Chapter 6

They Sit to Conquer

THE Goliath of American business enterprise, the automobile industry, was alert and waiting. Its vast corporations and multitudes of dependent industries flexed their muscles to brush off the puny, impudent CIO. They would flick off the CIO as they would an annoying insect, for this was the mammoth juggernaut that had always knocked out even the thought of attempting to organize the men who made autos.

But the CIO did not fight as it was expected to; it did not lead with its chin or its cheek. The CIO turned around and attacked with its buttocks! It sat down; and under it sprawled in impotent, choleric rage the fabulous financial and hitherto invincible motor empire.

The saga of the CIO's victory over the automotive industry is a tale of the irony of fate. It is a satire worthy of the gods that thousands of wearied men, angry and bitter with standing for hours beside an inhuman, constantly speeded-up assembly line, should achieve their triumph by the simple act of sitting down.

This is the story of D Day for the CIO. This is the tale of how that giant of General Motors was felled so that it became inevitable that the CIO banners would soon be flying over the automotive empire of America.

The automobile had become the symbol of American genius and the world's highest standard of living. The proud American creed no longer boasted only of a chicken in every pot, but also of a car in every garage. America was on wheels, and this revolution in transportation resulted in a transformation of every aspect of the American way of life.

To satisfy the public's hunger for cars, enormous factories

were constructed around one of the greatest industrial inventions of the era—the assembly line. In the course of the movement of the assembly line more than fifteen thousand separate parts were brought together to assemble the modern automobile. The Ford Motor Company was producing sixty assembled autos an hour. In 1936 the automotive industry produced 3,543,857 cars, and in 1937, despite shutdowns, slowdowns, and sit-down strikes, this number was topped with a production of 3,903,531. Americans demanded cars, and by now the auto was no longer a luxury; it was an essential.

Into the maws of this gargantuan industry went more than three and a half million tons of steel, a million and a quarter tons of copper, and the same amount of zinc. With this went thousands of tons of aluminum, chromium, nickel, and tin. This was just a part of the raw materials involved to keep Americans riding. The list does not include the vast quantities of textiles, rubber, glass, plastic, paint, and innumerable other products that are combined to produce the automobile.

What of the men needed to assemble (and in some cases fashion the items to be assembled) this stupendous mass of materials into automobiles? Well, exclusive of the hundreds of thousands of men and women working in steel mills, textile mills, tire, glass, and paint factories, exclusive of the hundreds of thousands of coal miners producing coal for the power needs of all of these, the copper miners, the men operating the boats and trains to transport these materials, the thousands working in oil fields and refineries, the hundreds of thousands employed indirectly but definitely in the production, sales, and maintenance of the automobile, exclusive of all these, four hundred thousand men were employed directly in the building of this high-speed, streamlined American dream.

The colossal automobile industry centered its major production plants in and around Detroit. Detroit became a synonym for the automobile, for the assembly line, for power. No matter where one went in this world, Moscow or Tokyo, Cairo or Prague, Paris, Capetown, or Melbourne, the name Detroit conjured up the greatest genii of industrial power known to mankind.

Our story concerns the human element in this vast, incredibly complicated mechanical network. It is the story of the

four hundred thousand men and women flanking the assembly lines, turning, wrenching, pulling, hammering, screwing, pushing, going through all the motions that went into the work of assembling the finished automobile.

Many of these four hundred thousand were Middle Western farmers who tired of reaping debts as their main crop. The collapse of portions of the coal and lumber industries set up large pools of unemployed that flowed into the automobile centers. Both skilled technicians and unskilled workers were attracted by the high wages offered by the automobile industry. The higher wages of the automobile industry over those prevailing in other major fields of production were exaggerated until they exerted a tremendous attraction upon the nation's labor supply. The economic depression drove even more people to the assembly lines of Detroit. "In desperation, I hit upon the scheme of going to Detroit to crash the gates of the automobile factories. In that city, according to the stories I had heard from workers who had worked in the auto plants, fabulous wages were paid in the shops that turned out millions of cars every year." [1]

It took no longer than a year for these people rudely to discover that the "high wages" of the automobile industry, which had originally attracted them, were a delusion. The regular seasonal layoffs for retooling for the new year's models, and layoffs for other reasons, shriveled the auto workers' annual income to the point of bare subsistence. In 1934, the annual earnings of half the auto workers amounted to less than a thousand dollars. Even by 1936 their average annual income was $1,294, less than $25 a week.

This low income of the auto workers reflected itself in their housing and way of life. In Flint, Michigan, General Motors' stronghold, "The city's housing condition was frightful, with substandard ramshackle dwellings of the 1910 period renting at exorbitant rates. According to a survey, half or more of the homes in a number of working class districts had no private indoor toilet, bath or running water." [2]

The misery of the auto workers outside the auto plants was surpassed inside the plant. The workers silently railed and

[1] Clayton W. Fountain, *Union Guy* (New York: Viking Press, 1949), pp. 16-17.
[2] Henry Kraus, *The Many and the Few* (Los Angeles: Plantin Press, 1947), p. 6.

cursed at the man-killing speed-up system. Sheer physical fatigue from the incessant, uninterrupted repetition of the same motions was accompanied by a mental exhaustion that bordered on neurosis. The noted comedian, Charlie Chaplin, in "Modern Times," a pantomime of the effect of assembly-line speed-up, depicts a scene during a five-minute rest period where for the first four minutes his hands continue the specific motions of his hands on the assembly line, gradually slowing down until he is finally able to grasp a glass of water. This satire was not amusing when witnessed by auto workers. They winced at its realism. The human havoc resulting from the speed-up bordered on the incredible. "During July, a torrid heat wave sent the thermometer boiling over 100 degrees for a week straight. But the assembly lines pounded away mercilessly while many workers fell at their stations. Deaths in the state's auto centers ran into the hundreds within three or four days, and the clang of the hospital ambulances was heard incessantly as they dashed to and from the factories in Detroit, Pontiac, and Flint." [3]

The speed-up was not alone in driving workers to distraction. Piecework contributed its share.

> Our major gripe was the piecework system. I don't recall exactly what our piece rate per cushion was at the time, but we made something like about $6.50 or $7.00 a day. According to the theory of incentive pay, the harder and faster you worked, and the more cushions you turned out, the more pay you received. The employer, however, reserved the right to change the rules. We would start out with a new rate, arbitrarily set by the company time-study man, and work like hell for a couple of weeks, boosting our pay a little each day. Then, bingo, the timekeeper would come along one morning and tell us that we had another new rate, a penny or two per cushion less than it had been the day before.[4]

To add insult to injury, the automobile workers early discovered that the automobile empire was possessed of its own "law and order." Workers were spied upon, insulted, searched, intimidated, and at times physically beaten up. The Ford Motor Company under its former personnel chief, Harry Bennett, was the extreme example of this medieval policy.

[3] *Ibid.*, p. 23.
[4] Fountain, *op. cit.*, p. 28.

> For years after Bennett came to power, it was the proud, undisguised aim of the Service Department to blot out every manifestation of personality or manliness inside a Ford plant. Striving for such an end, Bennett's mercenaries finally mastered every tactic from the swagger of the Prussian drill sergeant to outright sadism and physical assault. On the night shift they would jolt an incoming worker out of his wits and take the starch out of his system by flashing a light in his face and shouting at him, "Where did you get that badge?" or, "Who's your boss?" Another intimidating practice that came into being under Bennett's rule was the act of "shaking 'em up in the aisles." In this case a workman summoned to the employment office for any reason at all, even one that was totally unrelated to his work, would be shoved and pushed along the aisle by a pair of officious Servicemen, like a felon in the custody of the police. . . . But the disciplinary whip which caused greater dread than periodic bullying or an occasional show of force at Dearborn was the facility of Ford Service in exploiting fear of the job. This practice at Ford's was the talk of the trade. In an industry which was characterized by chronic job insecurity even in the 20's, the operatives of Ford Service made matters worse by invoking the right to fire without appeal.[5]

At Ford's the workers' lunch boxes were searched and one man was fired for "smiling." Workers were so cowed and fearful that they wouldn't speak to each other during their lunch period, for who knew but that their companion might be a company spy. Men were watched from the timecard to the toilet and back again. Even *Fortune* magazine stated, "Ford's organization does show extreme evidence of being ruled primarily by fear of the job." [6]

This rule of terror became a fixture in the mentality of the motor magnates. The violent union-busting of the notorious Black Legion that flourished in Detroit and its environs was viewed with sympathy by some of the top officials of motordom. General Motors in 1936, in conjunction with Standard Oil, U.S. Steel, Du Pont, and others, formed a "Special Conference Committee" to crush the challenging CIO. "In May, 1936, the investigation disclosed, William B. Foster, advisory director of

[5] Keith Sward, *The Legend of Henry Ford* (New York: Rinehart and Company, 1948), pp. 306-308.

[6] Reprinted from *Fortune*, December, 1933, by special permission of the editors. Copyright, Time, Inc.

the service department of E. I. du Pont de Nemours and Co., requested E. S. Cowdrick, director of the 'Special Conference Committee,' to obtain for him information concerning 'The Sentinels of the Republic,' the notorious pro-Facist organization. Cowdrick canvassed his constituents. Among those replying was Harry W. Anderson, G.M. vice-president in charge of personnel. A copy of Anderson's letter was published in the files of the La Follette Committee:

" 'Dear Mr. Cowdrick: With reference to your letter of June 1, regarding the Sentinels of the Republic, I have never heard of the organization. Maybe you could use a little Black Legion down in your country. It might help.' " [7]

The mechanical character of the industry tended to make its leaders think in mechanical terms of everything including their employees. It became devoid of human feelings and regarded its people as automatons—necessary adjuncts to the assembly lines. With this kind of attitude it was understandable why rule by actual terror developed as it did and why human life came to be regarded in such a cheap denomination in the automotive production formulae.

Yet only this kind of callous cruelty could have swept such vast numbers of workers, few with any union background, into the arms of the CIO. In the last analysis, the greatest organizers of the coming automobile workers' unions were the executives and owners of the industry.

The general economic collapse of the 1930's added terrifying pressure to an already ugly situation. The squeeze of unemployment and competition for fewer jobs added to the other destructive forces in the automotive industry and started the pot boiling. Wages were driven down; unemployment threatened every auto worker. The threat soon became the fact, and thousands upon thousands of them found themselves out of work. The workers, enraged, bitter, resentful, filled with hate and fear, struck back.

In mid-1930 a Communist-led union struck the huge General Motors Fisher Body Number One plant in Flint, Michigan. It was beaten. By 1932 it was estimated that from a third to one half of all of the workers in the automobile capital, Detroit, were unemployed. The federal relief programs had not yet

[7] Kraus, *op. cit.*, p. 37.

been organized to deal with this problem, and municipal and private agencies, completely swamped, found their resources were totally inadequate to meet this crisis.

It was in March of that year that the famous Ford Hunger March took place. That Communists were active in the formation of this mass demonstration is undeniable; but what is more important is that the thousands of workers, seething in their own helplessness, were more than willing to join in to make the only gesture by which it was possible to express themselves—a public demonstration. Several hundred of these workers, consisting primarily of former Ford employees, unemployed auto workers, and others, as well as a few Communists, set forth to march in a public orderly demonstration to the Ford Motor plants, at Dearborn. The obvious intent was then to send in a delegation to Harry Bennett with various requests for employment as well as a statement of their grievances against the company. What happened is now a matter of odious record. They were met with tear gas, gun fire, and fire hoses; and, when it was over, four were dead and about sixty were wounded. Practically every newspaper in the country bitterly condemned Harry Bennett and the Ford Motor Company for this murderous attack. Few pictures exist, since the Fort Dearborn police confiscated all film in the cameras of the news cameramen. The camera in the hands of the photographer of *The New York Times* was shot out of his hand. If the press had been aware of the arrogant attitude of the automobile industry toward their employees, they would not have been as shocked as they were by this outrageous attack.

