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# Moral Economy, Structural Leverage, and Organizational Efficacy: Class Formation and the Great Flint Sit-Down Strike, 1936–1937

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## ABSTRACT

In this article we use the Great Flint Sit-Down Strike as a strategic case for examining the issue of movement success in seemingly disadvantageous structural conditions. Through an application and elaboration of social movement and organizational theory to the Flint sit-down strike we identify four key factors that help to explain the emergence of successful collective defiance by labor: (1) the violation of the autoworkers' moral economy by General Motors; (2) the organizational flexibility of the UAW in adding new, revised, or revived mobilization and direct action strategies to protest repertoires to take advantage of preexisting social structures; (3) the identification of the sit-down strike as a strategy that leveraged the positional power of autoworkers; and (4) the on-the-ground organizational model used by the UAW, which allowed for democratic decision making that took advantage of local conditions.

The Great Flint Sit-Down Strike of 1936–37 was a watershed moment in the history of the US labor movement. It marked the first time that one of the Big Three automakers (General Motors, Ford, and Chrysler) was successfully challenged by workers. The success of the strike also started a chain reaction that resulted in the unionization of the auto industry and the success of other industrial unions.<sup>1</sup> Consider that at the start of the Flint, Michigan, strike,

1. Beverly Silver, *Forces of Labor: Workers' Movements and Globalization since 1870* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

in December 1936, the United Auto Workers (UAW) had 20,000 members and national union membership stood at 13.5 percent of the auto industry workforce; that by the end of 1937, UAW membership was 400,000; and that by 1941, 23 percent of the national workforce was unionized.

In addition to its significance to US labor history, the Flint sit-down strike also represents a strategic case for examining a key issue in the field of social movement research: movement success. Specifically, what are the necessary conditions for a group of individuals to act collectively to successfully defend their common interests, when the deck is seemingly stacked against them? The Flint strike is an ideal case for studying this question because at the time of the strike the union presence in Flint was minuscule, while the power structure in Flint was dominated by General Motors (GM). In addition, the timing of the strike is not ideal given the economic conditions of the time (this requires some explanation and will be addressed in the next section). How, then, can we account for the success of the UAW and the Flint autoworkers in a local context where we would expect them to fail (in fact the American Federation of Labor had failed in this context a few short years earlier)?

In this article, we attempt to solve this puzzle by applying social movement and organizational theory to the Flint sit-down strike. In the following sections we will provide a sociological account for how unionization proved to be possible in a seemingly impossible situation by identifying four key factors that help to explain the emergence of successful collective defiance by labor: (1) the violation of the autoworkers' moral economy by GM when the company returned to near pre-Depression profits in 1936 without returning workers to pre-Depression benefit levels; (2) the organizational flexibility of the UAW, compared with the American Federation of Labor (AFL), in adding new, revised, or revived mobilization and direct action strategies to protest repertoires to take advantage of preexisting social structures; (3) the organizational learning that took place in late 1935 and throughout 1936 and resulted in identifying the sit-down strike as a strategy that leveraged the positional power afforded semiskilled workers by the tightly coupled relationships among upstream suppliers, downstream manufacturers, and final assembly plants; and (4) the on-the-ground organizational model used by the UAW, compared with the top-down approach favored by the AFL, which allowed for democratic decision making that took advantage of local conditions.

Any attempt to understand the causes of a singular historical event faces methodological difficulties.<sup>2</sup> Primary among these is the issue of overdetermination,

2. C. C. Ragin and H. S. Becker, *What Is a Case?* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

where the existence of multiple potential causes of a single event results in an inability to empirically isolate a particular cause.<sup>3</sup> As we are fully aware of the potential pitfalls of causal explanation in historical sociology, we do not in this analysis attempt to isolate a single cause. Furthermore, we do not claim that the conditions identified by our analysis represent an exhaustive list of factors contributing to the Flint sit-down strike. Rather, the four factors that we identify constitute value added in understanding not just for the event in question but also for successful class mobilization in general.

#### MATERIAL CONDITIONS IN THE AUTO INDUSTRY

Before the onset of the Great Depression, GM employed 208,981 hourly workers, who made around \$1,195 annually.<sup>4</sup> In 1936, employment at GM had been increasing and stood at 171,711, still over 30,000 fewer jobs than before the crash. Hourly wages saw a similar trajectory, almost returning to their previously high levels (reaching \$6/day). However, while hourly wages were recovering in 1936, the income levels for GM workers were not. Fine described the situation: “The irregularity of employment in the automobile industry meant that the well-publicized high hourly wages of the auto workers did not necessarily become translated into equally high annual earnings.”<sup>5</sup>

Workers claimed that furloughs forced them into seasonal work that saw them receive around two-thirds of their precrash annual incomes, or \$800 a year on average.<sup>6</sup> Official GM records indicate that 85 percent of the workforce (145,860 workers, which was 63,000 fewer than before the crash) was full-time and made \$1,541 annually, with Fine estimating the actual annual average between \$1,200 and \$1,300. Even if we accept the higher official numbers, the annual wages are still below estimates of a maintenance-level budget in Flint at the time. For instance, the Works Progress Administration estimated \$1,434.79 was needed annually for a family of four, while the average GM worker earned around \$200 less than that. Henry Barclay, the editor of *Mill and Factory*, estimated that \$150 per month was needed, whereas full-time workers at GM made only \$128 a month.

3. M. Mizuchi, “The American Corporate Elite and the Historical Roots of the Financial Crisis of 2008,” in *Markets on Trial: The Economic Sociology of the U.S. Financial Crisis*, ed. Michael Lounsbury and Paul M. Hirsch (Bingley: Emerald Group, 2010), 103–39.

4. Unless otherwise noted, annual income for GM workers and employment numbers for GM come from S. Fine, *Sit-Down: The General Motors Strike of 1936–1937* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1969), 20–23, 60–61.

5. *Ibid.*, 61.

6. H. Kraus, *The Many and the Few: A Chronicle of the Dynamic Auto Workers* (Los Angeles: Plantin, 1947), 11.

The situation at Ford and Chrysler was no better, with many workers receiving between 40 percent and 75 percent of their precrash annual wages.<sup>7</sup>

In addition to depressed incomes, autoworkers in 1936 faced production speed-ups that coerced “prodigious new quotas” from “lines that had been fast and taxing in the 1920’s,” such that workers “were convinced that standing up to such a pace was aging and debilitating.”<sup>8</sup>

Thus, notwithstanding the small but visible improvements in hourly wages for all workers and annual wages for some workers, autoworkers in 1936 were essentially working harder, producing more, and receiving less annual income than they were before the Great Depression. This set of conditions faced by autoworkers in 1936 lead both Galenson and Fine to identify irregular employment and the physical toll of production speedups as the primary motivators for the union movements and the sit-down strike.<sup>9</sup>

The conditions in 1936, however, paled in comparison to the immiseration autoworkers faced during the early years of the Depression. Autoworkers experienced the worst material conditions from the start of the crash in 1929 to late 1932. This period, like 1936, included massive furloughs and production speed-ups. For example, soon after the crash, GM sought to increase production by unmediated increases in the rate of assembly and Ford and Chrysler followed suit. In 1931, Ford also established temporary furloughs, resulting in a majority of employees working less than a full year, with many working less than half the year.<sup>10</sup> Shortly after, GM instituted furloughs, such that the majority of hourly workers during this period made significantly less than \$1,000 a year.<sup>11</sup>

Unlike in 1936, however, workers in the 1929–32 period faced furloughs and speedups in concert with massive layoffs and drastic wage cuts.<sup>12</sup> At GM, the

7. H. W. Barclay, *Ford Production Methods* (New York: Harper, 1936), 28; E. D. Kennedy, *The Automobile Industry: The Coming of Age of Capitalism's Favorite Child* (1941; Clifton, NJ: Kelley, 1972), 255.

8. K. Sward, *The Legend of Henry Ford* (New York: Rinehart, 1947), 353, quoted by W. Galenson, *The CIO Challenge to the AFL: A History of the American Labor Movement, 1933–1941* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1960), 129.

9. Galenson, *CIO Challenge to the AFL*; Fine, *Sit-Down*.

10. I. Bernstein, *The Turbulent Years: A History of the American Worker, 1933–1941*, rev. ed. (1969; Chicago: Haymarket, 2010).

11. Fine does not provide numbers for annual pay of GM workers during the early years of the Depression, but he notes that in 1934 almost two-thirds of workers made around \$1,000 a year and that this represented an increase from the early years (*Sit-Down*, 61).

12. Barclay, *Ford Production Methods*, 28; Bernstein, *Turbulent Years*, 255; E. Cray, *Chrome Colossus: General Motors and Its Times* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1980), 272; Fine, *Sit-Down*, 20–23, 61; Kennedy, *Automobile Industry*; Kraus, *The Many and the Few*, 6–11; J. Stepan-Norris, “Left Out” (PhD diss., University of California, Los Angeles, 1988), 180; J. Stepan-Norris and M. Zeitlin, *Talking Union* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1996), 11; Sward, *Legend of Henry Ford*, 228–30; W. Lewchuk, *American*

company had laid off almost half of their workers three years after the start of the Depression. Wage cuts also became a substantial part of the mix in 1932. At Ford, the “Seven Dollar Day” was rescinded in early 1930, but the “Six Dollar Day,” the old standard, remained for two more years. At that point, Ford—once again the leader in wage policy—imposed a 33 percent wage cut to \$4; in subsequent months, some workers’ wages dropped to \$3.50. GM and Chrysler followed Ford’s lead in all these moves and eventually the average wage in the industry was well below \$4 per day.

Consequently, in the early years of the Depression, autoworkers were fortunate to work irregularly; and when they were employed, they were coerced into operating at increasingly fast rates for declining rates of pay. The alternative, suffered by an enormous number of workers, was unemployment with little to no public assistance.<sup>13</sup>

On the surface it might make sense that autoworkers did not act against the company when material conditions for autoworkers reached their nadir at the beginning of the Great Depression (1929–32) but instead staged the sit-down strike at the end of 1936, when GM’s profits had returned, wages were on the rise, and new workers were being hired. It is generally accepted among labor scholars that strikes are more likely to occur when unemployment is low because this gives workers what Beverly Silver calls “marketplace bargaining power.”<sup>14</sup> That is, when unemployment is high, if workers go on strike, there are plenty of unemployed individuals ready and willing to replace the striking workers. When unemployment is low, however, workers are less replaceable and thus have leverage. This type of leverage, however, is dependent not on the number of employed by the company but on the number of unemployed who serve as a reserve army of labor. Thus, the fact that GM employed only 116,000 workers in 1932 but over 200,000 in 1936 is less important to understanding the workers’ leverage than the fact that national unemployment in 1936 was still at 17 percent—which, while down from the Depression high of 24.9 percent in 1933, was higher than it was in either 1930 or 1931.<sup>15</sup> Hence, it is difficult to characterize the labor mar-

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*Technology and the British Vehicle Industry* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 62–63; A. Nevins and F. E. Hill, *Ford: Decline and Rebirth, 1933–1962* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1963), 35–37, 65, 155.

13. F. Piven and R. Cloward. *Poor People’s Movements: Why They Succeed, How They Fail* (New York: Vintage, 1977).

14. Silver, *Forces of Labor*, 13.

15. S. Lebergott, “Annual Estimates of Unemployment in the United States, 1900–1954,” in *The Measurement and Behavior of Unemployment* (Washington DC: National Bureau of Economic Research, 1957), 211–42.

ket conditions in 1936 as tight or in any way conferring marketplace bargaining power on autoworkers.

