

The Many and the Few: A Chronicle of the Dynamic Auto Workers (1985)



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In the middle of the Great Depression, auto workers stood up to the largest corporation in the United States—and won. Henry Kraus's insider account of the Flint Strike of 1936 reveals the chaos of those days. This strike was one of the most successful in U.S. history, transforming the United Auto Workers into one of America's strongest unions. Its success depended on worker solidarity but also a keen sense of strike strategy, using the novel resistance of the sitdown strike (where workers occupy the machines). By occupying a part of the General Motors supply chain that could not be replaced, the workers forced the company to negotiate. Unlike in the nineteenth century, the state and federal authorities refused to back local police or the corporation in the strike. Worker power allowed for union success.

Bob Travis received a phone call from "Chink" Ananich, one of the Fisher One boys. "Chink" was working on the swing shift and had slipped out of the plant to make his important announcement.

"They're moving dies out, Bob!" he said excitedly. "You sure?"

"Yeah! The boys in the press room working near the doors by the railroad dock say they got crank press dies on some trucks and they're loading a flock of freight cars." Travis made his mind up instantaneously.

"Okay! They're asking for it!" he said almost gayly. "Tell the boys stewards' meeting at lunch time. Bring everybody down."

There is hardly anything about which a unionist is more sensitive than on the subject of the "runaway shop." It is one of the oldest of tactics used against organization efforts. In Travis' own experience, besides, the memory was fresh of how General Motors had slipped two-thirds of the jobs right from under his co-workers at Toledo- Chevrolet in revenge for the defeat it had sustained in May 1935. Present always to his mind were the confusion and suffering and despair that this act had caused, and the picture of fathers of families coming to the union office and pleading that the organization do something to get their jobs back. Those who were still working felt as though they were taking the bread out of the others' mouths. The role played by Travis in the Flint strike and by many volunteers who later came up from his local to engage in it was directly traceable to this tragic experience and to the desire of the victims to pay off the responsible corporation in the coin of union solidarity.

After "Chink" Ananich hung up Travis called the Fisher One union office.

"Put the flicker on," he told the girl.

There was a big red 200-watt bulb over the front of the office which was right across from the plant. The boys near the windows inside the factory had instructions to give a look over every so often. If the flicker was on that meant something was up and that there would be a meeting. At 8 p.m. the workers streamed out of the plant for "lunch hour." In four minutes the union hall was filled with an excited crowd of men. The report of the moving of the dies had evidently spread everywhere by this time. Everybody's mind seemed made up before even a word was spoken. Travis got right down to brass tacks.

"Boys, we'll make this snappy," he said- "I understand there's something happening over there on the press room dock."

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

The men from the die room substantiated this.

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

sort of pause. A chap raised his hand and stood up.

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

"That's right!" several others exclaimed.

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

"Shut her down! Shut the goddam plant!"

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

"Okay, fellows, that's what I wanted to hear you say. Now the important thing to remember from here on out is—discipline. You can't have too much of it in a strike, especially at the beginning. Roy and I will come in after you've got the plant down and help you get everything organized. Bud and the rest of the committee will be in charge. You'll have to enlarge the committee so as to get representation on it from all departments. Remember, absolutely no liquor. And tell the girls in cut-and-sew to go home and come around to the Pengelly headquarters tomorrow morning. We'll have plenty of work for them to do. Okay, good luck!"

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

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

The men stood still facing the door. It was like trying to chain a natural force. They couldn't hold back and began crowding forward. Then suddenly they broke through the door and made a race for the plant gates, running in every direction toward the quarter-mile building front which bordered the main highway from Detroit.

We waited outside, anxiously watching the windows. The starting whistle blew. We listened intently. There was no responsive throb. Was it right? we asked ourselves, looking at each other, Had they pulled it off?

"Here's where the fight begins," Travis said between tight lips as we stamped nervously on the cold pavement. But there was no sign of any untoward activity inside the plant. Several minutes passed. Then suddenly a third floor window was flung open and there was "Chink" Ananich waving his arms.

"Hooray, Bob! She's ours!"

Then other windows went up and smiling workers gathered about them.

"Was there any trouble?" we shouted.

"Naw!"

A little later the girls came out, wearing overalls and working caps. And there was a straggling male here and there. But the vast majority of the three thousand men remained voluntarily inside the plant that first night.

The job of organizing the sitdown was tremendous, particularly since the great majority of the workers had had no experience with unions or with the discipline required in such crises. Many joined up only on that first night while the sudden calling of the strike had eliminated the possibility of even the most elementary preparations. The situation was pretty chaotic the first few days as a result.

One of the early steps was to confine the sitdown to one building, the north unit, as it was called, and to merely subject the south unit and press shop to a constant patrol. This cut the defense needs. But the men very quickly learned the importance of leadership and even proposed on their own measures endowing the strike committee with special powers.

The committee immediately ordered all further leaves to be halted and called union headquarters for reinforcements. Perhaps the only thing that saved the strike during this period of disorganization was the revolutionary newness of the sitdown tactic which undoubtedly proved far more confusing to the company than to the union, rendering impotent the traditional strikebreaking technics.

Questions

1. What was new about the sitdown strike compared to earlier strikes?
2. What tactical advantage did the strikers possess in occupying only a small part of the factory? Why did they choose that part of the factory?
3. How did morale matter in the occupation?
4. Why did the strikers value discipline?
5. Why did the company want to move its dies under cover of darkness?