In 1933 the Skilled Tool and Die Makers struck. Minor stoppages and disorganized protests flared up throughout the industry but were quickly quelled. Nineteen thirty-three was the year of NRA, with labor's magna charta, Section 7A. In early 1935 the American Federation of Labor armed with Section 7A approached the 400,000 angry men and women in the automobile industry who were aching to be organized so that they could strike back and stand up on their feet as men and women. With the protection of their numbers they believed they could start correcting the conditions that were goading them to the point of explosion.

The American Federation of Labor, based as it was primarily

on craft unions and on a craft-union philosophy, approached the problem of organizing the automobile workers with a certain diffidence and reservation. It was clear to everyone, even including the American Federation of Labor, that the automobile workers would have to be organized on a mass, industrial basis. Here was an industry which could only be effectively approached with the industrial-union philosophy. Everyone who worked in an automobile plant would belong to a single labor organization. To introduce the multitudinous, various craft-union locals and jurisdictions into an automobile plant would have hamstrung the workers to the point of paralysis. It would have created a condition whereby a thousand or more people working on one assembly line would belong to thirty or forty different unions. This condition would naturally have made it impossible for the workers in the automobile industry ever to bargain collectively with any effectiveness. To remedy this situation the AF of L set up what is called the federal local, in other words, locals which are affiliated directly to the national headquarters and not assigned to the jurisdiction of any of the craft unions making up the Federation. Into these federal locals by early 1935 thousands of automobile workers streamed.

Now organized, the auto workers prepared to lash back at their tormenters. The people who had worked and suffered in the auto industry knew that these vast corporations would listen only to the voice of power. Now they were ready. But the AF of L was not. The Federation's leaders and their organizers were totally incompetent to enter the arena in which they now found themselves. There is considerable evidence that the AF of L, which had become fat, soft, and afraid, was actually more fearful of the explosive power inherent in the thousands upon thousands of organized, angry, resentful, bitter automobile workers than they were of the opposition of the automobile industry.

It did not take very long for the labor leadership to discover that the automobile industry not only would not bargain collectively, but was impatient at the very idea of wasting any time conferring with union representatives. In desperation the AF of L turned to the Government. The personal intervention of General Hugh S. Johnson, head of NRA, was greeted by the automotive industry with bored indifference. The corporation

heads of the automobile industry likewise ignored the request and gesture of President Roosevelt. Finally, upon Roosevelt's personal plea, one last meeting was held between the motor executives and the AF of L officials. In this meeting, the officials of the AF of L retreated on one point after another, finally acceding and capitulating to the adamant position of the companies. They even went so far as to accept the companies' position of no recognition of the union. In short, the workers were left high and dry.

The reaction of the automobile workers to the AF of L was one of disgust and nausea. They made bonfires of their union books and cards. Thousands of them quit the union, vowing they would never have any further truck with what they considered the rottenest sellout in their experience. If this was what a labor union was like they didn't want any part of it. The AF of L for its own part, anxious to get rid of the troubled complications and mass headache the automobile workers represented to them, in May, 1936, handed over independence and complete control of the Automobile Workers Union to the automobile workers themselves. At this point it became questionable whether the automobile workers hated the tycoons of their industry as much as they did the leadership of the American Federation of Labor.

The Automobile Workers union lost no time in joining up with the newly formed CIO. This resulted in its suspension from the American Federation of Labor.

The condition of the union was grave. It was estimated that in Detroit one worker out of every 275 belonged to the union, and in Flint, Michigan, which was to become the Bunker Hill of the automobile workers, only one out of every 400 employed in the automobile industry belonged to the Automobile Workers Union.

General Motors from January, 1934, to July, 1936, spent $839,764 for spies, or as they were termed, agents. During the year of 1935 the Chrysler Corporation spent $72,611.89 for the same purpose. The business of labor espionage mushroomed to monstrous proportions. The Senate La Follette Committee reported that industry expended a minimum of $80,000,000 a year in the pursuit of industrial happiness. These undercover organizations riddled the labor unions and became industry's

fifth column. Spies held many key positions in the unions and used their posts for purposes of betrayal. Bribery and blackmail were common daily tools used by these labor-spy companies in achieving their aims.

In Flint the effective operations of these spies so disorganized the automobile workers that this espionage was a major force in practically decimating union organization among the workers. In one year from 1935 to 1936 the enrolled membership of the Auto Workers Union was reported by Huberman to have dropped from 26,000 to 1221

The curtain was about to go up on one of the greatest upheavals in the history of labor in America. The cast starred the General Motors Corporation, the CIO, the sit-down strikers, John L. Lewis, Governor Murphy of the state of Michigan, the President of the United States, and the Secretary of Labor. The supporting cast included the National Guard, the courts, the police, the politicians, an alarmed press, and hundreds of thousands of extras.

The giant of the automotive world was and is the General Motors Corporation. In 1937, the latter employed 261,977 of the approximately 400,000 employees in the entire industry. The corporation's net capital was $1,040,665,000. Its total annual pay roll for that year (including executive salaries) was $460,452,000, which was roughly 42 per cent of the total sales of the industry. It produced and sold 2,116,897 cars and trucks. Its plants were located in 57 different communities in the United States from New Jersey to California, and from Canada to Georgia.

In its colossal size and intricate network lay both its strength and its weakness. Each plant made essential parts which were then shipped to a central point such as Detroit, where they were assembled on the lines. The absence of one vital unit such as motors, springs, wheels, batteries, and similar items would bring the entire corporate production process to a halt. The various parts circulated through the General Motors system always returning to its heart in Detroit. A stoppage at any vital point reacts as a clot in the bloodstream which eventually deprives the heart of its life blood and brings death to the whole system.

Flint, Michigan, a city of more than 150,000 population is the basic stronghold of General Motors. Flint is the birthplace of the Buick Company, and it grew with the speedy development of the automobile and General Motors. The five huge corporation plants included the two largest units of the entire General Motors empire, Buick and the fantastically huge Chevrolet No. 4. It was in Chevrolet No. 4 that all the motors were built for the Chevrolet cars, the biggest-selling, biggest-money-making product of the corporation. If ever Chevrolet No. 4 fell, General Motors would quickly follow. But that was an impossible conjecture, for Chevrolet No. 4 was a mighty, impregnable fortress. Its enormous power plant and nine tremendous shops encompassing eighty acres was built, guarded, and policed in the finest General Motors tradition.

As for the town of Flint, General Motors owned it body and soul. The newspaper and local radio station carried out General Motors' bidding, not only editorially and by biased news reporting but even by refusing to carry ads of the new CIO union. The police, the politicians, and the judges were not the only ones genuflecting to the great god General Motors. So with few exceptions did the ministers, the priests, and the school officials. General Motors owned everything in Flint, except the people; all they owned of them was their implacable hatred.

It began in the autumn of 1936, by which time the accumulated frustrations and resentments of the auto workers had fused into deadly hatred against the industry. A prison expert who toured the assembly line in November reported that the tensions and expressions on the faces of the men were similar to those observed in a prison yard just prior to a mad riot. On November 18, there was a flare-up when a General Motors Fisher Body plant in Atlanta, Georgia, was struck. In the light of the coming struggle, this was tantamount to a brief feeling-out skirmish. Finally, in December, as one General Motors executive commented, "All hell broke loose."

Violent upheavals in the industry began to spread. On December 13 the employees of the Kelsey Hayes plant, which made brakes for the Ford Company, struck. On December 15, men in the General Motors Kansas City Fisher Body plant sat down.

The feeling-out period was drawing to a close. Soon the main forces would be joined in the struggle to a decision.

Homer Martin, the president of the United Automobile Workers Union, was a product of the depression period. Only out of the mad disorganization which characterized the terrible thirties could a Homer Martin be propelled upward to the official leadership of this union. A former minister, who lost his church because of his liberal sermons and then went to work in an automobile plant, Martin was a college graduate and a former national track and field champion of the hop, skip, jump. His critics held that he was also champion of the mental hop, skip, and jump. Certain it was that he possessed a most chaotic and incoherent picture of the auto industry and its workers. His lack of knowledge of industrial problems and the power politics of collective bargaining was appalling. No questions were ever raised at that time with reference to his personal integrity or idealism, but with the coming battle of corporate finance power against corporate manpower, Martin was to be in all actuality a minor and pathetic figure. True, he made many public statements, but it is also true that he was eliminated from the scene at every important showdown. He was vaguely aware of his inability to master-mind the situation and willing to follow Lewis and to respond to his cues, when he understood them.

On December 17, Homer Martin met and conferred with John L. Lewis on the volatile situation in autos. The next day Lewis issued a public statement, "It is the hope of the United Automobile Workers that General Motors will agree to meet peaceably and work out these questions without any disturbance of production. Collective bargaining is the law of the land and we think General Motors should now do a little collective bargaining." Lewis added the "hope" that a strike could be averted, but at the same time emphasized that the auto workers' organizing drive would be stepped up.

This statement was a significant sign of the forthcoming facility of Lewis's strategy. The sit-downs were coming in force, and some had already occurred. Lewis, well aware of the illegal aspects of the sit-down strike and the possible repercussions of public opinion, opened with a demand on General Motors that

they obey the law, inferring that General Motors was the law-breaker and not the sit-down strikers.

On December 19, the United States Senate's La Follette Civil Liberties Committee announced that it would investigate General Motors. Throughout the course of the events that followed, the Senate Civil Liberties Committee constantly pursued General Motors and repeatedly uncovered information damaging and acutely embarrassing to the corporation, actually performing yeoman service for the CIO offensive against G.M.

Now began what was to become the saga of the forty days of General Motors. Forty days of battle, climaxed by the ultimate capitulation of the corporation to the young, squalling, kicking, sit-downing union. On the twenty-first Homer Martin, following his conference with John L. Lewis, telegraphed William Knudsen, executive vice-president of G.M., demanding that General Motors meet with the UAW for purposes of negotiations on "flagrant discharge of and discrimination against union men." Martin also attacked the absence of seniority rights among the auto workers as well as the speed-up. The point of seniority rights was of great importance to the automobile workers, as it is to workers in all industries; for their absence meant that a man who worked for years in the industry had no more security in his job than one who had worked for only a short time.

General Motors' answer was a conference the next day between Knudsen and some of his associates, and Martin and George Addes representing the union. Knudsen announced that this was not a meeting of G.M. and the union but a "personal interview." General Motors' strategy obviously was first to get out of the spot where it had been placed by Lewis's statement accusing it of being an arrogant corporation that regarded itself above the law and would not meet with its workers. At the same time, General Motors was determined that the meeting should not be construed as an unofficial recognition of the union. Further to remove any ideas of informal recognition of the union, Knudsen told Martin "to take up matters with the plant managers." This was the same answer General Motors would give to any complaining worker.