Following both (a) the Galenson/Fine logic that assigns the primary role in motivating the Flint sit-down strike to grievances regarding irregular employment and the physical toll of production speedups and (b) the labor market logic of strikes that says mobilization will take place when unemployment is lower, we would expect that the height of mobilization and direct action by autoworkers should have crested sometime in 1930 or 1931.<sup>16</sup> During 1930 and 1931 GM implemented speedups and furloughs, and unemployment in those years, according to Lebergott, was 8.7 percent and 15.9 percent, respectively.<sup>17</sup> The fact that auto labor did not stage the sit-down strike until 1936 (when unemployment was 17 percent), and that the first signs of class mobilization since the establishment of the Five Dollar Day in 1914 appeared in 1934 (when unemployment was 21.7 percent), requires an explanation.<sup>18</sup> Fine notes that the “grievances expressed by autoworkers before the GM sit-down strike were long-standing and not peculiar to the conditions of labor in 1936”; however, he defaults to Hartman and Newcomb’s psychological interpretation of the strike as the result of “accumulated tensions and suppressions” that led to GM workers reaching a “threshold of restraint.”<sup>19</sup>

While we agree that by 1936 (and perhaps even 1934) the workers had reached their “threshold of restraint,” the psychological explanation adopted by Fine leaves much to be desired. For example, what caused the workers to cross their threshold? The reference to accumulated tensions and suppressions is vague in that it is unable to make any meaningful distinction between 1936 and earlier years, when conditions were worse. We explain this lag between when material conditions hit bottom and when autoworkers crossed their “threshold of restraint” and showed signs of collective anger by employing the concept of a “moral economy,” first introduced by British historian E. P. Thompson.<sup>20</sup>

Thompson developed his concept of moral economy in a landmark article addressing the long history of food riots in eighteenth-century England. In it, he

16. Galenson, *The CIO Challenge to the AFL*; Fine, *Sit-Down*.

17. Lebergott, “Annual Estimates of Unemployment.”

18. In March 1934, autoworkers joined the AFL en masse in support of a threatened national strike; when leadership signed a compromise rather than going through with the strike, workers also abandoned the AFL en masse; Krause, *The Many and the Few*; Fine, *Sit-Down*.

19. G. W. Hartman and T. W. Newcomb, eds., *Industrial Conflict: A Psychological Interpretation* (New York: Cordon, 1940); Fine, *Sit-Down*, 62–63.

20. E. P. Thompson, “The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the Eighteenth Century,” *Past & Present*, no. 50 (1971): 76–136.

codifies the actions of the food rioters as efforts to enforce previously established economic practices displaced by the growing market economy. Among the key economic principles undergirding the organization of early modern British agriculture (which he categorizes as “traditional rights and customs”) was the requirement that farm products be offered first to local residents at an affordable price, with only the remainder exported to cities or foreign markets. These practices applied even when shipment to distant locales would have yielded better returns for farmers, merchants, or others who traded in agricultural products.

During the eighteenth century these practices were substantially eroded by expanding urban markets and by the rising class of merchants capable of penetrating agricultural centers with offers of tempting prices for raw or refined grain (as well as other crops and products). When these temptations resulted in food shortages in the local markets or prices that exceeded local standards of affordability, the affected residents felt justified in taking enforcement into their own hands. Thompson emphasizes that the justification of what the authorities would label rioting and looting rested on their own adherence and belief in “traditional rights or customs.”<sup>21</sup>

Since Thompson’s development of this concept, it has become a standard conceptual tool for understanding the content, timing, and trajectories of social protest in a range of historical and contemporary contexts.<sup>22</sup> So, while the context of the US auto industry in southern Michigan in the 1930s is undoubtedly different from Thompson’s eighteenth-century England, we follow in a long tradition of historical sociologists and social movement scholars in our application of the concept to the Flint sit-down strike.

#### BREAKING THE EFFORT BARGAIN AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF A MORAL ECONOMY

Hilde Behrend first enunciated the concept of an “effort bargain” in an insightful article on labor contracts: “Every employment contract (whatever the method

21. *Ibid.*, 78.

22. Examples include S. Hahn and J. Prude, *The Countryside in the Age of Capitalist Transformation: Essays in the Social History of Rural America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1985); D. McAdam, S. Tarrow, and C. Tilly, *Dynamics of Contention* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001); H. Roberts, “Moral Economy or Moral Polity? The Political Anthropology of Algerian Riots,” working paper no. 17 of the Crisis States Programme (London: London School of Economics [Development Research Centre], 2002); J. Walton, *Primitive Rebels: Comparative Studies of Revolution and Underdevelopment* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), and *Western Times and Water Wars: State, Culture, and Rebellion in California* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992); J. Walton and D. Sneddon, *Free Markets and Food Riots: The Politics of Global Adjustment* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1994).

of wage payment) consists of two elements: (1) an agreement on the wage rate (either per unit of time or per unit of output), i.e., a wage-rate bargain; and (2) an agreement on the work to be done, i.e., an effort bargain. The employment contract thus fixes the terms of exchange of work for money.<sup>23</sup> This is, in some sense, a restatement of Marx's original conceptualization of work under capitalism as the exchange of labor power for money. In Marx's rendering, this exchange was problematic in one important respect: the level of compensation delivered by the employer was negotiated through a complicated process that involved both the labor market and socially determined levels of subsistence. In effect, the class struggle germinated in the negotiation over compensation.<sup>24</sup>

Behrend focuses our attention of the other half of the arrangement and allows us to see that it too is subject to all manner of controversy and the same enduring struggle:

Effort is not a substance that can be measured. Only the effect of the application of effort—output—can be measured. Effort itself is a subjective experience, like utility. An individual can say whether the effort he expends in performing a particular operation in a fixed time is equal to, greater or smaller than the effort he expends on another operation in the same amount of time, but he cannot quantitatively define the amount of the difference. . . . [As a consequence] there is likely to be concealed bargaining about effort intensity, and the entrepreneur is likely to employ various devices of effort control such as supervision and machine pacing.<sup>25</sup>

Even these devices can never fully measure or control the effort invested by the worker, because they cannot determine which rates are within the worker's physical capacity and which rates either exceed or underexploit that capacity. If management wishes to develop the work process effectively, it depends on workers to define an appropriate, viable, and most efficient level of effort for a particular job: "The belief [that there is] a correct rate for a job appears to work satisfactorily in practice although it has no scientific validity [i.e., cannot be objectively measured]. The worker's reaction to the rate, not scientific judgment, determines whether the rate is considered correct, loose or tight."<sup>26</sup>

23. H. Behrend, "The Effort Bargain," *Industrial and Labor Relations Review*, July 1957, 505.

24. Karl Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1 (1867; New York: Vintage, 1977).

25. Behrend, "Effort Bargain," 505–6.

26. *Ibid.*, 510.



But this sort of cooperation depends on the commitment of the worker to accurately report on appropriate effort levels and to react to changes in the system by measuring and recalibrating appropriate effort levels and by working with technicians to alter work processes to be consistent with maximized effort. If management wishes to avoid this dependence on workers' good will and honesty, it must control work pace through a combination of time-study research and machine pacing, and it must anticipate and control the various forms of collective resistance and union bargaining that workers utilize in these circumstances.<sup>27</sup>

Ford's introduction of the moving assembly line in 1913 represented an attempt to control work pace, but this meant that the company also had to deal with forms of resistance such as soldiering. Before the development of the moving assembly line, foremen had complete power for hiring and firing, and the nine-hour day with wages of about \$.30 per hour had attracted skilled and committed workers. Five years later, before the Five Dollar Day was instituted, unskilled employees left the firm in huge numbers, even though many were receiving closer to \$.40 per hour.<sup>28</sup> The Five Dollar Day dramatically reduced turnover, as evidenced by Henry Ford's discussion of the program: "In 1913, in the Highland Park plant, we had an average monthly turnover of 31.9 per cent [per month]. In 1915, we introduced the five-dollar-a-day minimum and the turnover dropped to 1.4 per cent."<sup>29</sup>

Turnover, however, was part of a larger problem, namely, the unwillingness of most employees to invest their own resourcefulness in improving both the process of production at Ford and the product that emerged from it. The other symptoms of this malaise were the large absentee rates and the vast amount of soldiering by line workers, who seized every opportunity to slow down, rest, and otherwise resist the efforts of management to increase the intensity of the work.<sup>30</sup>

Thus, the Five Dollar Day, was not simply a method of reducing turnover but also part of a more extensive and far-reaching effort to increase productivity

27. Fritz Jules Roethlisberger and William J. Dickson, *Management and the Worker: An Account of a Research Program Conducted by the Western Electric Company, Hawthorne Works, Chicago* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1939); Elton Mayo, *The Human Problems of an Industrial Civilization*, 2nd ed. (Boston: Graduate School of Business Administration, Harvard University, 1946); James R. Zetka, "Union Homogenization and the Organizational Foundations of Plantwide Militancy in the US Automobile Industry, 1959–1979," *Social Forces* 73, no. 3 (1995): 789–810.

28. Harry Franklin Porter, "Giving the Men a Share: What Its Doing for Ford," *System* 31 (March 1917): 262–70.

29. Clearly, Ford is mistaken: the Five Dollar Day was introduced in early 1914, not 1915; Henry Ford, *Today and Tomorrow* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, Page, 1926), 160.

30. D. Gartman, *Auto Slavery: The Labor Process in the American Automobile Industry, 1897–1950* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1986).

at Ford by raising the level of worker commitment to the company.<sup>31</sup> In other words, the Five Dollar Day resulted from concealed bargaining around effort intensity and ultimately reflected Ford's attempt to control and minimize collective resistance by workers. The irony is that it did not address the source of the discontent, namely, the enormous stress created by the more intense and monotonous work and enforced by machine-paced production. Instead it represented a brilliant and effective substitute for alleviating the problems of the line, giving workers other benefits—notably higher wages, shorter hours, and job security—that made the oppression of the line more palatable.

The result of Ford's program was dramatically increased productivity among autoworkers. Raff and Summers calculated the minimum increment in productivity during the next two years at between 40 percent and 70 percent.<sup>32</sup> And Karel Williams and his colleagues demonstrated that the increased commitment of workers, combined with the ongoing innovations at the plant, kept the cost of labor steady at \$65 per Model T produced, despite a virtual doubling of wages.<sup>33</sup> That is, the increased productivity from worker commitment and ongoing innovation absorbed the entire cost of the program in the first year after it was implemented.

By 1918, Ford's initially experimental Five Dollar Day program had been adopted by both Chrysler and GM; by 1919, the wage was raised to \$6 and became the industry standard.<sup>34</sup> Thus the Five Dollar Day became the key element in establishing the effort bargain for the industry as a whole. As Wayne Lewchuk commented in arguing this point: "It is reasonable to conclude that Ford workers disliked the new pace of work, disliked authoritarian supervision, disliked being set to a mechanical pace setter, and disliked company intrusions into their private lives. However they made a choice, albeit from a limited set of possibilities given the realities of the Detroit employment relationship, and they chose to accept managerially set effort norms and, at least in 1914, good wages."<sup>35</sup>

Once Ford established the bargain around superb wage levels, this became one of the central elements in the effort bargain in old Detroit: it constrained

31. D. Raff and L. Summers, "Did Henry Ford Pay Efficiency Wages?," *Journal of Labor Economics* 5 (1987): S57–S86; Wayne Lewchuk, "Men and Monotony: Fraternalism as a Managerial Strategy at the Ford Motor Company," *Journal of Economic History* 53 (1993): 824–55.

