



# UAW History



## The Flint, Michigan, Sit-Down Strike

Once called "the strike heard round the world," the first major labor dispute in the U.S. auto industry ended after General Motors signed a contract with the United Auto Workers Union on February 11, 1937.

1936 would prove pivotal. In July of 1936 there were hundreds of deaths in auto plants in Michigan that were thought to be a result of a heat wave combined with difficult working conditions. On November 12, 1936, three welders participated in a "quickie sit-down" strike and were fired when they arrived to work the next day. Their firing resulted in a sit-down protest of 700 men on November 13 at the Fisher Body No. 1, until the three men were rehired later that day. This success "had an electrifying effect on Flint's auto workers," and saw United Automobile Workers union membership growing from approximately 150 to 1500. On December 30, 1936, General Motors workers started their sit-down strike, which at the time was legal, gaining control of the Body Plant Number One in Flint. On January 1, 1937, workers controlled a second Plant in Flint. Although the strike was gaining power, some of the General Motors' plants were still running - most notably Chevy Plant Number Four, the largest plant owned by GM. But on February 1, 1937, the striking workers took control of this plant because Genora Dollinger asked the women in the crowd to surround the plant, leveraging their bodies to shield workers from the police shooting into the plant at workers.

By remaining inside the plants strikers were protected from both violence and weather as well as from the threat of being replaced with other workers unwilling to go along with the strike. Inside the plants the striking workers were playing board games, organizing concerts, and giving lectures. Outside, union supporters arranged for food, cooked within the Strike Kitchen organized by Mary Nightingale, feeding over 5,000 people, to be delivered to the strikers, and their families. After 44 days of striking, GM President Alfred P. Sloan announced a \$25 million wage increase to workers and recognition of the union.



This was the first major victory for unionization in America's history and its consequences were dramatic; within two weeks, 87 sit down strikes started in Detroit alone. Packard, Goodyear, and Goodrich announced immediate wage increases. Within a year, membership in United Auto workers grew from 30,000 to 500,000 and wages for autoworkers increased by as much as 300%. This strike marked the beginning of decade of intense union activity.

### Remembering the Sit-Down-Strike

Wear your White Shirt on February 10<sup>th</sup>!

Remember those workers that paved the road for you and unionization across America!