If General Motors could force the union to deal on an individual basis with each plant, it would never complete its

organization. Since all local plant policies were determined on a national scale by the top-level executives of the company, it could fight the union in its many plants, plant by plant. In each plant a relatively small number of workers would be forced to face the entire strength of G.M. The industry could decide strategically where it would permit a strike in order to crush the union in a particular plant. Suppose, for example, there are four plants assembling one make of car and negotiations begin in one. General Motors could be very tough and uncompromising with the union in one plant and force it to strike. In the meantime the company could go along with the unions in the other three plants, and grant union demands. Production could be boosted in those three plants to offset the closing down of the strike-bound plant. With that kind of situation, General Motors could operate with little loss and less jeopardy. With the company prepared to keep the strike-bound plant closed indefinitely the inevitable result would be the end of the strike and the return of the workers economically smashed and with crushed spirits. The union would disappear in this plant for a long time. Having achieved this, G.M. could then repeat this strike strategy in the other plants, one at a time.

Furthermore, plant-by-plant bargaining would result in many varied contracts, which would arouse resentments of workers within and against the union. The workers in a Detroit General Motors plant might get a contract whereby those doing job "X" would get ninety cents an hour. In Milwaukee the workers in a General Motors plant might get a contract whereby the workers doing the same job "X" might get eighty-two cents an hour. Disparity in wages for the same work breeds discontent and bitterness among the workers, much of it directed toward their own union. Furthermore, local plant managers possessed no powers for real collective bargaining and settling of grievances. In the last analysis, General Motor's plant-by-plant strategy was the ancient one of "divide and rule."

Homer Martin, blissfully unaware of what it was all about and pleased with meeting with such important General Motors executives, announced on the next day, December 23, that the meeting with Knudsen and his colleagues was "completely amicable."

In Washington, Lewis cursed as Martin's statement was re-

ported to him. Lewis well knew that to the auto workers the situation was the antithesis of being "completely amicable," and that Martin's statement could have a disastrous effect upon the fighting morale of the auto workers. Completely disregarding Martin's dignity or office, Lewis thundered from Washington, "That's not collective bargaining. That's just evasion of the responsibilities on the part of G.M. It will be unsatisfactory to the union." He then went on to warn that the UAW "will press their claim" and charged General Motors with full responsibility "for the continuing confusion which will logically result" from their adamant defiance of the Wagner Act and refusal to bargain. Homer Martin, now contradicted and publicly spanked, hurriedly fell back in line. He sent a hasty letter to Knudsen requesting a national conference. General Motors didn't even bother to acknowledge it.

But below Martin there were thousands upon thousands of General Motors auto workers led by tough, militant leaders like Bob Travis; Wyndham Mortimer; the three Reuther brothers, Roy, Walter and Victor; Dick Frankensteen; George Addes; and local leaders of the stripe of Bud Simon. These men were young, many of them in their late twenties; and they were passionately devoted to their "cause." These leaders and the auto workers knew their General Motors; and they knew that there was only one way to get General Motors to "acknowledge" Martin's letter, to speak the language General Motors would understand—force.

Three days after Christmas, the offensive began. The General Motors Fisher Body plant in Cleveland sat down. Tensions had reached the point where the workers' nerves were sensitive to the point of rawness. This entire plant went down because a conference between the union and management set for the morning had been postponed until 2:30 that afternoon. At 2:30 the plant was shut down and in the initial throes of a sit-down strike. Any ideas entertained by General Motors of moving their machinery to another town died a-borning when the railroad switch crews refused to cross the automobile workers' picket line. It was a common tactic among major industries that when plagued with strikes they would remove all their machinery to another locale and hire a new labor corps that had not been, from their point of view, "infected with labor-union

germs." This meant that the strikers would permanently lose their jobs as the plant they had struck had become defunct. Therefore, striking workers fought against any removal of machinery as it meant removal of their jobs.

Wyndham Mortimer, vice-president of the UAW, then issued a statement in Cleveland that this sit-down strike would and could only be settled as part of a *national* agreement and there would be no talks with local management. Mortimer and other officers of the UAW knew what they were doing and were prepared to follow the line laid down by Lewis. To confirm officially this policy the UAW called a planning conference for January 3 to lay down an approved and agreed-upon program in dealing with General Motors.

December 30 was D Day for the auto workers. The General Motors empire was rocked with four major sit-down strikes. It was now clear that the sit-down was to be the chief weapon in the attack against the company. To date all New Deal figures, including labor leaders, were loathe to indicate even indirectly the most remote approval of this revolutionary and seemingly illegal tactic. Even the sit-down strikers themselves were uneasy concerning both the legality and validity of this weapon. Sensing this, but believing General Motors could be beaten only by the sit-down, Lewis boldly blessed the sit-downers and told the nation, and what was more important, many of the sit-downers, what the purpose of the strike was. *"The CIO stands squarely behind these sit-downs.*[8] Local conferences, such as Knudsen proposes, would only be confusing. It is up to General Motors to make the next move."[9]

The New Year opened with a bang. While Michigan's new governor, Frank Murphy, was being inducted into office the crescendo of battle was rising rapidly throughout the state and the nation. The first issue of *The New York Times* for 1937 carried a four-column headline:

35,000 MEN ARE MADE IDLE
SIT DOWN STRIKE CLOSES
7 GENERAL MOTORS PLANTS

General Motors' reaction to the sit-down came speedily.

[8] Italics the writer's.
[9] *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, January 1, 1937.

Knudsen officially informed Homer Martin that first, collective bargaining would only be considered after the sit-down strikers evacuated General Motors' plants and second, that national recognition or bargaining was unthinkable; the union would have to bargain with individual plant managers.

Out of this exchange of views emerged the clear issue of the conflict. The UAW and Lewis demanded national recognition of the union as the bargaining agent for the workers of General Motors. To this, General Motors was adamantly opposed. All other issues were secondary in importance.

The area of conflict began to expand beyond the principals involved. Rev. Charles E. Coughlin, of Detroit, delivered a radio broadcast on January 1 with a so-called New Year plan for peace in the industrial world. The reaction in many quarters to Coughlin's remarks was the same as to his previous broadcasts, "more than a bit on the crackpot side." Before many days were to pass, Coughlin was to come out in a bitter attack against Lewis and the CIO.

A more formidable attack against the sit-down strikers came from Coughlin's superior, the Catholic Bishop of Detroit's Catholic Archdiocese, Bishop Michael J. Gallagher. On January 11, "addressing a cathedral congregation he said he did not doubt that the automobile company's employees should get higher wages, but he called the sit-down strikes 'illegal and Communistic. We're fearful that it's Soviet planning behind it,' the Bishop asserted. Many pastors told him of complaints of low pay and high-speed production methods. He added, 'But these sit-down strikes are illegal. They are borrowed from the Communists of France. You will remember there were many of them in France when Blum came into office. The Communists advocated these strikes—often followed by riots—as a smoke screen for revolutions and civil war.' " [10]

On January 2, General Motors secured an injunction from Judge Edward Black, ordering the sit-down strikers out of the plants. The sheriff who tried to serve the court order was laughed out of the plant. Homer Martin, visibly wilted by the threat of the law, announced that the court order would be obeyed and the union would not fight the law. He then went on to say that if Knudsen would only start to discuss "broad

[10] *The New York Times*, January 12, 1937, p. 12, col. 3.

principles covering seniority, speed-up, hours, non-discrimination for union activity," the UAW would be willing to have other matters dealt with in the local plants. Here Martin was actually throwing away the major objective of the sit-down strikes and of the union—national recognition and national bargaining.

In Washington, John L. Lewis, now beginning to doubt Martin's ability, softly remarked to his lieutenants that a couple of husky automobile workers sitting down on Homer Martin's mouth would be almost as important as sitting down in a G.M. plant.

The next day two hundred UAW delegates meeting in Flint created a board of strategy and gave it authority to call a general strike. They also reiterated Lewis's demand for national recognition. Thus in one day the union repudiated Martin's statement and actually stripped him of real authority for the struggle with General Motors.

General Motors continued to refuse to meet with the union, and strikes spread further. The January 4 battle map showed Atlanta, Georgia; Cleveland, Ohio; Flint, Michigan; Kansas City; Norwood, Ohio; and Anderson, Indiana, in the union's camp. That day President Sloan of General Motors lashed back at the union with charges of labor dictatorship, saying, "the real issue in the controversy is will a labor organization run the plants of the General Motors Corporation or will the management continue to do so?" With this blast, G.M. went to work plastering announcements of ". . . Will you pay to a private group of labor dictators for the privilege of working? . . ." over all the bulletin boards in their plants.

Homer Martin, scared by both General Motors' thunder, and Lewis's and the UAW officials' ominous reaction to his previous irresponsible utterances, maintained a discreet silence for one day and then issued a carefully worded denial of General Motors' charges.

Now the national administration began to be concerned with the rapidly expanded battlefront of the General Motors–CIO war. President Roosevelt and his Secretary of Labor, Frances Perkins, conferred twice on January 5 on this critical labor-capital conflict. Roosevelt was noncommittal after these conferences, while Secretary of Labor Perkins made some veteran

reporters grin sarcastically by stating that F.D.R. and she had discussed the strike "only superficially."

That day the General Motors strongholds in Toledo, Ohio, and Janesville, Wisconsin, toppled. Now that all forces were rapidly being joined for the final decision, conflict began to revolve around these questions.

1. The issue was national recognition of the union as the exclusive national bargaining agent for the factory employees of General Motors.
2. The union's basic weapon was the sit-down strike. If the sit-down strike was defeated either by the courts, public opinion, or the state or national governments, the cause of the union would be lost.
3. Although the strike was spreading all through the General Motors network, the major and decisive assault was converging upon the General Motors plants in Flint, Michigan, and specifically on the gigantic Chevrolet No. 4 plant. If that went, then the fatal bloodclot would be formed in the General Motors system. The battle of Flint was fully recognized by both adversaries as the locale of the ultimate showdown.
4. In the last analysis, it would be a struggle on the part of General Motors to use the courts, citizen groups, police, and governmental authorities to break the union's stranglehold on General Motors in Flint. On the other side, victory or defeat was to be determined by the ability of the workers and Lewis to maintain the sit-down strike unbroken by the opposition forces.

With this compass before us, we can now intelligently chart the maneuvers and drives of these two titans. G.M. had resorted to the courts and secured eviction writs. The strikers and their leaders in the Flint plants were apprehensive and uncertain in the face of the legal weapons pointed at them by G.M. The injunction of Judge Black could not be long ignored. If enforced it might well mean the collapse of the union. At this point, a brilliant maneuver saved the day for the union. Clever Lee Pressman, general counsel of the CIO, had been sent to Detroit by Lewis. The thought crossed Pressman's mind that it might be interesting to find out if Judge Black, who had

issued the injunction for General Motors against the union, might be a General Motors stockholder.

According to Pressman, what happened was this: "I phoned a friend of mine in New York City and asked him to go over to the General Motors offices and ask to look at the list of stockholders. He did this and called me back in about six hours. While I would not have been too surprised to have discovered that the Judge was a stockholder, I can tell you I was practically bowled over with joy when I was informed that this particular Judge Black was not only a stockholder, but he possessed 3,365 shares of General Motors stock currently valued at $219,000. Well, as you know, we went to town on the issue and by the next morning, Judge Black was as far out of the fight as though he lived on another planet. The Michigan state law barred any judge from presiding over a case in which he was an interested party. Well $219,000 is more than a slight interest. As for the injunction, it wasn't worth the paper it was written on. If G.M. was calling us 'red' it was nothing compared to the red face General Motors had after we broke this. It was a real break for us." [11]

Although Pressman calls it "a real break for us," the fact is that through his own alertness, imagination, and in this case, brilliant idea, he made the "break." The same ingenious maneuvering and sensitivity to all possibilities in the situation by Lewis and his associates made nearly all the "breaks." In Flint, it was Bob Travis and the Reuther boys; in Detroit, Wyndham Mortimer, Maurice Sugar, a skillful labor attorney, and Lewis's lieutenants, Pressman, Brophy, and Powers Hapgood; and over it the old Napoleonic master of power and strategy: cold, ruthless, ingenious John L. Lewis.