32. Raff and Summers, "Did Henry Ford Pay Efficiency Wages?"

33. Karel Williams, Colin Haslam, John Williams, Sukhdev Johal, and Andy Adcroft, "The Myth of the Line: Ford's Production of the Model T at Highland Park, 1909–16," *Business History* 35 (1993): 66–87.

34. Charles F. Sorensen, *My Forty Years with Ford* (New York: Norton, 1956), 142; Sward, *Legend of Henry Ford*, 74–75.

35. Lewchuk, *American Technology and the British Vehicle Industry*, 64.

management to keep raising wages to ensure that the auto industry would remain at or near the top of the national wage hierarchy. Increasing wages—first to \$6 per hour and then to \$7—was not an act of generosity but rather a matter of management maintaining its side of the arrangement: offering workers superb wages in exchange for high levels of compliance and commitment.

But we should not lose sight of the ideological origins of these high wages in Ford's Five Dollar Day. In its original incarnation, this was a profit sharing plan.<sup>36</sup> While this became indistinguishable from the straight wages paid at other firms, it nevertheless created a significant underpinning to the entire effort bargain struck in pre-Depression auto industry. Just as the workers came to accept the periodic furloughs that punctuated the economic cycle, they also came to expect a share of the prosperity when the industry expanded and became the most profitable in the country. It was this sense—of sharing in the positive and negative fate of the owners—that defined the effort bargain for the workers and constituted the “traditional rights and customs” that informally governed labor-management relations at the Big Three for the two decades prior to the Great Depression.

An example of the role that the axiom of shared suffering and shared rewards played in labor-management relations can be seen in the worker response to the changeover from the Model T to the Model A at Ford.<sup>37</sup> First, production was abruptly halted in May 1927, and 60,000 workers were furloughed indefinitely. Beyond the abrupt closing of the line, which left tens of thousands of workers without income to support families and pay mortgages, lay the failure of the vaunted “welfare capitalism” that had always promised to support workers in these sorts of crises. The privation experienced became national news, reported regularly in the *New York Times*, *Barron's*, the *Wall Street Journal*, and other national media. And, when the workers were rehired, Ford was no longer the leader in wages or in benefits.<sup>38</sup>

Despite this clear breach of the effort bargain, workers returned to Ford with a commitment to making the new car work and therefore to ensuring that their

36. S. Meyer, *Five Dollar Day: Labor Management and Social Control in the Ford Motor Company, 1908–1921* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1981).

37. This account of the Model A changeover is based mainly on David A. Hounshell, *From the American System to Mass Production—1800–1932* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984), 279–93; and Sward, *Legend of Henry Ford*, 194–205.

38. For a detailed accounting of the fall of Ford from industry leadership, see A. J. Kuhn, *GM Passes Ford, 1918–1938: Designing the General Motors Performance Control System* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1986).

recently threatened jobs would be made secure again. This reflected the foundation of the workers' moral economy: workers would share in the fate of the company. The decline of the Model T was apparent, as were the huge losses absorbed by management during the 18-month redesigning and retooling process. So, despite the profound deprivations suffered during the furlough, workers saw their suffering as part of the larger moral economy. Protest was at best muted, and no job actions were undertaken in or around the idled River Rouge plant. At the same time, workers expected that they would share in the anticipated success of the Model A, and they invested themselves in that project. In other words, the workers endured the wrenching immiseration created by wage cuts, layoffs, and speedups during the transition from Model T to Model A at Ford because the concept of shared suffering made these acceptable under the moral economy derived from the effort bargain and because the concept of shared rewards held the promise that their suffering was not in vain. A return to productivity would mean compensation for their hard work and sacrifice.

It is this commitment to shared sacrifice and rewards that explains why—despite the massive layoffs, furloughs, deep wage cuts, and unmediated production speedups at the beginning of the Depression—labor did not respond collectively or direct its anger toward management. Specifically, Ford and Chrysler logged major losses starting in 1930, while GM's profits sank each year, from a record \$296 million in 1928 to \$8.5 million in the trough of the Depression in 1932.<sup>39</sup> Thus, though top management retained their more-than-ample salaries, the companies themselves absorbed tremendous declines in sales, revenues, and profits, the benchmarks used to evaluate sacrifice.

To be sure, the immiseration caused by management's cost cutting generated numerous complaints, but they were usually registered as individual resistance, with only occasional collective protest. In addition, the collective protest was generally directed against the more immediate symptoms of suffering, such as hunger and evictions, rather than the policies of the Big Three automakers.<sup>40</sup> As historian Joyce Peterson reported, "the presence of union power in the industry was so small as to be almost unnoticed."<sup>41</sup>

While the workers' moral economy explains the lack of collective action against management in the early years of the Depression, it also explains the

39. Fine, *Sit-Down*, 20–21.

40. P. Bonosky, *Brother Bill McKie: Building the Union at Ford's* (New York: International, 1953); J. Prickett, "Communists and the Communist Issue in the American Labor Movement, 1920–1950" (PhD diss., University of California, Los Angeles, 1975), 117; Stepan-Norris and Zeitlin, *Talking Union*, 9–11.

41. J. Peterson, "Auto Workers and Their Work, 1900–1933," *Labor History* 22, no. 2 (1981): 213.

signs of collective anger in 1934. Soon after the low point of 1932, things turned around for the auto industry, the Big Three, and most dramatically for GM. In direct parallel to previous hard times for individual firms or for the industry as a whole (such as the 1919 recession and development of the Model A at Ford), worker commitment and willing sacrifice proved instrumental to early recovery. At GM the recovery was most spectacular, with after-tax profits at GM reaching \$240 million by 1936.<sup>42</sup>

While in previous iterations, workers shared in the rewards of recovery (with the company often rehiring the laid off, giving wage increases, and putting an end to furloughs), the Depression-era recovery did not bring the same level of reward to workers. As previously discussed, massive furloughs remained the policy of GM, even after recovery, and this resulted in the average autoworker at the company making an annual income that fell below the level needed to maintain a family in southern Michigan.<sup>43</sup>

Thus, in the eyes of the workers, the traditional obligation of owners and workers to share in the sacrifices needed to grow the industry—and, in turn, to share the rewards of that growth—had been violated. Management had violated the moral economy of the auto industry, and the autoworkers felt justified in challenging management's actions.<sup>44</sup> The workers' sense of injustice regarding their unrewarded role in GM's return to profitability might have been best expressed during a debate about the ongoing Flint sit-down strike detailed by Kraus.<sup>45</sup> The debate matched the UAW union president Homer Martin against a prominent Michigan minister, R. L. Lee. In opposing the strike, Lee invoked a familiar metaphor for the pre-Depression effort bargain, calling GM "a big family of 250,000 people," within which strikes were alien ways of resolving disputes. To this point, Martin responded that GM was "the kind of family where father eats the bacon, mother eats the gravy and the kids can lick the skillet."

Hence, the moral economy of the autoworkers partially helps to explain the timing of the embrace of the unionization effort. Just as the moral economy in Thompson's eighteenth-century England motivated and legitimated the food riots that enacted claims to ample amounts of bread at affordable prices, the moral economy in the 1930s US auto industry motivated and legitimated the sit-

42. Fine, *Sit-Down*, 21.

43. *Ibid.*, 61.

44. Prickett, "Communists and the Communist Issue," 109–73; Bernstein, *Turbulent Years*, 94–98, 181–85, 372–79.

45. Kraus, *The Many and the Few*, 266.

down strikes that enacted workers' demands for their fair share of the post-recovery rewards.

Notwithstanding the importance of deprivation and legitimacy as necessary conditions for food riots in England and union militancy in southern Michigan, in neither case were they sufficient to generate the sort of disruptive (and often successful) collective action that occurred in both settings. That is, even with signs of "moral outrage" apparent as early as 1934, the workers waited until late 1936 before they took "the law into their own hands" with what became known as the "Great Flint Sit-Down Strike."<sup>46</sup> Bohstedt offers a useful rubric—what he calls "political calculation"—to understand what additional factors must fall into place in order for the already aggrieved and morally outraged to enact their demands,<sup>47</sup> utilizing what social movement theorists call "transgressive collective action":<sup>48</sup>

The material need for food—an economist's "rational interest"—was a powerful driver but not enough to explain the patterns of riot. The moral outrage afforded by Thompson's "moral economy" may have contributed key catalysts to direct action: compelling fire in the belly, bonding cement with other community members and "umbrella" legitimation for what were formally illegal intrusions upon property. Beyond the moral impulse, lay a pragmatic political decision: Before they risked their hides, rioters might have to debate the *prospects* for using collective force—with their wives, other neighbors, and even their own instinct for self-preservation. As in other politics, rioters had to practice the "art of the possible," weighing probable risks and gains in the light of past experience, current assessments, and projections of the near future, especially to predict how rulers would use their power.<sup>49</sup>

In Detroit, these "political calculations" of the "art of the possible" involved two key elements identified by numerous social movement scholars: (1) mobilizing a sufficient number of strategically located workers to strike action and (2) developing specific strategies that could nullify the huge power marshaled by the Big Three directly (through their control of the production process) and indirectly (through their privileged access to government law enforcement ap-

46. *Ibid.*.

47. J. Bohstedt, *The Politics of Provisions: Food Riots, Moral Economy, and Market Transition in England, c. 1550–1850* (New York: Ashgate, 2010), 12–13.

48. McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly, *Dynamics of Contention*.

49. Bohstedt, *Politics of Provisions*, 11–12.

paratus).<sup>50</sup> As we will demonstrate in the following sections, the final conditions that contributed to the timing of the successful Flint strike in 1936 (as opposed to earlier) all depended on the organizational flexibility of the UAW. The UAW was organizationally flexible because it was new. Before 1936, the AFL failed to take advantage of the previously discussed conditions, precisely because as an established organization, its structure was inert. At the same time, the UAW demonstrated a propensity to learn as an organization, developing the sit-down strike as the weapon of choice after observing its use in other contexts. Finally, even with all these elements in place, our analysis of the Flint strike suggests that its success in the face of an unfriendly local power structure is attributable to the democratic decision-making structure of the on-the-ground organization in Flint, which allowed the rank and file to contribute their expertise in the structure of GM production and local conditions.

#### ORGANIZATIONAL FLEXIBILITY AND MOBILIZATION OF AUTOWORKERS

Fine, in addition to appealing to psychological analysis, acknowledges the role of strategic differences between the AFL and the UAW-CIO (Congress of Industrial Organizations) in explaining the success of the 1936 sit-down.<sup>51</sup> In fact, he argues that the AFL's failures in organizing autoworkers resulted in making independent unions a part of the auto industry, which ultimately set the stage for the UAW to later reap the benefits.<sup>52</sup> He points to the conservative approach of the AFL (preferring compromise over aggressive actions such as strikes) versus the aggressive approach of the UAW-CIO as a key difference between the 1936–37 union success and past failures.

We agree that differences between the AFL and UAW-CIO are key to explaining the timing and success of the Flint sit-down strike, but we aim to explain the differences rather than simply appeal to them. That is, we contend that the differing strategic approaches of the AFL (conservative) and UAW-CIO (aggressive) reflected deeper structural differences between the organizations. We

50. R. Fantasia, *Cultures of Solidarity: Consciousness, Action, and Contemporary American Workers* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988); Piven and Cloward, *Poor People's Movements*; A. Morris, "Black Southern Sit-In Movement: An Analysis of Internal Organization," *American Sociological Review* 46 (1981): 744–67, *Origins of the Civil Rights Movement* (New York: Free Press, 1986), and "Naked Power and the Civil Sphere," *Sociological Quarterly* 48 (2007): 615–28; Michael Schwartz, *Radical Protest and Social Structure* (New York: Academic Press, 1976).

51. S. Fine, "The Origins of the United Automobile Workers, 1933–35," *Journal of Economic History* 18, no. 3 (1958): 249–82, and *Sit-Down*.

52. Fine, "Origins of the UAW."

believe that even if the AFL had tried an aggressive approach during the earlier period, they were doomed to failure because their organizational structure was not a proper fit for the environment of the auto industry in southern Michigan in the 1930s.

The organizing process in the auto industry involved building unions capable of imposing on the Big Three at least some of the elements of the effort bargain at the heart of the autoworkers' moral economy. The success of this campaign relied to a considerable degree on exploiting the specific characteristics of the production system in southern Michigan. Specifically, the high concentration of suppliers and assemblers, which was a foundation for the culture of production that lay at the heart of auto industry's three-decade history of remarkable innovation, was also a foundation for systematic communication among workers, unmediated by management.<sup>53</sup> Workers from the many GM establishments—as well as workers from other Big Three plants and myriad suppliers—lived in the same neighborhoods, socialized in the same bars, and played in the same parks. The tightly coupled southern Michigan production culture therefore created enduring personal and community relationships among workers who—in a dispersed production system—would have had few useful relationships unless they deliberately sought them out.

Beyond the organic connections created by the geographical concentration of production lay the myriad employee benefit programs that had developed as part of the effort bargain and were bulwarks of the production culture. Consider, for example, Sidney Fine's description of the Industrial Mutual Association (IMA) of Flint: "The IMA offered its members gymnasias, bowling alleys, billiard tables, card rooms, chess and checkers, facilities for dancing, an auditorium seating sixty-five hundred, and a summer resort at Potters Lake. It carried on an elaborate intra- and inter-company sports program in cooperation with the personnel departments of various plants, and sponsored gardening, stamp, hiking, bridge, cribbage, youth, and similar clubs, a male glee club, a women's chorus, several bands, and classes in such things as handicrafts, sewing, and modern dance."<sup>54</sup> Fine then points to the function of this program (and others): fostering loyalty among workers (and hence providing a layer of protection against union

53. M. Storper and R. Walker, *The Capitalist Imperative: Territory, Technology, and Industrial Growth* (New York: Blackwell, 1989); F. Romo and M. Schwartz, "Escape from New York," *Challenge*, January/February 1990, 18–25.

54. Fine, *Sit-Down*, 25.



organizers) as well as providing a locus for systematic surveillance over workers' personal lives and any effort at collective action.<sup>55</sup>

Henry Kraus—the union historian of the Flint strike—also recorded the management functionality of these welfare services, observing that they “multiplied the number of hidden ties between man and company” and provided an important locus for the companies' extensive espionage network.<sup>56</sup> When describing the impact of the IMA and the many other programs operating at GM, however, he also noted a perhaps unintended side effect: fostering a sense of community by multiplying the number of unmediated ties among the rank-and-file workers. That is, by providing a platform for socializing outside of work, the IMA increased the possibility that workers from different factories knew each other, creating a city- and even regionwide interpersonal network that facilitated the type of grassroots organizing utilized by UAW organizers in Flint and elsewhere in the auto production culture.

The necessity of word-of-mouth organizing to the labor movement in the auto industry was increased by the fact that towns at the center of auto production, such as Detroit—as well as its satellite cities, notably Flint (GM) and Dearborn (Ford)—were essentially (or actually) company towns with physically present upper classes made up largely of executives and stockholders of the Big Three and its multitude of suppliers, who sought to dominate public life in the region and to utilize control of government and of public spaces to foreclose collective action deemed antagonistic to management's interest. Stanley Nowak, a union activist at the massive River Rouge plant, described this sort of political control that Ford exercised over the localities where its plants were located and its workers resided: “The Ford Motor Company . . . actually controlled the municipalities: Dearborn, all of Lincoln Park . . . Ecorse, River Rouge . . . all of the municipalities down the river. Because that's where the Ford workers lived. They controlled it—well, they had all kinds of municipal acts against distributing leaflets, against organizing meetings, and in Dearborn particularly. So to get in front of the Rouge plant, nearby where workers were going to work, it was impossible. You'd be arrested for violation of a city ordinance.”<sup>57</sup>

55. Bernstein, *Turbulent Years*, 515–19; Fine, *Sit-Down*, 36; Piven and Cloward, *Poor People's Movements*, 135; Prickett, “Communists and the Communist Issue,” 180–210; J. R. Walsh, *CIO: Industrial Unionism in Action* (New York: Norton, 1937), 109.

56. Kraus, *The Many and the Few*, 6.

57. Quoted in Stepan-Norris and Zeitlin, *Talking Union*, 64–65.

At the time of the first sit-down strike, Flint's city manager, mayor, and police chief all had close ties to GM's executives and continued a long history of enacting and enforcing public policies that GM favored.<sup>58</sup> This sort of domination, combined with the ferocious antagonism of the Big Three to any independent unions, meant that organizing efforts faced explicit repression from local police and other public officials. Tactics such as injunctions against mass picketing enforced with targeted or mass arrests, the denial of public permits for handing out literature, the refusal by local papers to print anything that would offend GM, and a virtual blackout of radio news or announcements about collective protest constituted effective barriers to organizing.<sup>59</sup> Without the ability to mount large demonstrations, activists who did engage in public actions were subject to immediate firing from jobs, especially at GM, where the spy network allowed quick identification of protest participants.<sup>60</sup>

These social control tools available to management made public agitation more difficult and less fruitful, and it served to suppress and defeat the traditional organizing strategies favored by the AFL, which focused on building support through formal rallies and official leaflet and literature distribution.<sup>61</sup> Fine and other historians point to the AFL's conservative strategy with regard to direct action as the key explanation for their failure organizing the autoworkers.<sup>62</sup> Though the evidence for this factor is indisputable, it is important to note that the AFL's hesitation to directly confront the Big Three reflected the fact that workers were not sufficiently mobilized to sustain a traditional picket line strike. Moreover, the reason for this weakness was the AFL's inability to adapt its organizing strategies to the new structural context of the auto industry in southern Michigan (see below).

The concept of *structural inertia* is a useful tool for understanding why the AFL continued with traditional organizing tactics even as they failed to penetrate company towns.<sup>63</sup> Essentially, structural inertia is the result of external and internal pressures that limit an organization's adaptive flexibility. Hannan

58. Bernstein, *Turbulent Years*, 520–21; Kraus, *The Many and the Few*, 5–6; Prickett, "Communists and the Communist Issue," 190.

59. Kraus, *The Many and the Few*.

60. Fine, *Sit-Down*.

61. Piven and Cloward, *Poor People's Movements*, 140; J. Brecher, *Strike!*, rev. ed. (1974; Boston: South End, 1999), 187.

62. Fine, "Origins of the UAW," and *Sit-Down*.

63. M. Hannan and J. Freeman, "The Population Ecology of Organizations," *American Journal of Sociology* 82 (1977): 929–64, and "Structural Inertia and Organizational Change," *American Sociological Review* 49, no. 2 (1984): 149–64.

and Freeman list the following sources of inertia: sunk costs, bounded rationality/constraints on information, internal political constraints, and the organization's own history.<sup>64</sup> Notwithstanding the role of internal politics and bounded rationality in the AFL, it seems obvious that its past success in unionizing the crafts using traditional tactics contributed to its inability to adapt to Detroit production culture; not only did leadership assume that what was successful in the past would be successful again, but the organization itself had evolved an internal structure designed for and committed to the use of traditional tactics.

The UAW, on the other hand, was a relatively new organization that did not face the same inertial pressures, and communists within the UAW were explicitly opposed to the AFL's model of conducting business.<sup>65</sup> Accordingly, the UAW was able to adapt to the production culture in southern Michigan and sought to exploit the vast interpersonal networks that both the production system and the benefit system had created, conducting word-of-mouth, grassroots campaigns to build support for direct action while eschewing any initial effort to create large formal membership in union locals infiltrated by GM spies. Historian James Prickett described the strategy of Wyndham Mortimer, one the leaders of the communist group within the UAW, when he arrived in Flint in May 1936 with the daunting task of organizing in the heart of the GM corporate empire:

Mortimer slipped secretly, he thought, into the company town of Flint, and checked into a hotel room. As he was taking off his coat, the phone rang, and a man told him, "You better get back to hell where you came from, you S.O.B., or we'll take you out in a box." Mortimer attributed the threat to the Black Legion, a semi-fascist organization widely credited with the murder of several union organizers.

There were other difficulties in organizing in Flint. City ordinances forbade the distribution of leaflets and the use of sound equipment. The five locals in Flint had a total membership of 122, out of a potential of 45,000, and most of those were considered company spies by the workers. Open meetings were out of the question, since only company spies and ardent unionists would show up. The spies would report the unionists, and the company would fire them.

So Mortimer simply went door-to-door in Flint, talking to workers and their wives, discussing their grievances, and signing them up in the union.

64. Hannan and Freeman, "Population Ecology of Organizations," 931.

65. Kraus, *The Many and the Few*; Fine, *Sit-Down*.

Their membership cards were sent directly to [National UAW Secretary-Treasurer George] Addes in Detroit, thus bypassing the spy-infested local leadership. Some of the workers visited by Mortimer would invite him back for a second meeting with their friends present.

Before the summer was over, Mortimer was mailing a weekly mimeographed newsletter to seven thousand working class families in Flint.<sup>66</sup>

Friendship ties thus became the main vehicle for recruiting new members. As Mortimer described the process, the door-to-door campaign was simply “leavening the dough,” through which “a few men joined the union and then they got their friends in.”<sup>67</sup>

The effectiveness of utilizing the existing social structure can be confirmed by citing a simple (but quite amazing) statistic. Mortimer, the only full-time organizer in Flint during the summer of 1936, went from a standing start to a mailing list of 7,000 families who supported unionization and were willing to take the (moderate but measurable) risk of receiving (and almost certainly reading) his union newsletter. He recruited, therefore, about six families per day, and, perhaps even more extraordinary, this foundation would yield, only three months later, a strike ultimately involving tens of thousands of workers and supportive community members that would last 44 days, shut down virtually all of GM’s automotive production, and establish industrial unionism in the United States.

This rapid and thorough mobilization reflected a process that social movement scholars have identified as the (often) invisible foundation for most (or perhaps all) explosions of social protest like the strike in Flint. Such explosions utilize a process by which—once the constituency has (implicitly or explicitly) arrived at a unity of purpose—new movements borrow preexisting structures to mobilize coherent collective action.<sup>68</sup> In southern Michigan in 1936, this

66. Prickett, “Communists and the Communist Issue,” 180–81; see also W. Mortimer, *Organize! My Life as a Union Man* (Boston: Beacon, 1971), 103–22; Bernstein, *Turbulent Years*, 520–22.

67. Kraus, *The Many and the Few*, 21.

68. For examples of this phenomenon operating the Civil Rights movement, see Morris, “Black Southern Sit-In Movement,” and *Origins of the Civil Rights Movement*; D. McAdam, *Political Process and the Development of the Black Insurgency, 1930–1970* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982); B. Robnett, *How Long, How Long: Women in the Civil Rights Movement* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000); for examples in the 2011 Arab Spring, see Michael Schwartz, “The Egyptian Uprising: The Mass Strike in the Time of Neoliberal Globalization,” *New Labor Forum* 20 (2011): 33–43; S. Gonzalez-Bailon, J. Borge-Holthoefer, A. Rivero, and Y. Moreno, “The Dynamics of Protest Recruitment through an Online Network,” *Scientific Reports* 1 (2011): 197; I. Akin, C. Encina, M. Restivo, M. Schwartz, and J. Tyagi, “Old Wine in a New Cask? Protest Cycles in the Age of the New Social Media,” *Whitehead Journal of Diplomacy and International Relations* 13 (2012): 89–103.

process of utilizing the existing social structure was an essential ingredient in building a protest movement—an ingredient that depends on a kind of collective learning in which activists and rank-and-file participants learn what will work within the specific context of their circumstances and then apply it to extract leverage over the structure in which they are embedded. This learning was evident in the adoption of the sit-down strike by the UAW.