The devastating effect of the disclosures of Judge Black's holdings in General Motors stock blasted him and his injunction permanently out of the picture. In fact, the UAW petitioned the State House of Representatives to impeach Judge Black for sitting on the case while being a stockholder of General Motors. Here is another sample of the play to the public, probably by both Pressman and Maurice Sugar. General Motors issued embarrassed denials of any knowledge of the Judge's financial investments and hurriedly prepared to go to

[11] Interview with Lee Pressman, New York City, December 6, 1948.

another court for a new injunction to evict the sit-down strikers. With the union now having temporarily extricated itself from the legal hot box of the injunction concerning the sit-down strike, it began to issue statements to the general public to the effect that sit-down strikes were just and legal on the basis that a man's right to a job transcends the right to private property. G.M. met this propaganda attack by their own publicity, which was along the line that people have a right to work and the vast majority of workers in General Motors were being denied that right by a sit-down strike in which only a handful of radicals were engaged.

On Friday, January 8, for the first time both sides were becoming apprehensive. G.M. was definitely restless now that operations in Flint were at a standstill. The corporation began hinting that it might be willing to negotiate nationally if the plants were evacuated. This was accompanied by another G.M. statement that they would be willing to promise not to move out their machinery if this evacuation were to take place.

On the other side, the UAW informed Governor Frank Murphy of Michigan that it was willing to waive its demands for recognition, if G.M. would start negotiating. Friday, January 8, was a day of jitters for both sides. G.M. for the first time was fearful, UAW uncertain as to how long it could continue to maintain the sit-down strike.

The nervous tension gripping both the union and General Motors was reflected in Flint, where fights and demonstrations broke out. Father Coughlin in *Social Justice* of that week attacked Lewis. Coughlin stated that he did not and would not ever support any organization of union labor to sovietize industry. This statement was almost an exact paraphrase of what General Motors had been charging, and the same statement was paraphrased later in the official statement of the New York Merchants Association in their attack on the CIO.

The unrest of Friday the eighth resulted in G.M.'s sending a brief and unacceptable offer to UAW through Governor Murphy. In Washington that day Lewis, aware of the nervous tension of both the auto workers union and G.M., decided upon a dramatic act to restore confidence to the union and also increase G.M. apprehensions. Lewis had tried to get F.D.R. to make a public statement insuring unimpaired federal relief

to the strikers, which would have been a terrific morale factor. The President would not budge. Roosevelt, as President of the United States, could not possibly indicate any approval or even moral support for an action as patently lawless as the sit-down strike. The auto workers worshiped him and always assumed that he was completely on their side. Lewis then decided to do what he had done before and did so many times afterward—maneuver to make it appear the President was actively behind him even if he was not.

He decided to exploit the general public opinion that he had F.D.R.'s positive support. Lewis prepared a situation that would be publicly interpreted as his possessing confidential information that the President would shortly throw his weight on the side of the union. This, plus a personal air of unruffled confidence, would be certain to tighten even more the already taut nerves of General Motors.

Edward McGrady was Roosevelt's right-hand labor conciliator and very much in the public limelight. Lewis asked McGrady on Friday night to make an appointment for the following morning to see the President on the subject of the automobile strike and then to meet Lewis later that afternoon at the Willard Hotel. McGrady innocently agreed to this. The Roosevelt calendar of appointments was public property, and anyone who saw Roosevelt that day was not only known, but it was actually printed in the paper. Lewis then tipped off the press that he had a very important appointment with Ed McGrady late that afternoon. The press put two and two together. McGrady was seeing Roosevelt in the early afternoon and was going to see Lewis in the late afternoon, and something big must be brewing. Roosevelt was finally acting in this situation and obviously was going to act on the side of Lewis. McGrady showed up for his appointment with Lewis and was dumbfounded to find a room full of newspaper reporters all buttonholing him and saying, "Mr. McGrady, you've seen the President this morning and, now of course, you're carrying a very important message from him to Mr. Lewis. Can you tell us what happened?" While McGrady was still in a state of shock, Lewis came out and said, "Come on into my room, Ed," and pulled McGrady into his room and shut the door. McGrady then looked at Lewis and said, "Why all the newspaper re-

porters?" Lewis said, "Oh, well, they just heard you were coming. Forget them." Lewis then engaged McGrady in conversation for an hour, and as McGrady left, said, "When you leave, ignore the reporters with a 'no comment.' That's all, and I'll appreciate your doing this for me."

McGrady stayed for an hour and then left, elbowing through the reporters saying, "No comment." All the while Lewis looked very mysterious and bore a look of triumph as though something terrifically important had taken place. The press then began pounding that Roosevelt was beginning to step into automobiles. Lewis was about to square off with General Motors with President Roosevelt's full support behind him. The fact that F.D.R. was furious over this maneuver leaked out; but at the same time repudiation of Lewis and organized labor was unthinkable, so F.D.R. could do nothing but sit there and hold the bag, for the time. . . .[12]

At this point the forces engaged in the battle appeared to spread, including other seemingly spontaneous movements that unfurled the banners of General Motors and rushed onto the warpath against the union. In Flint a new organization, the Flint Alliance, suddenly mushroomed, headed by George E. Boysen, a former paymaster of the Buick Motor Company. There seemed to be ample funds supporting this movement, judging from their headquarters and organizational tactics. Company foremen, executives, doctors, politicians, and others worked enrolling members.

Frequent charges that General Motors was the hothouse for this new flower of the Flint Alliance have never been legally proven though it was of interest to note that after the strike Boysen sued G.M. for money he claimed to have spent developing the organization.

The Flint Alliance announced that it represented thousands of workers and that, if there was going to be any collective bargaining between General Motors and its workers, the Alliance had as good a right if not a better one to represent the workers than did the union. The Flint Alliance's daily announcement of its growth in "membership" defied the tales of Paul Bunyan.

Public opinion was not entirely with General Motors. The social-action department of the National Catholic Welfare Con-

[12] Interview with Lee Pressman, New York City, December 6, 1948.

ference, the Industrial Division of the Federal Council of the Churches of Christ in America, and the Social Justice Commission of the Central Conference of American Rabbis sent a joint telegram to Knudsen urging collective bargaining. They also went a step further and offered their services to resolve this conflict. It was becoming clearer by the hour that the fight was one that would be determined strictly by the strength of the opponents and that both sides in the last analysis had the attitude, "the public be damned," unless the public would be on their side. This was a straight power struggle, which suited John L. Lewis.

The reaction of General Motors to the telegram of the three major religious groups was in accord with this. They announced they "would stand pat," and then having rejected these requests from these major organizations announced any action they would take would depend upon "public opinion." On that day Governor Murphy announced that he had ordered the State Welfare Department to provide relief on the basis of need. This meant that the strikers were eligible for relief and were removed from the shadow of starvation. It was now clear that G.M. was not going to be able to starve the union into submission. This action was one of the most important administrative decisions in behalf of the automobile workers that took place throughout the strike. Murphy was not only leaning over backward as far as the union was concerned but actually siding with them. He demonstrated this in many other ways. Committees of so-called "loyal" workers and other alleged citizen committees favorable to General Motors attempted to see the Governor and demand the eviction of the sit-down strikers. With few exceptions Governor Murphy either side-stepped these groups, ignored, or reprimanded them.

The spurt of strikes continued, however, and Oldsmobile and the Fisher Body plants in Lansing, Michigan, went down. General Motors was being pushed more and more to their last line of defense.

January 12 was a day of blood. Twenty-four strikers were injured, some seriously, in a riot that broke loose in Flint. There seems to be little doubt that a good part of this riot was the result of the inflammatory action of the Flint Alliance. Certainly, statements like Boysen's would not hasten peace. The

union offensive continued, and five more plants were shut down. General Motors was no longer producing Chevrolet cars, Cadillacs, or LaSalles. Pontiac and Oldsmobile production was seriously curtailed. The mammoth G.M. organization was grinding to an almost complete standstill. The job of paralyzing the G.M. structure was practically done. The question now was, would the workers be able to continue the sit-down and hold down the brakes on the General Motors juggernaut? General Motors was feeling the pressure and beginning to spar for time to find a way out of this tempest. They announced that they would not use strike-breakers, which was somewhat ludicrous, since one of the main features of the sit-down strike was that physical occupation of the plant made it impossible to bring in strike-breakers.

Tension was mounting through the country. Newspaper editorials appeared, demanding that Roosevelt intervene. The *Detroit News* came out with a front-page editorial headed, "Let Roosevelt do it." Rumor was chasing rumor that G.M. was willing to discuss a number of points of controversy on a national basis. Added to the pressure on General Motors was the knife-in-the-back "co-operation" of the rest of the automobile industry with the union. If the other automobile companies, Ford, Chrysler, Studebaker, Nash, and Packard, had been willing to support General Motors in its fight, probably the union could have been defeated. That is, if Studebaker, Ford, and Chrysler had said to General Motors, "Look here, we recognize that you are carrying on our fight. We fully share the policies that you have and the employment practices which you try to maintain, including your opposition to having your workers organized into a union. Your defeat by the union now means our defeat later. If you continue your fight against the union, we will stop producing cars so that you need not fear loss of your market." But they did not. The profit motive transcended everything else. Pressure began to build up on General Motors from its dealers throughout the country and particularly from Chevrolet dealers, who now could no longer guarantee delivery on automobiles. At the same time other automobile companies cut in on the General Motors market, to an unprecedented degree. The squeeze was on, not only from

the union, but also from the other automobile companies, G.M.'s competitors.

Through all this, Lewis continued to exude an air of supreme confidence. By word and gesture he would intimate that the President of the United States and the Government of the United States was behind him. He announced that the Government's La Follette Committee was going to be asked to investigate General Motors and that this investigation should encompass the entire financial structure of General Motors, excessive salaries of executives, possible dictation of policy by foreign stockholders and also their "arsenal" and "armies." While Lewis's words encouraged the sit-down strikers, they had just the opposite effect upon Knudsen, who, it is reported, was so disturbed he sat up all night. The boys in the plants, the army of labor, the people without whom no general and no one individual could have forced General Motors to its knees, continued their advance. The Fleetwood Body plant in Detroit and the Pontiac plant fell; and General Motors production lines now were as silent as the tomb. Threats by the Flint Alliance of open physical warfare resulted in a stream of reinforcements for the union. The union leader in Toledo, Ohio, announced that a thousand workers in his town were coming into Flint to help the union. Rubber workers from Akron, coal miners from Ohio, men from different industries in the Middle West were filing into Flint, and a revolutionary spirit surged through the town.

At this point, Murphy invited Knudsen and Homer Martin to come to Lansing, Michigan state capital, for a conference. Following the meeting, Governor Murphy announced that the deadlock had been broken with a truce, whereby the union had agreed to evacuate the sit-down strikers out of five of the major plants that week end and that in return General Motors had agreed to start negotiations with the union, at 11:00 A.M. the following Monday. On the next day the sit-down strikers began to evacuate the plants. They were marched out of the Cadillac and Fleetwood plants in Detroit, with flying banners and brass bands. Preparations were being made for similar evacuations in the other plants, when suddenly the truce blew up with a roar. The sit-down strikers who were halfway out of the plants turned and ran back in to assume their positions. Other

plants in the midst of their marching-out preparations locked the doors and prepared for an indefinite siege. The union had discovered that General Motors had agreed also to meet and negotiate with the Flint Alliance. Organizer Bob Travis had secured this information before it was released to the press. Thus the union could countermand its evacuation orders in time.

John L. Lewis issued a statement saying, "The representatives of the workers in these conferences will insist upon formal recognition of the union as the *exclusive* bargaining agent before the industry. When General Motors accepts this formula, it is reasonable that the other items in the controversy will quickly respond to negotiation." This was obviously the major issue. General Motors' agreement with the Flint Alliance was defined by the union as a betrayal of the agreement. With the rupture of the truce, G.M. began to use the law.

Governor Murphy tried to save the truce from complete destruction by phoning Knudsen and trying to persuade him to drop his scheduled conference with the Flint Alliance. Knudsen refused. At this point, Lewis issued a public statement. "G.M. was caught in a barefaced violation of the armistice and so the evacuation of the plants was stopped. The men are not going to leave them. It was an amazing action for the motor manufacturers to take but the union will protect itself."

With the battle now hopelessly deadlocked between General Motors and the union, Frank Murphy left for Washington to confer with Roosevelt and Perkins. He also planned to see John L. Lewis. Murphy now realized the impossibility of dealing with subordinates in this situation and announced that if he could see Lewis he would then go to see Alfred P. Sloan, chairman of the board of directors of General Motors. Here were the very top powers in both camps, Sloan for General Motors and John L. Lewis for the CIO.

On January 20 while Roosevelt was giving his now famous inaugural speech, ". . . I see one third of a nation ill housed, ill clad and ill nourished . . ." Governor Murphy was closeted with Secretary of Labor Perkins and the G.M. chieftains, Sloan, Knudsen, Brown, and John Thomas Smith in a "peace" conference that ended in a dismal failure.

The next day Lewis charged that ". . . a united front of finan-

cial groups interested in steel, automobiles and rubber and glass and coal is intent on ending what they consider the menace of the CIO." This statement carried within it the revolutionary implication of class warfare which began to permeate the CIO during these months.

The same day, the CIO began calling off strikes in the aluminum and plate-glass industry to insure a free flow of materials to Ford, Chrysler, Packard, Nash, and Studebaker so that they could not only maintain but boost production to invade the market formerly dominated by General Motors. The CIO was employing a hard, shrewd policy of using even the rivals of the auto industry as unwitting allies.

On Thursday, January 21, Lewis, before a press conference equal in attendance to the White House conferences, publicly asked for the support of President Roosevelt: "The administration asked labor for help to repel this attack and labor gave its help. The same economic royalists now have their fangs in labor. The workers of this country expect the administration to help the workers in every legal way and to support the workers in General Motors plants."

It is interesting to note that Lewis deliberately used the term popularized by the President of "economic royalists." Here was his open bid for a dividend on the more than $500,000 contributed to Roosevelt's 1936 campaign by the United Mine Workers of America.

Sloan, after seeing the newspaper stories about Lewis's demand for the President's support, packed his bags and left for New York City. Before leaving he announced that General Motors would not bargain with any group "until negotiations with the United Automobile Workers Union were concluded successfully or otherwise." This was a slight retreat from General Motors' fixed position.

On Friday, Roosevelt, smarting under Lewis's pressure to get him involved in the strike, tartly commented, "Of course I think in the interests of peace that there come moments when statements, conversations, and headlines are not in order."

The New York Times headlines were "Roosevelt Rebukes Lewis." Lewis, undaunted, then began to turn the screws on the President by replying, "I cannot undertake to interpret the President's words. He alone can define his statement and of

course, I do not believe that the President intended to rebuke the working people in America or his friends." By this statement Lewis broke through the generality of Roosevelt's phraseology and challenged him openly to say that he would not help the automobile workers. This, of course, Roosevelt would not do, by virtue of both his personal attitudes and his personal politics. Then Lewis, having fended off Roosevelt's intended rebuke, returned to the attack: "We have ample evidence here that in the end the President will do what he thinks necessary. We think that the President thinks about as we do on these things. . . . Labor is on the march. . . . That is what Sloan asked for and he'll take that and more."

In the meantime General Motors continued to denounce the union and the sit-down strikers as representing a minority of its employees. Also the corporation charged that the strike was engineered by "radicals" or "left-wingers." There was considerable truth to these statements; for, while the union represented the frustrations and hopes of most of the automobile workers, comparatively few of them officially belonged to the union. As for the charges of "radicalism" and "left-wingers" there was no question that the political thinking of the two prime leaders of the General Motors strike, Robert Travis and Wyndham Mortimer, was to the left.

Lewis continued indifferent to all attacks from General Motors. The UAW told the administration and the country that they would do what Lewis told them to do when they stated, "Homer Martin was directing strike activities under the *leadership of* John L. Lewis." [18]

January 24 Frances Perkins stepped into the picture to announce she was calling a conference of the union and the company two days from that time.

Lewis viewed the conference with General Motors and Secretary of the Labor Perkins with wariness and caution, if not suspicion. He felt that Frances Perkins was accustomed to far different behavior and standards than the dirty, slugging power battle which was raging between General Motors and the union. Lewis also felt that because of this she would be unable to understand that this was a battle where anything went and that the decision would come as a result of sheer power.

[18] Italics the writer's.

Sloan's rejection of Madame Perkins's invitation to the meeting opened the door for Roosevelt to counteract his first statement against Lewis with a second one against Sloan. On January 27 he stated at his press conference, "I told them [meaning General Motors] that I was not only disappointed in the refusal of Mr. Sloan to come down here, but that I regarded it as a very unfortunate decision on his part." But it was obvious to the nation that President Roosevelt's personal "disappointment" was not going to influence the policy of General Motors.

The same situation was repeated on the thirtieth. Frances Perkins had Sloan in her office. After a couple of hours of conversation she assumed that he was prepared to sit down with Lewis and Governor Murphy and commence negotiations. Instead of that, Sloan after leaving her office, took a train for New York City, and slammed the door on a settlement under Madame Perkins's auspices. Perkins's reaction to Sloan's departure was typical of what Lewis felt with reference to her ethics and standards. Perkins, emotionally very upset, protested, "Really, it is not what one should expect from a man in his position." The sit-down strike that had paralyzed General Motors should have been some clue to Frances Perkins as to "what one should expect from a man in his position." However Sloan's action was popularly interpreted as G.M.'s placing itself above the Government and swung considerable public opinion toward the union.

Lewis also balked at conferences with Perkins and the General Motors officials because he felt that Perkins might suggest that the sit-down strikes stop and the strikers leave the plants as a condition for bargaining. Of course the evacuation of the plants would have meant the end of the strike for the union and victory for the company. Perkins could not see it that way.

On Sunday, January 31, Lewis's fears were confirmed when Perkins told the press that one of her proposals to Sloan on the day before had been that the strikers were to evacuate the plants "as an expression by the union of good faith in General Motors."

The Washington negotiations or rather lack of negotiations began to resemble a Mack Sennett comedy. On Monday, Roosevelt would spank the union, on Friday he would spank General Motors, and all other days he would turn somersaults to stay

out of the whole situation. A few blocks away, Frances Perkins was continuously wringing her hands and deploring the ungentlemanly conduct of Alfred Sloan. Alfred Sloan seemed to spend most of his time jumping off and on trains, going to Washington and returning to New York, while Madame Perkins's blood pressure rose and fell accordingly. A few blocks away, John L. Lewis glowered and persistently tried to force the President to throw the weight of the White House behind the union. But trying to catch and hold on to the elusive Franklin Delano Roosevelt appeared to be impossible.

Governor Murphy, now in a state of despair, realized that this issue would not be settled in Washington, that Frances Perkins was unable to do anything about it, and that the President would not be coaxed, taunted, or threatened into it. It would be decided right on the battleground of Detroit between the leaders of General Motors and the leaders of the CIO.

The crisis came on Tuesday, February 2. What the sit-down strikers and their leaders had long feared now came to pass. Judge Paul V. Gadola issued an injunction ordering the sit-down strikers out by 3 P.M. the following day. This time the writ was not signed by a G.M. stockholder. The injunction and the proceedings were legal.

General Motors waited silently. The courts had acted. The law of the State of Michigan was now openly invoked in behalf of the corporation. These sit-down rebels must now get out or be forced out. The red nightmare of property seizure was now to have its back broken. Chaos was to go, and order was to come. General Motors' silence was the sudden stillness auguring the oncoming storm.

General Motors' tense quiet, of stop, look, and listen, was not the case with the sit-down strikers. Bellows of defiance, mad rage, and frenzied curses could be heard coming from the occupied plants. "Damn the injunction, damn the courts, damn the army, and double damn General Motors." They would be damned if they would budge! Out of this inferno came the now famous blood-bath telegram to Governor Murphy:

> Unarmed as we are, the introduction of the militia, sheriffs or police with murderous weapons will mean a blood-bath of unarmed workers. . . . We feel it proper to recall to you the assur-

> ances that you have given many times publicly that you would not permit force or violence to be used in ousting us from the plant. . . . The Police of the City of Flint belong to General Motors. The Sheriff of Genesee County belongs to General Motors. The judges of Genesee County belong to General Motors. . . . It remains to be seen whether the Governor of the State also belongs to General Motors. Governor, we have decided to stay in the plant. We have no illusions about the sacrifices which this decision will entail. We fully expect that if a violent effort is made to oust us many of us will be killed and we take this means of making it known to our wives, to our children, to the people of the State of Michigan and the country, that if this result follows from the attempt to eject us, you are the one who must be held responsible for our deaths!

General Motors, shaken by this incredible reaction to the injunction, tried to pacify the sit-down strikers with a public statement that the union's observance of the injunction would demonstrate "union responsibility." The sit-down strikers and the union, now in a frenzy of defiance, didn't even give a thought to General Motors' "gentlemanly request."

The hours went on for the sit-downers with the outlook becoming steadily darker. Finally in desperation, Lee Pressman and Bob Travis phoned Lewis in Washington at 3 A.M. Pressman pleaded with Lewis to come out to Detroit at once. Lewis inquired, "What will you have for me when I get there?" Pressman replied, "Nothing, except that we will have you out here and you can do what has to be done. If you don't come it will mean injunction enforcement, defeat, and blood filling the streets of Flint." Lewis spoke three words, "I am coming," and hung up.

Before leaving for the train Lewis faced a press conference equal in size to one that met with the President that day. *The New York Times* reporting this conference notes that Lewis was asked point blank, "Have you talked to the White House or Secretary Perkins during the afternoon?" Lewis answered, "I am noncommittal on that." At Roosevelt's press conference, the President parried similar questions as being "iffy."

Before leaving for the railroad station, Lewis conferred privately with Roosevelt's right-hand labor adviser, Ed McGrady. Then he literally led a parade of news reporters to the railroad

station. There, surrounded by the press, labor leaders, and hundreds of interested citizens, he dramatically announced, "Let there be no moaning at the bar, when I put out to sea," and then boarded the train.