#### ORGANIZATIONAL LEARNING AND THE REDISCOVERY OF THE SIT-DOWN

When Wyndham Mortimer arrived in Flint in early 1936, the national office of the CIO had embraced the reversal of traditional AFL strategy: instead of seeking to sign not only up large numbers of members before undertaking collective action, Mortimer intended to utilize successful work stoppages to build the union. In Flint, where GM was the target, the dense interpersonal networks, the various embedded institutions, and the nascent union structure allowed for fluid communication and therefore laid a foundation for collective action. The growing commitment to unionism among rank-and-file workers, however, was restrained by a widespread understanding that union activism risked jobs, physical well-being, and even lives. These dangers were measured against a growing history of union organizing that had an at-best checkered history of success.<sup>69</sup> This necessitated that the union be able to stage successful actions despite having a relatively small proportion of autoworkers enrolled. As Fine notes, by the end of 1936, the UAW only had around 10 percent of the GM workforce as members.<sup>70</sup> The union's presence in Ford and Chrysler, however, was even weaker, which is ultimately why GM was selected as the target.<sup>71</sup>

The strike strategy that the United Auto workers eventually developed relied on disrupting the normal functioning of the manufacturing system by withholding the workers' cooperation at key plants, thus paralyzing part or all of production until management of the target company acceded to specific demands. This exercise of what is known variously as structural leverage,<sup>72</sup> positional power,<sup>73</sup> or workplace bargaining power<sup>74</sup> is a key ingredient in effective protest action:

69. Bernstein, *Turbulent Years*; Piven and Cloward, *Poor People's Movements*, chap. 3.

70. Fine, *Sit-Down*.

71. Kraus, *The Many and the Few*.

72. Schwartz, *Radical Protest*.

73. L. Perrone, "Positional Power and the Propensity to Strike," *Politics and Society* 12, no. 2 (1983): 231–61.

74. Silver, *Forces of Labor*.

Social structures create power relationships. . . . A familiar example is the power of an employer over his employees. The employees work because they desire the pay. Whenever the employer gives an order it carries the threat of job loss behind it—the job situation is one that enhances obedience for payment. . . . We see here the exercise of *structural power*, which is recognizable by the fact that the structure in question could not function without the consistent and routinized exercise of such power. It is not possible to imagine a company functioning in any recognizable way without the employer ordering his employees to do certain things. . . . If employees suddenly began refusing to obey orders, the company in question could not function. . . . Thus we see a subtle but very important relationship between structural power and those who are subject to it. On the one hand, these power relations define the function of any ongoing system; on the other hand, the ability to disrupt relationships is exactly the sort of leverage which can be used to *alter* the functioning of the system. Thus, *any system contains within itself the possibility of a power strong enough to alter it.*<sup>75</sup>

The key point of leverage was the positional power that the structure of production conferred on the semiskilled workers who labored on the fast-moving assembly lines and on the side areas that fed it, producing critical components installed in all or most of the automobiles produced by GM.<sup>76</sup> As Silver described it, this structure of production meant that “a relatively small number of activists could bring an entire plant’s production to a halt” and that “when the line stopped, every worker necessarily joined the strike.”<sup>77</sup>

GM, Ford, and Chrysler all utilized the sole-supplier strategy whenever feasible (both internally and with outside vendors) because the pace of innovation created difficult, expensive, and often unmanageable coordination problems. Therefore, one station in a single plant might provide parts needed for every car manufactured by one of the Big Three. Every single Chevrolet, for example, contained engine parts manufactured in Chevrolet Plant Number 4; and all Buicks, Pontiacs, and Oldsmobiles used body parts molded in Fisher Body Plant

75. Schwartz, *Radical Protest*, 172–73.

76. Silver, *Forces of Labor*, chap. 2; Perrone, “Positional Power and the Propensity to Strike,” and L. Perrone, “Positional Power, Strikes and Wages,” ed. E. O. Wright and L. J. Griffin, *American Sociological Review* 49 (1984): 412–26.

77. Silver, *Forces of Labor*, 47.

Number 1.<sup>78</sup> If key workers on the assembly lines in these two plants (both located in Flint) chose to stop production (and could prevent anyone from replacing them), production of all GM models except Cadillac would soon cease.<sup>79</sup>

The latent workplace bargaining power conferred on the semiskilled workers in the auto industry became manifest—to both workers and management—only after the dissolution of the effort bargain. During the long decade of the 1920s, when the Detroit production culture was the beacon of innovative and enlightened capitalist production, one of its most celebrated features was the commitment and loyalty of the assembly line workers, who endured the dangerous and debilitating stress of Fordism, while contributing their own creative energy to production and innovation. The effort bargain, with its numerous implicit elements, was the essential element that guaranteed this cooperation and therefore guaranteed that the workers would not activate their latent power to definitively disrupt production. Starting in 1934, however, when increasing numbers of workers became convinced that management was not fulfilling its side of the bargain, they began searching for strategies to enforce various elements of the pre-Depression moral economy. What remained, then, was for the workers to appreciate and harness their latent workplace bargaining power.

By the beginning of 1936, autoworkers had acquired a good sense of the leverage afforded to them by the structure of production. According to Kraus, they adopted management's term "mother plant" to refer to facilities that represented the single source of parts for various other GM plants located within Detroit and across the country.<sup>80</sup> By the time of the Flint Strike in December 1936, the UAW organizing committee had selected two among the 20 or so mother plants as key targets: Fisher Body Plant No. 1 in Flint, which produced all Buick bodies and vital elements for Pontiacs and Oldsmobiles, and the Fisher Body Assembly Plant in Cleveland, which produced essential parts for all models of Chevrolet. More than 75 percent of all GM production depended on parts from the two plants; so a relative handful of determined workers in one corner of each plant could choke off three-quarters of GM's production capacity. The union organizers tentatively targeted these two plants because, in addition to being mother plants, they each contained a critical mass of strategically located committed unionists sufficient to initiate the disruption.<sup>81</sup>

78. Fine, *Sit-Down*.

79. Krause, *The Many and the Few*, 75–80.

80. *Ibid.*, 78.

81. *Ibid.*, 78–79.

The key to leveraging the workers' positional power, however, was the UAW's use of the sit-down strike, a newly rediscovered strategy that was far more successful than the standard picket line strike due to its ability to limit the arsenal of weapons the employer could use against strikers.<sup>82</sup> For example, with workers occupying the factory, employers could not hire scabs; the factory served as a defense against the type of police brutality that strikers on picket lines often faced; and, most important, occupying the factory protected the union's positional power by stopping the employer from moving equipment to nonunionized plants and resuming production.<sup>83</sup> The selection of the sit-down strike as the weapon of choice was the result of organizational learning made possible by the organizational flexibility that set the UAW-CIO apart from the older, more established AFL.

The diffusion of successful collective action repertoires through social movement networks has been documented in many different circumstances.<sup>84</sup> The manner in which the sit-down strike as a tactic gained currency in 1936 exemplifies this phenomenon and adds substance to the collective learning that is always a part of the process.

Starting as early as 1906, the tactic was utilized sporadically in various locations inside the United States, most notably by the International Workers of the World; but it was not until late 1935 that workers and union organizers began to appreciate the exceptional leverage it conferred in assembly-line manufacturing, especially in company towns like those where the auto industry was located.<sup>85</sup>

The process of learning worked its way through a series of smaller and larger strikes, not all of them in the auto industry. Sidney Fine offers this summary of the prehistory:

There was a three-day sit-down at the Hormel Packing Company in Austin, Minnesota, in 1933, some brief sit-downs in the rubber factories of Akron in 1933, and quite a few sit-downs of the quickie variety in the automobile industry, especially in body plants, in 1933, 1934, and 1935; but it was not until the next year, 1936, that the sit-down strike began to

82. Fine, *Sit-Down*.

83. Kraus, *The Many and the Few*.

84. S. Spilerman, "Structural Characteristics of Cities and the Severity of Radical Disorders," *American Sociological Review* 41 (1976): 771–93; Morris, "Black Southern Sit-In Movement"; D. S. Meyer and N. Whittier, "Social Movement Spillover," *Social Problems* 41 (1994): 277–98.

85. Brecher, *Strike!*.



receive widespread attention and to become a matter of some public concern. There were forty-eight strikes in 1936 in which the strikers remained at their jobs for at least one day; in twenty-two of these work stoppages, involving 34,565 workers, the strikers stayed inside the plants for more than twenty-four hours.<sup>86</sup>

Among these many precursor strikes inside and outside the Detroit production culture, some became key nodes in the learning process that defined the strategy and execution of the Flint strike at the end of 1936.

Perhaps the earliest of these learning moments occurred at the Toledo Chevrolet plant, the site of the only militant AFL strike in the auto industry, beginning on April 23, 1935.<sup>87</sup> Without the endorsement of the national union, a relative handful of critically placed workers sat down at their stations, quickly idling almost the entire plant. After a few hours, when the bulk of the 2,300 workers had registered support for the strike, the sit-downers left their stations and joined the outside picket line. Confronted with this *fait accompli*, the national AFL leadership reluctantly offered its endorsement, without acknowledging the sit-down tactic.<sup>88</sup> Because the Toledo plant was the sole source of Chevrolet and Pontiac transmissions, within 10 days 17 plants employing 32,000 workers were idled, and Chevrolet and Pontiac dealers around the country faced the imminent prospect of vacant showrooms and lost business to Ford and Chevrolet.

On May 11, with the Toledo plant idle for 18 days, GM Executive Vice President William Knudsen offered unprecedented concessions, including the first instance of (de facto but not publicly acknowledged) sole bargaining rights to the local union, together with substantial wage increases, improved seniority, and slowing the speed of the assembly line.<sup>89</sup> Though this offer did not address most of the worker's demands, Knudsen told the union negotiators that continuing the strike would result in Chevrolet moving the entire operation to a nonunion location, depriving all 2,300 workers of their jobs.<sup>90</sup> Under this pressure, and against the resistance of the more militant unionists—who felt they could defeat the threat by widening the strike to other plants (particularly the

86. Fine, *Sit-Down*, 123.

87. This account is based on Sidney Fine, *The Automobile under the Blue Eagle: Labor, Management, and the Automobile Manufacturing Code* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1963), 384–403, and *Sit-Down*, 44–49, 75–79; and also Bernstein, *Turbulent Years*, 518–19.

88. Fine, *Automobile under the Blue Eagle*, 387–88.

89. *Ibid.*, 393.

90. Norman Beasley, *Knudsen: A Biography* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1947), 398.

Flint Buick facility, which would interrupt Buick, Oldsmobile, and Cadillac production)—the leadership endorsed the settlement and won a rank-and-file vote.

Even this less-than-complete victory created an indelible mark on workers' understanding of how to leverage GM into restoring key elements of the pre-Depression moral economy. The initial sit-down demonstrated that a relatively small band of well-placed militants could initiate an effective plant-wide strike, embraced by the bulk of previously uncommitted workers. This lesson would be applied repeatedly for the next four years. The more important lesson, however, was that a militant strike at a mother plant could force even GM to offer unprecedented concessions. The AFL national newspaper characterized the victory thus: "For the first time in history, one of the major automobile manufacturing concerns has agreed to recognize and meet with a spokesman for its employees."<sup>91</sup>

Despite the agreement to negotiate with the union exclusively, GM did not negotiate around or unilaterally address either the lost jobs or the multitude of other issues that remained after the strike. Long-term success would depend, therefore, on effective in-plant mechanisms to coerce adherence to negotiated settlements as well as violations of the tattered effort bargain. Ultimately, the threat or reality of sit-downs would become the answer to this problem.

Rubber workers in Akron, Ohio, provided the first overwhelming victory for militant strikes in the early months of 1936, mounting a series of short sit-downs against the four largest rubber manufacturers and a sustained militant strike against the Goodyear Rubber Company.<sup>92</sup> The provocation was an October 1935 announcement that—starting in January 1, 1936—industry leader Goodyear would reduce its workforce by 25 percent, while maintaining the same productivity by speeding up production for the remaining workers. When January arrived, Goodyear and the three other major rubber producers (also housed in Akron) began introducing the new work regime in various units around the city, provoking a number of small work stoppages. The first big explosion occurred on January 29, when the tire builders in one corner of the main Firestone Rubber Company plant initiated a sit-down strike, provoked by the rate reduction and the firing of a protesting union official. Journalist Ruth McKinney, who spoke

91. Quoted in Fine, *Automobile under the Blue Eagle*, 400.

92. L. Adamic, "Sitdown," *The Nation*, December 5, 1936, "Sitdown II," *The Nation*, December 12, 1936, and *My America, 1928–1938* (New York: Harpers, 1938), 400–411; Bernstein, *Turbulent Years*, 591–602; Brecher, *Strike!*, 193–204; Fine, *Sit-Down*, 122–23, E. Levinson, *Labor on the March* (1938; Ithaca, NY: ILR Press, 1995), 143–46.

to the workers soon afterward, described the start of the strike as a cathartic moment for the assertion of workers' power in the tightly coupled system of manufacturing, a power capable of reenforcing the violated effort bargain:

The tirebuilder at the end of the line walked three steps to the master safety switch and, drawing a deep breath, he pulled up the heavy wooden handle. With this signal, in perfect synchronization, with the rhythm they had learned in a great mass-production industry, the tirebuilders stepped back from their machines.

Instantly the noise stopped. The whole room lay in perfect silence. . . .

"We done it! We stopped the belt! By God, we done it!" And men began to cheer hysterically, to shout and howl in the fresh silence. Men wrapped long sinewy arms around their neighbor's shoulders, screaming, "We done it! We done it!"<sup>93</sup>

After two days, with one plant completely idle and with workers at a second poised to initiate a sit-down of their own, Firestone capitulated, granting all the strikers demands. This success was repeated at Goodrich, which answered the sit-downers' demands in less than a day.

These preliminary victories set the stage for the workers to challenge industry leader Goodyear. On Friday, February 14, in response to the layoff of 700 workers (along with the promise of speedup for the rest) and a newspaper report of Goodyear's \$5 million profit in 1935, a tiny cohort of 137 tire builders in Department 251-A of Plant No. 2 "shut off the power and sat-down."<sup>94</sup> As in earlier sit-downs, this small action rendered the entire plant inoperative and inspired the vast majority of the now idled other workers to join the strike. The workers left when Goodyear responded by shutting down Plant No. 2 for the weekend but returned on Monday to establish an "endless human chain" around the factory that kept it shut. On Tuesday, 500 Plant No. 1 workers sat down and remained inside for 20 hours, until they were confident that Goodyear had abandoned its announced intention of either reopening the plant with replacement workers or moving the machinery to Alabama or California. They then marched out and joined 10,000 strikers who surrounded the plant in what they claimed was the longest picket line in history.

93. Quoted in Brecher, *Strike!*, 200–201.

94. *Ibid.*, 201.

It took a month involving a full array of tactics—including publicity campaigns, recruitment of vigilantes, and police violence—for Goodyear to satisfy itself that only concessions would end the strike. Although the company postponed signing a formal contract, the final resolution granted virtually all of the workers immediate demands, most notably a companywide agreement, the cancellation of layoffs and speedup, and routinized meetings with union officials around these and other issues.

In the next few weeks, Akron workers pioneered the use of spontaneous sit-downs to enforce the recently won agreements. As one United Rubber worker told *Nation* reporter Louis Adamic, sit-downs “put teeth in the agreement.”<sup>95</sup> Since management sought to follow its prestrike pattern of failing to implement most elements in new (formal and informal) contracts, the sit-down as enforcement mechanism became a daily fact of life in Akron. In late 1936, Adamic reported: “During the spring—or to be exact, between March 27 and June 1—there were nineteen known sit-downs in the Goodyear plant alone; how many others that never received notice, no one knows. . . . In Akron a week seldom passes without one of more sit-downs. The local newspapers notice only the more serious ones, those which develop or threaten to develop into stay-ins [lasting more than a shift] or close-downs [idling an entire plant].”<sup>96</sup>

The events in Akron definitively validated the CIO organizing strategy of mounting strikes in plants without strong union presence, using the strike to validate union effectiveness and therefore building the union based on successful militant action. At their annual convention in the fall of 1935, prior to the sit-downs, the United Rubber Workers had 3,000 dues-paying members in an industry employing 100,000. In spring of 1936, just after the conclusion of the Goodyear strike, membership had reached 30,000, on its way to almost 50,000 by the end of the year.<sup>97</sup>

Many UAW leaders, including Homer Martin (the sitting UAW president) and Walter Reuther (a future UAW president), traveled to Akron for the victory celebration, interpreting the events as proof that militant strikes and industrial unionism could force the automotive core of the US industry into granting the sorts of concessions necessary to re-establish their lost economic security. Without yet embracing the sit-down as a necessary weapon, they concluded that Akron had validated all the elements in the overarching strategy of strikes

95. Adamic, “Sitdown II,” 702.

96. *Ibid.*

97. Adamic, “Sitdown,” “Sitdown II.”

initiated by small numbers of workers and sustained by a flood of workers into the nascent union organization.<sup>98</sup> They returned to Detroit with this confidence and were soon joined by a new cadre of organizers comprised of sit-down veterans from Akron and Toledo, who moved to Detroit to help fulfill Martin's prediction that "We'll be next."<sup>99</sup>

Two months later, the first sustained sit-downs—with workers remaining in the plants until a settlement was reached—occurred in Europe.<sup>100</sup> Numerous precedents might well have influenced the use of this tactic in France, but Louis Adamic, one of the few US journalists to analyze these strikes (however briefly), argued that its appeal derived from its fit with the production structure, since the complex division of labor fundamental to modern manufacturing allowed a "small group of unionists" to "cripple an entire system" and to sustain the interruption without allowing the arrival of replacement workers or the departure of the machinery: "I do not mean to suggest that the sit-down and the stay-in are inventions of the Akron rubber workers which have since been picked up by European labor; but rather that they are weapons mutually or shall I say, *elementally* invented by industrial workers here and abroad who were confronted by the same or similar problems."<sup>101</sup>

The strikes in France were a model for the Flint strike, because unlike previous successful AFL actions, the strikes did not take place among skilled craft workers or in highly unionized industries; rather, they "occurred precisely in the underunionized manufacturing sectors of dynamic France, among semi-skilled factory workers."<sup>102</sup> They began on May 8, 1936, without official union presence (fewer than 7 percent of workers were union members) or sanction (the national unions had never advocated sit-downs), and spread spontaneously through the rubber and auto industries and into most industrial and extractive sectors. Tilly and Shorter, in their comprehensive review of nineteenth- and twentieth-century French strikes, emphasized the same quasiformal organizational origins that we have been tracing in the auto industry.<sup>103</sup>

98. Adamic, "Sitdown II," 704.

99. Fine, *Sit-Down*, 125.

100. Adamic, "Sitdown II"; D. Lescohier, "Sit-Down Strikes: An Invention of Mediaeval Europe Now Adopted in Present-Day America," *The World Today: Encyclopedia Britannica* 4, no. 4 (1937): 1; M. J. Vincent, "The Sit-Down Strike," *Sociology and Social Research* 21 (1937): 524–25; Levinson, *Labor on the March*, 169–71; Fine, *Sit-Down*, 121–28; C. Tilly and E. Shorter, *Strikes in France* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1974), 127–37; M. Torigian, "The Occupation of the Factories: Paris 1936, Flint 1937," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 41, no. 2 (1999): 324–27.

101. Adamic, "Sitdown II," 702.

102. Tilly and Shorter, *Strikes in France*, 132.

103. *Ibid.*

By early June, almost 2 million French workers were on strike, with 8,941 of the nearly 11,000 shuttered plants occupied by their workers. Instead of leaving the plants once production stopped, the French workers announced they would remain next to their machines while negotiating an acceptable settlement. Despite many threats from various management and government officials, no violent effort was made to dislodge them. On June 7, the French Premier Léon Blum brokered the Matignon agreement, which gave the trade-union movement official recognition and workers the right to freely organize.

Even before the French strikes ended, sit-downs spread throughout Europe, with noteworthy movements in Yugoslavia, Hungary, Spain, Poland, and Scotland. Diffusion across the Atlantic, however, did not occur. There was almost no major newspaper coverage in the United States. The *New York Times* did not report on the strike at all, publishing a short article on its resolution without mentioning the use of the sit-down strategy or the content of the settlement.<sup>104</sup> Some information did leak through, however, in labor-oriented publications: the *Daily Worker* (the Communist Party national newspaper) and the *United Automobile Worker* (the UAW organ in the Detroit area) both carried articles with substantive content about the conduct of the national strike and its resolution.<sup>105</sup> The UAW made a point of mentioning that some workers were paid wages for the days they spent inside the factory during the sit-down, apparently because the “plant had never before . . . been so well protected against fire, theft and malicious damage.”<sup>106</sup>

For the activists who paid attention, “the French sit-down strikes first proved the effectiveness of this new labor weapon” and showed that what they “accomplished in France could also be accomplished in the United States.”<sup>107</sup> In particular, they took note of three aspects of the strike that would figure in the Flint strike, which was at that time only six months away. First, reaffirming the lessons learned earlier in the year in Detroit, the French strikes demonstrated that sit-downs could be successful without an already established union presence. Second, a sustained sit-down—never before attempted in Detroit—could guarantee that the plants remained shut down and that the workers would have a far less arduous task in sustaining solidarity and commitment. Third, the absence of violent police action in France convinced them that sit-downs were far less susceptible to physical repression than other strike strategies.

104. “Sit-Down,” *New York Times*, January 2, 1937.

105. Fine, *Sit-Down*, 128.

106. *United Automobile Worker* 1, no. 2 (July 7, 1937).

107. “New Labor Tactic—the Sit-Down Strike,” *Life Magazine*, January 18, 1937.