Reporters scampered aboard, staying on until Baltimore, machinegunning questions, "What would he do?" "Would the sit-down strikers defy the injunction?" "Would they march out?" "Was the President going to intervene?" "Did Mr. Lewis have anything to say about anything?"

Lewis was in a jovial mood, answered questions with questions, laughed frequently, and exuded complete self-confidence. He appeared unruffled and assured of victory. Reports of his apparent lack of concern came as a trumpet call of courage to the tension-ridden strikers.

That day *The New York Times* headlines ran:

COURT ORDERS STRIKERS OUSTED TODAY
MEN WIRE MURPHY THEY WON'T SUBMIT.
LEWIS GOES TO DETROIT TO FACE CRISIS.

The next morning, February 3, Lewis arrived in Detroit. His prime concern prior to meeting and negotiating with General Motors was to find out exactly where Governor Murphy stood in terms of enforcing the injunction. Would the sit-down strikers be permitted to sit or would they be forcibly evicted?

Frank Murphy was sincerely devoted to the liberalism of the New Deal. His heart was with the union in this no-quarter war with General Motors. Yet as governor of the state of Michigan he would have to carry out the laws of the state and support the courts and their action—and one of their actions was the Judge Gadola injunction against the sit-down strikers in General Motors. Frank Murphy was also ambitious. He was an excellent possibility for the Democratic party's presidential nomination in 1940 to succeed F.D.R., and he stood an excellent chance of winning in spite of being of the Roman Catholic faith. The climate of the nation had changed drastically since the ill-fated campaign of Alfred E. Smith in 1928. Frank Murphy knew that organized labor and particularly the CIO ranked at the top of the New Deal family. To antagonize the CIO might well annihilate his future career.

It is reliably reported that on the first day Lewis was in

Detroit he was informed by Governor Murphy that President Roosevelt wanted the sit-down strikes ended. Lewis was dumbfounded. He told Murphy: "I was given to understand by the President before I left Washington that the sit-down strikers could continue to sit as far as he was concerned. He said, 'Let them sit, John!' "[14] Murphy then replied: "Look, the President has told me one thing and now you tell me that he told you just the opposite. I do not intend being caught in the middle. I will call the President and you can listen in on an extension." The call was made and when Governor Murphy quoted Lewis's report of what the President had told him, Roosevelt's reply was, "Disregard whatever Mr. Lewis tells you." This answer started the deadly feud between Lewis and Roosevelt.

Lewis, in reviewing his relationship with Roosevelt, stated to the writer: "It was during the winter of 1937 when we were gripped in fatal conflict with the corporation of General Motors that I discovered the depths of deceit, the rank dishonesty and the doublecrossing character of Franklin Delano Roosevelt."

Murphy gambled with time. He decided to ignore the injunction for the moment and stake everything on a quick settlement of the strike between Lewis and General Motors.

On the first day of negotiations, Lewis took a short walk with Knudsen. Upon his return he announced that Knudsen and he had agreed upon national recognition of the Automobile Workers Union by General Motors and also a closed shop. When they heard this, the General Motors associates of Knudsen almost went berserk. They pulled Knudsen off into another room for a twenty-minute, behind-closed-doors huddle. Later they emerged and in the presence of a flaming-faced Knudsen informed Governor Murphy that they would sever negotiations if Lewis again talked privately with Knudsen. Knudsen stood there, the picture of mortification, but silent. Lewis's success with Knudsen was partially the result of careful research. It should be noted that Lewis usually is well armed with data whenever entering a controversy. As Lewis tells the story:

"I had Mr. Knudsen investigated during the early days of the strike and I was repeatedly impressed with the assembly-line character of his mind. There was no question that he was a

[14] Personal interview with John L. Lewis, Roosevelt Hotel, New York City, 1940.

production genius, however, and his mind operated with the methodical inflexibility of a mechanical assembly line. His mind must logically proceed from step to step with a rigidity that did not permit too much imagination. For example, years ago, while he was an executive with Ford Motor Company, some mechanical condition developed which caused a great number of complaints from many Ford owners. It became sort of a standing joke that you were never certain whether the Ford you drove out would be able to bring you back.

"Knudsen decided to find out what was wrong and then go about fixing it. My information was that he spent about seven months traveling around the country, going from one Ford agency to another and inquiring at each service place what the major complaints were with reference to the Ford car. After this seven months' investigation he discovered the trouble was something that had to do with a spark coil. Knudsen then corrected this condition so it did not recur.

"Now the main lesson of this experience of Knudsen's to me is that I found it difficult to understand why he simply did not send out telegrams to every Ford agency in the country saying, 'Please inform me by return wire what is the major complaint you have on the mechanical operation of the Ford.' He would have secured all this information in a couple of days. But not Knudsen. He, as I tried to emphasize, with this assembly-line type of mind, had to see things for himself, he had to talk directly with the people he dealt with, the people servicing the cars, and in many cases, see the cars themselves. Now with that kind of a mind, once you can get it to accept an initial step it will automatically accept all the implications that follow.

"With that in mind I got Knudsen first to agree that if the workers did not look out for their own welfare, no one else would and that, therefore, they had a right to organize into a union. Once he agreed to this, the next logical step was the closed shop—which he also agreed to. (Here Lewis roared with laughter.) I will never, never forget the looks on the faces of his associates—his fellow officers of General Motors—when Bill Knudsen nodded his head after I announced we had agreed upon national recognition of the union and the closed shop." [15]

Meanwhile the strikers were at bay before the onslaught of

[15] Interview with Lewis, 1940.

the courts. On one side there was an injunction carrying a penalty of fifteen million dollars on the union and all its officers in the event the injunction was not immediately obeyed. In the meantime a military force of 1300 troops had already been concentrated in Flint by Governor Murphy and was suddenly doubled in size as 1200 troops, including light artillery and cavalry, moved in. A blockade was thrown around the strike-bound area, pickets were driven off at the point of bayonets, crews of union sound trucks were arrested, and then the military made their first direct move against the sit-down strikers by barring shipments of food into the plants, which meant forcing the strikers to submit by starvation. This tactic was quickly stopped by an order from Governor Murphy and food shipments into the plants were resumed.

A curious and overlooked detail of that day was that suddenly the 26th Infantry, which had been occupying the Fisher Body plant sector No. 2 area in Flint, was relieved by the 125th Infantry. The 125th was made up mainly of boys coming from Detroit, many of them auto workers and many of them knowing the strikers or known by them or related to them. *The New York Times* reported considerable fraternizing between strikers and national guardsmen. However, at many points in the sit-down area sullen suspicion prevailed. The smell of possible carnage was in the air. Union men were walking around armed with clubs; and a horde of automobile workers from Detroit, Lansing, Pontiac, Saginaw, Bay City, and Toledo descended upon Flint. Here was to be the Waterloo of General Motors or the union. The union was further reinforced by rubber workers from Akron, steel workers from Pittsburgh, and coal miners from Pennsylvania, Ohio, and Indiana. Street fights broke out with coal miners and steel workers right in the middle of them.

The city of Flint had by this time recruited a special police force of five hundred and tolerated armed vigilantes inspired by such groups as the Flint Alliance. The tension was somewhat eased when the National Guard got an agreement from the union that its followers would stop walking around with clubs in their hands and assembling in large groups well stocked with clubs. The authorities of Flint agreed to demobilize their five hundred special policemen and to keep armed vigilantes off the streets. Here we find the municipal administration of Flint, for

the first time, recognizing the growing political power of labor.

Friday, February 5, found both General Motors and Lewis refusing to budge. *The New York Times* headline read:

AUTO DEADLOCK UNBROKEN
BUT MURPHY REPORTS GAIN
ROOSEVELT INSISTS ON PEACE

John L. Lewis, flanked by Wyndham Mortimer and Lee Pressman, stood pat for recognition of the UAW–CIO for a beginning period of at least six months. Lewis assumed that within that six-month period the union, with possession of the exclusive right of collective bargaining, would so increase its strength that there would be no question of the indefinite continuance of this arrangement.

General Motors treated this demand as too preposterous to merit discussion. They were willing to say, "We'll recognize you but not for any fixed time period." General Motors felt invincibly armed with the injunction and was convinced that Governor Murphy could not stall longer than another week before being compelled to enforce it and smash the strike.

In Flint that day the strikers held "victory parades," shook wooden clubs out of car windows, and established mass picket lines around the struck plants. The tension began to affect Homer Martin, and he sought help from the AF of L. The answer was a sarcastic rejection.

Between Detroit and Washington the telephone wires were humming. Governor Murphy and Madame Perkins had lengthy conversations, which Perkins then reported to Roosevelt. That evening Murphy recessed the negotiations for an hour and asked Lewis to step into the next room. Murphy closed the door behind Lewis and pointed to a telephone with its receiver off the hook. "The President wants to talk to you, John."

Lewis strode to the phone and picking up the receiver said, "Yes, Mr. President," and the voice that came back was that of Franklin D. Roosevelt.

"Hello, John, how are you? John, we're having sort of a party up here at the White House, but I'm talking to you from my bedroom upstairs and things are very quiet here. As a matter of fact, Sidney Hillman is here, and I've asked him to come upstairs. He's sitting right along side of me. I've had a long talk

with Sidney about this situation out in Detroit, and we came to an agreement. John, I think I can get an agreement for you for General Motors to give you recognition for one month. What do you say, John?"

Lewis replied, "Mr. President, my people tell me it's got to be six months. One month is not satisfactory."

There was some hesitation, and then the President continued. "Now, now, John, let's be reasonable about this. How about two months? I'm not sure I can get two months, but I think I can. As a matter of fact, I think I can. Now what about two months, John?"

Again came the answer. "Mr. President, my people tell me it's got to be six months. Nothing less than six months will be satisfactory."

Roosevelt then became irked: "Now look here, John, this is no time to be arrogant about this whole thing. This is a pretty dangerous and critical situation that you're in. How about three months? I don't know whether I can get it, but how about three months?"

Lewis again repeated, "Mr. President, my people tell me it's got to be six months. No less than that."

A few more words were exchanged and then Lewis turned the phone over to Murphy, "Governor Murphy, the President would like to speak to you." With that Lewis left the room.

The next day Roosevelt sent his famous message to Congress requesting that the Supreme Court be reformed. It cannot be questioned that Roosevelt's sole interest in this message was to change the Supreme Court. However, his attack on the judiciary reverberated through the General Motors war areas to the advantage of the strikers. Roosevelt's onslaught on the Court tore the gown of infallibility surrounding all the courts and lessened the popular sanctity of the law. For the moment it rendered the flouting of the injunction less reprehensible; and moments were desperately needed by the union.

In Detroit that night, Murphy, Knudsen, and Lewis met as a subcommittee to discuss and prepare reports for the conference to be held the next day. At this meeting, Lewis dropped his demands that the union be the sole bargaining agency for everyone in G.M.'s sixty-nine plants and limited it to the twenty strike-bound plants. As these were the key plants of the

General Motors structure, Lewis's concession was not as much as it might seem. Actually the organization that bargained for the workers of those strategic plants really controlled the total personnel policy of General Motors. G.M. was rumored to be willing to grant six months' recognition to the union in six plants. If this was true, General Motors was on the road to defeat; for it would mean they had abandoned their "no-six-months" recognition position and the door was open for the union to build up the figure of six plants to twenty.