While the French strike convinced key activists and some rank-and-file workers in Detroit of the efficacy of the sit-down strike, it did not convince Bunky Knudsen, the top GM operating executive, of the strategy's applicability in the United States. When warned against the tactic by French auto executives, Knudsen told them, "That could not happen in the United States. The American people would not stand for them."<sup>108</sup>

On November 17, 1936, the first sustained sit-down strike in the American auto industry took place in South Bend, Indiana, at the Bendix Products Corporation. The strike sought to enforce union recognition and wage increases negotiated in June but never implemented. GM, which owned 24 percent of the company's stock, participated in a settlement with the union after six days of the factory occupation, agreeing to honor the previously promised wage increase, while partially recognizing the UAW local. Henry Kraus, the editor of the *United Automobile Worker* during this period, concluded that it was the Bendix strike that convinced the mass of autoworkers of the "basic advantages of the technique for the auto industry, and especially employer-ridden cities like those of Michigan."<sup>109</sup>

Two days after the Bendix settlement, the UAW used the sit-down strike for the first time in Detroit. At the Midland Steel Products Company, which made bodies for Chrysler and Ford, 1,200 workers halted production and caused the layoffs of 53,000 workers at the Plymouth, Dodge, Chrysler, Lincoln-Zephyr, and Briggs plants that utilized frames manufactured at Midland. Given its position as "an important feeder plant . . . in the highly synchronized automobile industry, the strike's effect was immediate."<sup>110</sup> In a little over two weeks, on December 4, Midland management agreed to a wage increase, abolition of piece rates, and time-and-a-half pay for overtime (above 45 hours a week) or for work on Sundays and holidays. This strike further demonstrated that a work stoppage at a key plant could paralyze production in a large part of the industry.<sup>111</sup>

In the month of December, Detroit saw a rash of sit-down strikes at parts companies. Each strike had a negative effect on the production of the auto companies, and it was often pressure from the Big Three that led to relatively quick settlements.<sup>112</sup> These victories also confirmed an argument that the communists had been making for several years: that a show of union power in even small

108. Quoted in Fine, *Sit-Down*, 128. Fine's source for this quote is Beasley, *Knudsen*, 165–66.

109. Kraus, *The Many and the Few*, 46.

110. Mortimer, *Organize!*, 120.

111. Fine, *Sit-Down*, 129–30.

112. Kraus, *The Many and the Few*.

shops could lead to support for unionization across the Detroit region. Immediately following each strike, union membership for the striking local boomed and spread to other companies. In December 1936 alone, the UAW added more than 10,000 members in Michigan.<sup>113</sup>

Thus, heading into the Flint sit-down strike, three key differences from earlier periods were already present: (1) the workers' saw GM's actions as a violation of the traditional moral economy, which justified collective action; (2) union activists had taken advantage of the specific aspects of the Detroit production system to successfully mobilize GM workers in Flint; and (3) both autoworkers and union activists had by this time identified the sit-down strike as a weapon with the potential to cripple the production of the Big Three.

In the following section, we detail a final key difference between December 1936 and earlier times that helps to explain why the sit-down strike was successfully implemented when it was. Specifically, while the AFL relied heavily on the national leadership to make decisions, we detail the way that the UAW relied on an on-the-ground organization that included leftist activists and rank-and-file members in the decision making process. Allowing the local autoworkers to take part (and sometimes take the lead) in the decision of when and how to take action allowed the UAW to adapt to local conditions and take full advantage of the specific production structure in Flint when implementing the sit-down strategy.

#### THE ROLE OF THE RANK AND FILE IN THE FLINT SIT-DOWN

Buoyed by the success of previous sit-down strikes, the Detroit-based UAW organizing committee was fully committed to the strategy of initiating a full-scale conflict with GM by stopping production in two "mother plants" that could reduce all of GM production by 75 percent: the Cleveland Fisher plant and Flint Fisher Body Plant No. 1.<sup>114</sup> Though the activist workers in the targeted plants were eager to get started, the leadership wanted to wait until January, after the promised five-dollar Christmas bonuses would be paid and when Frank Murphy, the newly elected governor of Michigan who sympathized with organized labor, would take office.<sup>115</sup>

The workers at Cleveland Fisher, though aware of the January target, initiated the soon-to-be-national strike several days early. On December 28, 1936, after a

113. Fine, *Sit-Down*.

114. Our account of the conduct of the Flint strike is based, unless otherwise noted, on Bernstein, *Turbulent Years*; Brecher, *Strike!*; Fine, *Sit-Down*; Krause, *The Many and the Few*; Mortimer, *Organize!*; Piven and Cloward, *Poor People's Movements*; and Prickett, "Communists and the Communist Issue."

115. Mortimer, *Organize!*, 124.



month of short work stoppages, the workers in the “strongly organized quarter panel department” sat down in protest against a newly announced wage cut. Unlike previous job actions in Cleveland and elsewhere, this dispute did not remain restricted to one section while the involved workers sought immediate response to their grievance by local management. Instead, the original instigators successfully recruited the support of the other departments and expanded their demands, culminating in the first articulation of the global slogan that would become the mantra for the GM-wide shut down: “No Settlement without a National Agreement.”<sup>116</sup>

Once it became clear that the Cleveland sit-down would be part of a larger struggle, events began to overwhelm the plans of the UAW organizing committee. At 7:00 AM on December 30, while the organizing committee continued to prepare for the Fisher Body Plant No. 1 strike in early January, fifty workers at Fisher Body No. 2 in Flint “sat down and tied up production” throughout the plant. The provocation in this instance was the transfer of three inspectors for refusing to quit the union.<sup>117</sup> Though Fisher No. 2 was not a “mother plant” (it produced only 450 Chevrolet bodies per day and no critical components), the workers there sought to join the national strike signaled by Cleveland Fisher, and the successful shutdown shattered the image of Flint as invulnerable to anything more than hit-and-run work stoppages.

In the meantime, the Cleveland Fisher strike had alerted GM management to the “mother plant” strategy, and they moved to preempt the expected takeover of Fisher No. 1. Twelve hours after the Fisher No. 2 sit-down, the company began loading key machinery from Fisher Body No. 1 onto freight cars, apparently headed for the less militant plants in Grand Rapids and Pontiac. John Ananich, a swing-shift worker at Fisher Body No. 1 and a union member, slipped out of the plant to call CIO organizer Bob Travis with the news. Travis immediately called an 8:00 PM lunch-break meeting of the UAW stewards at the union office across the street from Fisher Body No. 1. As described by UAW organizer Henry Krause, the entirety of the meeting consisted of the following discussion, called to order by chief UAW organizer Bob Travis:<sup>118</sup>

“Boys, we’ll make this snappy,” he said. “I understand there’s something happening over there on the press room dock.”

116. Kraus, *The Many and the Few*, 82–83.

117. Fine, *Sit-Down*, 144.

118. Kraus, *The Many and the Few*, 88–89.

"That's right," one of the men called out, "they're taking dies out of the press room. They got four or five [railroad] cars lined up there."

The men from the die room substantiated this.

"Well, what are we going to do about it?" Travis asked, looking slowly about the room.

There was a cold sort of pause. A chap raised his hand and stood up.

"Well, them's our jobs," he said quietly. "We want them left right here in Flint."

"That's right!" several others exclaimed.

"Boys," Travis said, still holding himself back, "I'm not going to tell you what you ought to do. That ought to be plain enough to you if you want to protect your jobs. In my plant in Toledo, General Motors walked off with 1,500 jobs a year ago and in Cleveland the Fisher Body boys struck just Monday to save theirs. What do you want do?"

"Shut her down! Shut the goddam plant!"

The cry was taken up by the whole room till it was nothing but one big shout.

"Okay, fellows, that's what I wanted to hear you say. . . . Roy [Reuther] and I will come in after you've got the plant down and help you get everything organized . . ."

"Everybody stays in till the warning whistle!" I yelled from the door.

"That's right," Travis said. "We don't want any stooges tipping the company off ahead of time."

It is significant that Travis did not lead the takeover, leaving the initiative in the hands of Fisher No. 1 workers. It reveals the commitment of UAW organizers to the participation of the rank and file. As the above example illustrates, a rank-and-file member initiated the strike by notifying the union of the attempt to remove equipment, and the success of the strike depended on worker participation in the on-the-ground decision making.

The strikers also expressed this same proprietary attitude once in possession of the plants. In all plants—there were eventually six sit-down strikes of various durations in the GM system during the Flint Strike—they instituted a set of rules and committees to enforce them; these rules protected the factory from any damage that would endanger the prompt return to production at the end of the strike.<sup>119</sup> There were strict rules against harming any of the machines,

119. Brecher, *Strike!*, 198–89; Fine, *Sit-Down*, 158–69; Galenson, *CIO Challenge to the AFL*, 144–45; Kraus, *The Many and the Few*, 93–96; Lescohier, "Sit-Down Strikes," 1–2; Mortimer, *Organize!*, 127–29.

including “meticulously [observing] all plant rules concerning maintenance and safety.”<sup>120</sup> The strikers purchased a sufficient supply of gas in order to operate a ventilator in the paint department to prevent dangerous fumes from accumulating. They removed and delivered to GM 1,000 acetylene torches, “to prevent strikers from playing around with them.”<sup>121</sup> Workers were prohibited from sleeping in auto bodies; in part because they were worried they would harm the expensive upholstery. Outsiders were prohibited from entering the plants without express permission of the striking workers. No intoxicating liquor was allowed. A full cleanup was organized every afternoon, with special attention to any real or potential damage to the equipment.

Even with these proactive measures, individual workers inside the factory still had plenty of opportunities to destroy GM equipment. Collectively, however, the strikers showed remarkable restraint. Though many workers saw GM as a mortal enemy and were inclined to inflict any available punishment on the company, an antisabotage committee prevented any significant injury to the machinery, the tools, and the inventory stockpiles. For example, they regularly sought intelligence about management’s plans and actions, but they did not loot the captured management offices; they used seat padding as beds but did not keep the padding for permanent use;<sup>122</sup> they used bolts and hinges as defensive weapons during police assault but did not appropriate and sell even a small proportion of stockpiled parts to finance the strike or augment their depleted family finances. Even in the case of the very marketable acetylene torches, they delivered them to management instead of selling them on the black market. Aside from reflecting their moral economy with regard to their jobs and tools, the workers’ commitment to protecting company property during the strike also reveals the elevation of long-term collective interests over the short-term individual interests that may have been served by looting and sabotage.

The most dramatic (and least publicized) moment in which the workers sacrificed their immediate impulses and self interest for the greater good took place in the Chevrolet No. 4 sit-down. In that plant, GM managed to establish a blockade that prevented the daily infusion of food needed to feed the sit-downers. During the blockade the workers might have decided that they were justified in raiding the well-stocked commissary, but they did not: “The candy bars, peanuts and sandwiches that were stacked in the company commissaries remained as the men resolved to demonstrate in this manner their discipline and responsibility.”<sup>123</sup>

120. Kraus, *The Many and the Few*, 95.

121. *Ibid.*, 96.

122. Fine, *Sit-Down*, 166.

123. Kraus, *The Many and the Few*, 221–22.

The scrupulousness of the strikers in protecting the plant was given full expression by Ellen Wilkinson, a Labour Party member of the British Parliament, speaking after her own inspection of Fisher Body No. 1: "I must say I am amazed at the scrupulous care the sit-in strikers are taking of the plants. As clean as a motor plant can be, they are keeping it so. The cafeterias are neat and clean. The sleeping quarters are tidy. The company's property is looked after as if it belonged to the men and not to their hostile employer."<sup>124</sup> The aggressive enforcement of their own moral code during the occupation echoes the behavior by eighteenth-century food rioters studied by E. P. Thompson, who took bread from bakeries without trashing the premises and left behind a "fair price" for the product taken.<sup>125</sup> In both cases, the demonstrators enacted a coherent set of principles and therefore saw themselves as upholding justice, rather than violating the law.