General Motors through this period continued to participate in negotiation although possessing writs for the arrest of all union leaders because of the defiance of the Gadola injunction. Murphy's ignoring of the injunction placed General Motors in a tight spot. If they forced Murphy's hand so that he would use force against the sit-down strikers, General Motors' public reputation might be boiled in blood. From their point of view Murphy must, as governor, enforce the injunction on his own initiative so that the blood would be directly on his hands and not on law-abiding General Motors.

That day, February 6, Judge Gadola issued a writ of body attachment against all the sit-down strikers, pickets, and union officers. The Sheriff's office, obviously unable to carry out the order of the court alone, requested the use of the National Guard. Sheriff Wolcott wired Governor Murphy:

> Please advise me by wire whether you will place the National Guard now on duty here at my disposal to carry out the orders of the Court or will it be necessary to deputize a sufficiently large group of deputies to uphold the court decree. Your immediate reply is respectfully requested.
>
> Thomas Wolcott

It was squarely up to Murphy, and he could not evade the issue much longer. The issue was whether or not Frank Murphy as governor of the State of Michigan was going to enforce the law of that state. If he did, he would go down in labor history as the Benedict Arnold of labor. If he did not he would have failed to live up to his oath of office as governor. It was a bad Saturday night for Murphy.

General Motors gave Murphy and themselves a forty-eight-hour reprieve by announcing they would refrain until Monday

from demanding the enforcement of the law. General Motors was fearful of the possibilities inherent in the immediate enforcement of the order. *They were fully cognizant of the fact that the battle to evict the strikers might well result in the destruction of General Motors' plants and a pyrrhic victory. The General Motors strike bordered on revolution.*

The press reported that day that Governor Murphy was about to declare martial law, which would render civil court decisions ineffective during the period that military rule prevailed. This course of action appeared as too crude an evasion of the issue. There were also press stories that Murphy was going to be impeached, that Murphy was going to evict the strikers, that he was not going to evict the strikers. In essence it was becoming clear that no one knew what Governor Murphy was going to do including Governor Murphy.

The next day Murphy announced that nearly all points of differences had been ironed out and the chief obstacle remaining was sole recognition. Of course, this was the basic issue from the beginning, but Murphy's statement cast the shadow of a possible union victory over all its foes. Into this shadow promptly fled all officials dependent upon the electorate for their badges and bellies. Sheriff Wolcott suddenly wheeled on both the anti-union vigilante groups and the Flint Alliance, warning them that if they attempted to take the law into their own hands, they "will be the first ones arrested." In Flint, the hitherto bitterly anti-union City Commission called a special meeting to try to disband the "special police force." A newspaper reporter cynically commented that Flint was changing its clocks from General Motors time to the United Automobile Workers Union time!

February 7 was a bad day for General Motors. The G.M. directors met and cut their dividends in half. G.M.'s biggest stockholder, Pierre S. du Pont, owning ten million shares, was estimated to have lost a minimum of $2,500,000 on this day. Other auto makers were having a Roman holiday at the expense of General Motors. Nash reported their sales had doubled. Studebaker jumped their production from 6,000 units a month to 7,700. But General Motors was at a standstill, sweating it out.

The tension was terrific on both sides. Homer Martin was discovered walking down a street in Detroit's main business sec-

tion weeping hysterically. Lewis then dispatched Martin on a nationwide speech-making tour in order to get him out of the picture.

The next day, General Motors, with its back to the wall, stiffened and lunged to the offensive demanding the enforcement of the injunction. Murphy began to wilt. Suddenly the entire strike-bound Chevrolet area was surrounded by bayonets and machine guns. The picket lines that had fraternized with the sit-downers were dissolved. Sit-down strikers were barred from leaving the plants to visit the union office or their homes and then returning to the plants. The morale of the strikers was visibly waning. Murphy was on the spot, and his morale was keeping pace with that of the strikers. General Motors, now having tasted blood, struck again. The weather was icy cold, and they were prepared to turn off the heat in the struck plants and freeze the workers out of the plants. The sit-down strikers countered by opening all the windows. This meant that the fire-fighting equipment would freeze and all the General Motors insurance policies would be voided. Some of the UAW leaders, probably Robert Travis, had carefully read over the insurance policies of the corporation and spotted this one loophole whereby the insurance companies could be freed of any responsibilities for destruction by fire of the General Motors plants. For some hours the key plants of General Motors were completely unprotected by insurance until General Motors capitulated.

General Motors, now in a frenzy from the results of their turning off the heat on the workers, really turned the heat on the Governor. Murphy on his last legs blew up under the additional pressure and stormed into Lewis and Pressman. His voice shaking with anger, he said, "The sit-down strikers over at Chevrolet No. 4 have opened up all the windows. This means that everything inside that plant is going to freeze, including the fire equipment, and all of the policies that General Motors has will lapse; and you've got to do something about this, Mr. Lewis. I demand that you do something."

Lewis looked stonily at Governor Murphy for a moment and then said quietly, "I did not ask these men to sit-down. I did not ask General Motors to turn off the heat. I did not have any part

of either the sit-down strike or the attempt to freeze the men. Let General Motors talk to them."

Through Monday, February 8, General Motors pushed its last-ditch legal offensive and stalled on negotiations. The conferences continued only because of the firm insistence of Governor Murphy, who now was stalling for time with the fervent hope that something might occur that would stave off his evicting the sit-down strikers and also evicting himself out of public life. Unquestionably Murphy was emotionally on the side of the union. The sincerity of his liberalism was later borne out by his many opinions as a member of the United States Supreme Court. But the calm, deliberative atmosphere of a judicial chamber did not surround Murphy in 1937. This was an ordeal that he was never to forget.

General Motors again insisted on a secret ballot to be supervised by Governor Murphy to determine how many of their employees actually belonged to the union. This was a shrewd maneuver by the company as first, they felt that the union only represented a minority of their workers. Second, it would result in the suspension of negotiations until the vote had been taken and during this interval Murphy would have to evict the strikers. Third, by stipulating that Murphy was to supervise the election, they prevented the union from raising any question of the honesty of the election, and they also put Murphy in a spot where the corporation was willing to trust him. For these reasons General Motors put forth this proposition, but the union rejected it. The union well knew the validity of G.M.'s charge that the union's membership consisted of a minor part of G.M.'s working force. Lewis publicly announced that the UAW must first be recognized as the sole collective-bargaining agency for the twenty plants closed by the strike and that afterward all other points at issue were to be settled by continuous collective bargaining.

Into this stalemate stepped the American Federation of Labor. William Green, president of the AF of L, phoned Governor Murphy and wired William Knudsen demanding that the "rights" of the AF of L be protected and therefore he and the AF of L were opposed to General Motors' granting exclusive recognition and bargaining to the CIO. Actually Green here was supporting the position of General Motors.

At the afternoon meeting Knudsen suddenly produced his telegram from William Green stating that the AF of L opposed any recognition of the CIO Automobile Workers Union or John L. Lewis. After Knudsen had read this telegram, he looked up at Lewis awaiting his comments. Lewis calmly rose, turned his back on all of the representatives of General Motors and Frank Murphy, then crossed the room to the closet. Slowly and silently he put on his coat. Pressman, startled, followed suit. Frequently not knowing what was in Lewis's mind CIO representatives just imitated his actions. One could hear a pin drop. Lewis then slowly walked to the door. The silence was unbroken until he put his hand on the door knob. Murphy then cleared his throat and called out, "Oh, Mr. Lewis, where are you going?" Lewis slowly turned and stared coldly at Mr. Knudsen for a moment and then turned his gaze on Governor Murphy. After a moment he said slowly: "Why, now that Mr. Green and the American Federation of Labor have entered into this picture, I suggest that you gentlemen also invite Haile Selassie, because he certainly has as much of a following and as much representation among your workers and as much right to be present as Mr. William Green!"

Knudsen and Murphy burst out laughing. Murphy then called, "Oh, forget it, John. Come back here and sit down. Come back here." Lewis took off his coat and strode back to his seat. Never again was William Green or the American Federation of Labor mentioned in the conferences.

Later that evening General Motors continued to maintain an aloofness from any actual discussions. They made it clear that they were present by sufferance because of Governor Murphy's insistence that the negotiations go on. Time was running out, and Lewis was harassing and maneuvering in every possible way to break through the icy disinterest of the General Motors representatives. The leader and strategist of the G.M. position was John Thomas Smith, general counsel of General Motors. Smith was the toughest and most hostile to the union of G.M.'s negotiating triumvirate, which included William Knudsen and Donaldson Brown, who was a son-in-law of the Du Ponts. Lewis focused his attention on Smith, who was sitting next to him.

Lewis has described the scene: "John Thomas Smith was one of the most ruthless individuals I have ever encountered. He

was as impersonal and as void of feeling for the workers as though he were a soul-less corporation in human form. He was truly a worthy representative of General Motors. He was the major obstacle to any spirit of negotiations. Finally I turned on Smith, glared, then looked down at the space separating our chairs and cleared my throat noisily with a sound of complete disgust. Then I looked away. A moment later I turned again on Mr. Smith, glaring at him and then with as disgusted an expression as I could possibly muster, I stared down at the space separating our chairs again, noisily clearing my throat. This time Mr. Smith seemed to become aware of my actions and began to shift uneasily in his chair. Again I turned, glaring at him; and as he caught my eye, I turned my head downward staring at the space between our chairs clearing my throat once more as noisily as I could. This time, Mr. Smith, too, looked searchingly and apprehensively at the space between our chairs. I repeated this performance a moment later and this time Mr. Smith, practically in a panic, turned to me and said, 'Why, Mr. Lewis, is anything wrong?'

"This time I brought up my best frown and turning to him I said very slowly, 'Wrong, Mr. Smith? Yes, there is something wrong.'

"Mr. Smith said, 'Well, what is it, Mr. Lewis?'

"I replied, 'Mr. Smith, would you mind moving your chair a bit closer to mine?'

"Smith looked down at the space between our chairs and ejaculated, 'Move it closer to you? Why, we're practically sitting in each other's laps right now, Mr. Lewis. My chair is only about six inches away from your chair. Why should you want me to move closer to you?'

"I then stared at him and with a wistful tone I said, 'You see, Mr. Smith, for the past hour I have been thinking about how someday in the future I would be able to tell my grandchildren about how at one time I sat just six inches away from one and a half billion dollars, but I would so like to tell them that I sat only three inches away! Please, do you mind moving your chair a little bit closer?'

"Smith, purple with rage, leaped out of his chair. He started off with, 'I'll have you know, Mr. Lewis, that I worked my way up, that I was a . . .'

"I interrupted. 'Newsboy, when you were a child . . .'

"Smith said, 'That's right and later on I worked my way through school . . .'

"I interrupted again. 'I'm sure you took some correspondence courses too!' At this point Smith's success story became ridiculous even to him and amidst giggles even from his associates he subsided. The icy reserve of General Motors was now broken." [16]

An experience along the same line occurred later that night. At one point, late in the evening, conversation ceased. General Motors representatives, realizing Lewis was baiting and irritating them to start conversations that might conceivably lead into negotiations, decided to shut up. Finally in a body they got up from the table, put on their coats, and prepared to leave. Governor Murphy remaining at the table, said, "Gentlemen, the conference is not adjourned as yet." The three General Motors representatives then stood in the room with their hats and coats on and their mouths grimly silent. Murphy's invitation to be seated was politely declined.