The dedication of the rank-and-file strikers to behaving in a fashion consistent with the moral economy of the working class in southern Michigan was key to attracting vocal, material, and emotional support from the other workers in GM, from the community in Flint, and from neighbors, unions, and supporters from around the country.<sup>126</sup> A quote by a Fisher No. 1 striker underscored the importance of this outside support for the willingness of the sit-downers to continue to occupy the factories, when he commented that "if public sentiment was against us, and thought we were really outlaws, we couldn't stay here a minute."<sup>127</sup>

The striking workers' commitment to protecting plant equipment also likely played an important role in Governor Frank Murphy's decision, in the aftermath of what became known as the Battle of the Running Bulls, to use the National Guard to protect the strikers from attacks by outside forces, rather than try to forcibly evict the workers from the plants. On January 11, GM guards shut off the heat and closed the entry gate, preventing the daily supplies from being delivered and leaving the workers to face the 16-degree Detroit winter with no direct contact or support with their allies outside. After the strikers forcibly took control of the entry gate from the guards so that supplies could be imported and electricity restored, the local police tried to forcefully evict the workers from Fisher Body No. 2. The Battle of the Running Bulls ensued, as the workers routed

124. R. Porter, "Court Test Today on Flint Sit-Down: Men in Plants Arm," *New York Times*, February 1, 1937.

125. Thompson, "Moral Economy."

126. Bernstein, *Turbulent Years*; Kraus, *The Many and the Few*.

127. Porter, "Court Test Today."

the police with fire hoses and a rain of one-pound bolts hurled from the second story of the plant, the raid was unsuccessful for the police. When the police fled, the workers gained control of the entrance gate, which the company had previously controlled. The next day, Governor Murphy sent in the National Guard. In explaining his decision to not use the guard to aid the police in evicting the workers, Murphy said that he was reluctant to use troops against trespassers who were “peacefully occupying their place of employment,” thus implicitly embracing their proprietary right to their jobs.<sup>128</sup>

In addition to playing an important role in stopping the removal of equipment from the Flint Fisher plants, deciding the timing of the strike, and building community support through their commitment to their moral economy, the knowledge that the rank and file possessed of the specific structure of the Flint Fisher Body production was utilized to seize Chevrolet No. 4 in a final blow to GM. With the threat of a court ordered injunction on the Fisher No. 1 and No. 2 strikers looming, Flint organizers decided on a new sit-down strike in Chevrolet No. 4, which they felt held the potential to nullify the possible impact of the impending injunction. Since Chevrolet No. 4 was itself a mother plant—the sole producer of engines for Chevrolet cars—the workers could obey the injunction, avoid both injury and arrest, and even allow Fisher No. 1 and Fisher No. 2 to go back on line, and GM would remain out of production. The appeal of this stratagem was enhanced by the fact that GM had restored production in Chevrolet No. 4 (part of an effort to build up stockpiles of critical parts), and thus the workers would be in the plant and in a perfect position to sit-down.

The strategy the workers used to take Chevrolet No. 4 could not have been employed without the knowledge that the rank-and-file workers possessed of company spies and the proximity of plants to each other. Regarding the proximity of plants to each other, Kraus states that the Chevrolet plants in Flint were like a sort of “factory-city” featuring an aggregation of plants all in one mammoth unit.<sup>129</sup> The strategy that Flint organizers and workers crafted involved the use of disinformation and the military tactic of a feint attack: staging a preliminary attack on an undesired target to divert opposition forces away from the desired target. Specifically, the union first leaked information about a potential strike at Chevrolet No. 9 to company spies, then when the workers at the plant staged what appeared to be a sit-down, it drew the attention of the

128. Fine, *Sit-Down*, 235.

129. Kraus, *The Many and the Few*, 56.

entire armed forces for the Chevrolet division away from the intended target of Chevrolet No. 4.<sup>130</sup> While security and strikers battled for control over No. 9, workers at Chevrolet No. 4 staged a sit-down of their own. Since the union forces at No. 4 were small, workers from Chevrolet No. 6, which was located 300 yards down the road, joined the forces at No. 4 and aided in securing the plant. Further evidence of the importance of structural proximity to the worker's efforts is the fact that after the Fisher Body No. 4 was seized, the No. 1 Plant supplied the new strikers with pads from the cushion room to use for bedding.<sup>131</sup>

With the No. 4 plant captured, and the No. 1 and No. 2 plants, along with Cleveland Fisher, still occupied, production was almost completely shut down. GM had delivered 50,000 cars in December; in the first week of February production had dwindled to 1,500. At the same time, Ford and Chrysler recorded dramatic increases during the strike, as they acquired GM's customers. For example, while GM's had dwindled, Ford and Chrysler production stood at Depression era highs of 28,825 and 25,350, respectively.<sup>132</sup>

No longer able to resist the financial pressure, GM agreed to a settlement on February 11. As part of the settlement, GM consented to rehire workers who had participated in the strike, to allow union members to wear buttons and other insignia on company property, and to give the UAW-CIO six months as the sole negotiator in the plants that had gone on strike.<sup>133</sup> This last term of the settlement amounted to the exclusive bargaining rights the UAW and CIO had desired, even if just for a limited time.

It turns out that six months was all the union needed. Riding a wave of momentum created by the victory over GM, the UAW-CIO increased its membership from about 80,000 in February to around 400,000 in October 1937.<sup>134</sup> Given that UAW membership stood at 20,000 in December 1936, and zero just a few months before that, this turn of events confirmed the theory of taking action to build support.

The aftermath of the UAW victory over GM led to similar contracts with Ford and Chrysler and eventually the widespread adoption of industrial unionism in the United States.<sup>135</sup> As we have illustrated, however, the success of the

130. *Ibid.*, 193–97.

131. Fine, *Sit-Down*, 162.

132. Kraus, *The Many and the Few*, 266.

133. Fine, *Sit-Down*, 304–5.

134. *Ibid.*, 327.

135. Fine, *Sit-Down*, 313–41; Silver, *Forces of Labor*, 47.

Flint strike would have been unlikely without the actions of both the rank-and-file workers and the on-the-ground organizers in Flint, which highlights a key difference between the hierarchically inclined AFL and the more democratically organized UAW-CIO.

## CONCLUSION

To return, then, to the original question posed at the beginning of this article: how were workers successful in their direct action against GM in 1936, when the seemingly impossible conditions they faced had precluded success in the previous years of the Depression? Our analysis identifies four key factors that help to explain the timing and success of the strike: (1) the workers had to see GM's actions as an injustice before they were willing to collectively resist; (2) they needed to use mobilization strategies that took advantage of preexisting social networks and bypassed official channels controlled or influenced by GM; (3) they needed to adopt the sit-down strike as a direct action strategy that leveraged the positional power conferred on autoworkers by the structure of production and protected them from the use of the vast army of reserve labor created by high unemployment as replacements; and (4) the input of rank and file members was integral to building community support and making strategic decisions that took advantage of local conditions.

These factors, we believe, can be generalized to class formation and social movement success in other contexts. First, that autoworkers during the Depression did not collectively rebel against their employers until GM's massive profits in the face of continued worker sacrifice became a visible violation of the early US auto industry's moral economy, illustrates the mediated nature of the relationship between material conditions and social protest. That is, deprivation and hunger alone do not motivate collective resistance. Rather, the cause of immiseration must be seen as a violation of a culture or subculture's traditional morals. As Piven and Cloward argue, the emergence of a protest movement requires that "large numbers of men and women who ordinarily accept the authority of their rulers and the legitimacy of institutional arrangements come to believe in some measure that these rulers and these arrangements are unjust and wrong."<sup>136</sup> While the details as to what constitutes economic and social "justice" certainly vary by time and cultural context, the importance of a sense of injustice to social movement mobilization has been identified in a

136. Piven and Cloward, *Poor People's Movements*, 4.

number of studies,<sup>137</sup> including Thompson's original use of the concept of a moral economy.<sup>138</sup>

In addition to the need for moral justification of collective action, the Flint strike illustrates the importance of organizational flexibility to successful social protest. In the case of the Flint sit-down strike, organizational flexibility is one of the key explanatory factors in the strategic differences between the UAW and the AFL. As previously discussed, the environment of Flint specifically, and southern Michigan and the surrounding areas dominated by the auto industry in general, was not conducive to traditional organizational structure (rigidly hierarchical), mobilization tactics (public rallies, leaflet distribution, and newspaper ads), or direct action strategies (pickets). The AFL, as an established organization, found itself unable to adapt to the new environment. The UAW, on the other hand, was a new organization whose structure (hierarchical but with localized democratic decision making built in), mobilization strategies (grassroots, door-to-door mobilization), and direct action tactics (sit-down strike) were being developed specifically for the new environment. This is not to say that door-to-door organizing and use of sit-downs are universally the correct strategy for social movements. On the contrary, in a different context, an established UAW using these tactics may fail in the same manner as the AFL did in Flint in the 1930s. What is generalizable from the Flint case is the need to take advantage of preexisting social networks and to leverage the positional power of members. In other words, the fit between a protest organization's structure and its environment determines its success. This highlights the importance of organizational flexibility and adaptability. Given what we know about organizational inertia, older, more established movement organizations often are unable to adapt to new issues and social environments.<sup>139</sup> Thus, as issues evolve and the social environment changes, movement success may require the development of new organizations.

At this juncture, we want to briefly address the role of the political opportunity structure in the success of the Flint sit-down strike. As our emphasis on fit between organizational structure and environment (of which political structure is a part) suggests, we recognize the importance of political opportunity structure to movement success in general, and the UAW specifically. There

137. Hahn and Prude, *Countryside in the Age of Capitalist Transformation*; McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly, *Dynamics of Contention*; Roberts, "Moral Economy or Moral Polity?"; Walton, *Primitive Rebels*, and *Western Times and Water Wars*; Walton and Sneddon, *Free Markets and Food Riots*.

138. Thompson, "Moral Economy."

139. Hannan and Freeman, "Structural Inertia and Organizational Change."



were a number of political factors that aided the UAW during the Flint strike. President Roosevelt had set up the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) in 1935, and refused to denounce the strikers during the sit-down; and Governor Murphy sent in the National Guard to keep the peace after the “Battle of the Running Bulls,” essentially protecting the strikers from local police and GM goons.<sup>140</sup> It is important, however, to recognize the role that the actions of the workers played in taking advantage of the opportunity structure. First, the NLRB never intervened in the Flint strike, and the strike was resolved two months before the Supreme Court upheld the National Labor Relations Act.<sup>141</sup> Additionally, as noted in the section on the role of the rank and file, it was the strikers’ sense of ownership over their jobs, their stewardship of the occupied factories and the equipment inside, and the general peacefulness with which they conducted themselves (aside from self-defense during the Battle of the Running Bulls) that allowed the labor-friendly president and governor to give any measure of support to the workers. In fact, Murphy cited worker conduct as integral to his decision to use the National Guard, not to remove the strikers but rather to keep the peace.<sup>142</sup> Hence, just as the structure of economic production in the auto industry was integral to providing the workers with positional power, the political opportunity structure during the Flint strike played a role in the success of the UAW. However, similar to the way that workers had to employ the sit-down to take advantage of the positional power conferred by economic structure, the strategy and tactics employed by a social movement also determine the successful leveraging of political opportunity. The ability to utilize strategies that take advantage of specific political structures, once again, emphasizes the importance of organizational flexibility and adaptability.

Finally, it is important to stress that the factors we identify as integral to the success and timing of the Flint strike are not an exhaustive list of all causal factors that played a role in the UAW’s success, but we believe they are key elements that can be found in a wide range of other movements and contexts. Thus, by detailing not just why collective action by autoworkers was successful in 1936–37 but also why it was unable to get off the ground before that, our analysis of the case of the Flint sit-down strike helps to make sense of an otherwise puzzling case and can help us to understand other similar cases.

140. Fine, *Sit-Down*, 303–12.

141. B. Cushman, *Re-thinking the New Deal Court: The Structure of a Constitutional Revolution* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 237.

142. Fine, *Sit-Down*, 235.