Lewis coolly surveyed the three representatives of General Motors and then turning to Murphy he inquired, "Governor, is there an Army and Navy store open at this hour?"

The Governor, taken aback, replied, "Why do you ask this, Mr. Lewis? Is there anything you need? I don't think there is a store of that type open at this hour, but I suppose arrangements can be made. What is it you want, Mr. Lewis?"

Lewis again turned and carefully looked over the standing G.M. executives and said: "Well, Governor, I would like to purchase three long suits of red flannel underwear and present them to these gentlemen with my personal compliments. I think they would be much more comfortable standing in this warm room in red flannel underwear than as they are in hats, coats, suits, and what have you."

Murphy tried, unsuccessfully, to refrain from laughter but roared. The spectacle conjured up by Lewis of these three great leaders of the General Motors Corporation decked out in red flannel underwear was too much for the Governor, and he continued to shake with laughter. Lewis joined in the merriment. The G.M. officials looked sheepishly at each other and then

[16] Interview with Lewis, 1940.

without a word took off their hats and coats and sat down again at the negotiations table.

However, the meeting finally broke up with General Motors still refusing to bargain.

The next day, Murphy displayed an outward confidence to the press which was actually ninety-nine per cent bravado and one per cent wild hope. If a settlement was not forthcoming by the next morning, he would have to order the National Guard to enforce the court's injunction against the strikers and the union. Murphy's back was to the wall. He knew it and General Motors knew it. *The New York Times* reported Murphy's position as of that day:

> Talk that a state of insurrection might be declared by Governor Murphy if present peace conferences fail and that under such a proclamation the National Guard would assist Sheriff Thomas Wolcott in evicting the sit-down strikers . . . It was said that Governor Murphy felt he had done everything possible to prevent bloodshed through his repeated conferences with General Motors and union officials. It was pointed out that he had never issued any statement justifying the sit-downers in seizing possession of other people's property or in defying the courts. He has limited himself to discouraging and delaying any drastic action until the last hope of peace has been dissipated. Reluctant as he still is to do anything that might cause the killing or shooting of anyone, it is understood that the Governor feels that the strikers are in a state of insurrection against the local authorities, especially in their action in defying an injunction issued by Judge Paul V. Gadola, ordering them to evacuate the seized factories by 3:00 o'clock last Wednesday afternoon.[17]

Murphy tried one last desperate compromise. He suggested that General Motors sign a contract recognizing the union not as the sole bargaining agent, but that in practice they would do so. All this time the General Motors proposal for a secret ballot was receiving more and more public support. The union's position was grim.

At this crucial point Lewis refused to retreat. He decided to try to bull his way through. He issued the following succinct public statement:

[17] *The New York Times*, February 10, 1937.

> Our position is substantially this: These plants are shut down and operations are suspended throughout General Motors. General Motors and the Governor in these negotiations are recognizing the United Automobile Workers as the bargaining agency to start this industry going again. We are the only agency in this conference. There is no other qualified to negotiate. If we are the bargaining agency to start these plants in operation we must be the bargaining agency after an agreement is reached. That is very simple, very concise and perfectly understandable.

With Lewis now hanging onto the union's demands with bulldog tenacity and General Motors demanding the enforcement of the court order, Governor Murphy was at the end of the road. No one could have done more than he did to help the union. He had stood by now for almost a week turning his back while thousands of strikers defied the law. Now he must give the fatal order.

Around Flint that night of February 9, 1937, the National Guard sprang into action. All units were alerted. Preparations were made to seal off all highways, railroads, and every entrance into Flint so as to prevent CIO members and sympathizers from reinforcing the strikers. The civilian police were mobilized and used for the first time.

In Chevrolet No. 4 and the Fisher Body plants that night, the men were depressed and angry. Was this the end? They nervously clutched sections of door hinges, bars, cushions for shields, and anything else they could hold in their hands. Some wanted to fight to the death, some wanted to run, and all were scared. There was that tightness in the air and inside their chests; the feeling that men have just before they do battle.

In Detroit, that night, the General Motors chieftains were on edge. With nerves at the breaking point they waited for Murphy's order. Maybe they had erred in forcing the Governor's hand. What if there was a horrible massacre? What if their plants were destroyed in the reign of terror that seemed certain to erupt with the Governor's decision? How long would it take them to rebuild their plants and how much more of their shrinking market would their competition raid? General Motors' customers were buying Ford, Chrysler, Studebaker, and Nash products. Was it too late to retract and sign a contract? The nerves of General Motors were snapping. If Murphy now

did not put through the order they would recognize the union and avoid the nightmare that now enveloped them.

In Detroit, that night, John L. Lewis went to bed.

In Detroit, that night, Governor Murphy, torn up inside, prepared the order that was to convert Flint into a battlefield and sound the death knell of the union.

In Detroit, later that night, Lewis told the writer, he was awakened by a knock on the door. He opened it to find Governor Murphy standing there tense and pale. The Governor entered and turned to Lewis. "Mr. Lewis, I have here in my hand an official order as governor of the State of Michigan, declaring a state of insurrection and ordering the National Guard to enforce the injunction of the court of the State of Michigan to evict the sit-down strikers from those plants of General Motors which they are occupying by illegal seizure." Lewis, equally pale, glowered silently at the Governor. Governor Murphy continued, "I want to give you an advance copy of this order so that we can avoid violence."

Lewis took the order and read it carefully. It was a brief announcement by Frank Murphy that as the governor of the state he was sworn to uphold the laws of the state; that an injunction of a court of the State of Michigan was now being flouted and that he was sworn to uphold the law and therefore compelled to enforce this injunction. It went on to order officially that on that morning the sit-down strikers were to be asked voluntarily to evacuate the plants. If they refused there would be no alternative except forcible ousting.

Lewis wheeled on the Governor, thundering, "Governor, do you know what this means?"

Murphy, shaken, replied, "Yes, I do, but there is nothing else I can do."

Lewis then turned his back on the Governor, walked across the room and stared broodingly out of the window.

For some minutes the silence in the room alone was audible and then Murphy said, "Well, Mr. Lewis, what are you going to do about it?"

Lewis turned on Murphy. "I repeat, Governor Murphy, why are you doing this?"

Murphy's voice trembled. "You know why I'm doing it. As governor of the State of Michigan, I have no recourse. I'm do-

ing it because I am sworn as governor of this state to uphold the laws of this state, and I have to uphold the law. Now do you understand?"

Lewis fixed a stony stare upon the Governor and then began in a very low voice, "Uphold the law? You are doing this to uphold the law? You, Frank Murphy, are ordering the National Guard to evict by point of bayonet or rifle bullet, the sit-down strikers? You, Frank Murphy, by doing this are giving complete victory to General Motors and defeating all of the hopes and dreams of these men. And you are doing all of this because you say, *'to uphold the law!'* " Lewis continued with his voice rising with each sentence. "Governor Murphy, when you gave ardent support to the Irish revolutionary movement against the British Empire you were not doing that because of your high regard for law and order. You did not say then *'uphold the law!'* When your father,[18] Governor Murphy, was imprisoned by the British authorities for his activity as an Irish revolutionary, you did not sing forth with hosannas and say, 'The law cannot be wrong. The law must be supported. It is right and just that my father be put in prison! Praise be the law!' And when the British government took your grandfather[19] as an Irish revolutionary and hanged him by the neck until dead, you did not get down on your knees and burst forth in praise for the sanctity and the glory and the purity of the law, the law that must be upheld at all costs!

"But here, Governor Murphy, you do. You want my answer, sir? I give it to you. Tomorrow morning, I shall personally enter General Motors plant Chevrolet No. 4. I shall order the men to disregard your order, to stand fast. I shall then walk up to the largest window in the plant, open it, divest myself of my outer raiment, remove my shirt, and bare my bosom. Then when you order your troops to fire, mine will be the first breast that those bullets will strike."

Then Lewis lowered his voice. "And as my body falls from that window to the ground, you listen to the voice of your grandfather as he whispers in your ear, 'Frank, are you sure you are doing the right thing?' "

[18] Governor Murphy's father, John Murphy, was jailed at the age of sixteen in Canada for taking part in a Fenian disturbance.

[19] Governor Murphy's grandfather was hanged in Ireland by the British.

Governor Murphy, white and shaking, seized the order from Lewis's hand and tore out of the room.[20]

The order was not issued, and the next day General Motors collapsed and capitulated at 2:45 A.M. Thursday, February 11. Lewis was confined to his bed with a severe cold, and the Governor and the General Motors' executives shuttled from their conference room to Lewis's bedside. When the agreement was reached, General Motors' John Thomas Smith stood alongside Lewis's bed and said, "Well, Mr. Lewis, you beat us, but I'm not going to forget it. I just want to tell you that one of these days we'll come back and give you the kind of a whipping that you and your people will never forget."

The nation's press bannered the settlement in headlines. The National Guard began to evacuate Flint. The agreement signed at noon on February 11 provided that General Motors agreed to recognize the UAW as the bargaining agent for its members, not to bargain on the matter of general corporate policy with any other group from the twenty struck plants without Governor Murphy's sanction, no discrimination to be shown against the union members, to drop court proceedings, rehire all workers and resume operations as soon as possible. The United Automobile Workers agreed to call off the strike and evacuate the plants, not to have any intimidation or coercion in its membership drive, not to recruit members on company property, to exhaust negotiations before striking again, and not to have a strike when negotiations were about to begin. Both agreed to begin bargaining Tuesday on wages, hours, production "speed-up" and other working conditions.

After the signing of the agreement, which Governor Murphy signed first, the Governor suggested to Lewis that he sign his name above all the signatures on the pact. Lewis replied, "If it's all the same to you, Governor, I will put it last." He signed as "Counselor for UAW and representative of the CIO."

Lewis then issued a statement: "Automobile workers can rejoice in their achievement. The efficiency and precision of their

[20] The order was never seen until about two years afterward, when Frank Murphy was nominated for the post of U.S. Attorney General. Violent criticism was leveled at his past handling of the General Motors sit-down strikes during his gubernatorial administration in Michigan. Among the materials publicly presented in defense of Frank Murphy's "legal responsibility" was this unissued order.

strike has been magnificent. Their devotion and self-sacrifice has been rewarded. They can now perfect their union and go forward. Governor Murphy has contributed greatly to the settlement. The nation is the beneficiary of his statesmanship."

Knudsen told the newsreel cameras, "Let us have peace and make cars."

The union told its members, "Let us get back to work to build cars and build our union."

The UAW was on its way now. The CIO shifted into high gear and raced on to new battlefields.

Flushed with triumph, astride both General Motors and the CIO, stood John L. Lewis. He had generaled an undisciplined but fighting small army against the fabulous entrenched power of the General Motors Corporation and won. He had not flinched from the storm of the sit-downs, but instead had assumed leadership of them. He had captured not only General Motors, but the hearts and imaginations of America's workers. Out of this victory over General Motors was born the legend of Lewis's invincibility. A later, unbroken series of conquests permanently fixed Lewis in the minds of the workers as a man who always won: Labor's tomcat had become a lion. But he was a lion not without wounds. He was hurt and angry with Roosevelt. Lewis felt betrayed. He was convinced that if this President, who had benefited just ninety days before by almost a million dollars contributed in support of his re-election did not stand fast then, he never would. Here were planted the seeds of what was to grow into one of the most bitter feuds and hatreds of the generation—that of Lewis and Roosevelt.