

Module 06: "Which Side Are You On?" The Flint Sit-Down Strike, 1936-37

Evidence 2: UAW Demands, January 3, 1937

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Introduction

On Sunday, January 3, 1937, UAW and CIO officials met and issued an official list of demands. When Homer Martin presented the short list to Sloan and Knudsen the next day, he indicated that GM's continued demand for local bargaining was unacceptable. For one thing, through its systematic attempts to thwart unionization in all of its plants, GM seemed to be defying the intent of the National Labor Relations Act. The UAW could not engage in meaningful discussions with local plants until GM discontinued its policy of subverting union drives at its plants. At the same time, while the diversity of GM production facilities across the nation meant that each had different conditions and needs, certain "fundamental issues" were determined by high-level, national officers of the corporation. The UAW thus sought a national collective-bargaining conference to negotiate a nation-wide agreement concerning eight such issues.

Although the UAW list deals with a number of concerns, the most common complaint among sit-down participants, and the issue considered the cause of the Flint strike, remained the push to increase the pace of production, an effort workers referred to as the "speed up." GM and other employers used a variety of means to push workers to increase the rate of production, including increasing the speed of assembly lines, urging foremen to badger workers and stand over them with stop watches, and forcing straw bosses (crew leaders) to serve as pace setters for non-assembly-line production. Like many other manufacturers, GM also relied on the piece rate system, in which workers were paid by the number of tasks they completed in a given amount of time rather than at an hourly wage. Workers complained that management constantly readjusted the piece rate, so that even when they increased their production rate, their take-home pay did not necessarily increase. Through these and other methods, workers believed that management was driving them to produce more and more, even at the expense of their health and well-being, without appropriate compensation.

Questions to Consider

- What did the UAW hope to accomplish with their list of demands?
- Why did the union appeal to the "American standard of living" as a measure of appropriate pay?
- Why did the union ask for a shorter work day and work week?
- Does the list seem reasonable? Why or why not?

Document

1. National conference between responsible heads of G.M.C. and chosen representatives of international union, United Automobile Workers of America. Such conference to discuss and bargain collectively on the following points as a basis for national agreement between General Motors Corporation and its employe[e]s, as represented by international union, United Automobile Workers of America.
2. Abolition of all piece work system of pay, and the adoption of straight hourly rate.
3. A 30-hour week and six-hour work day and time and one-half for all time worked over the basic work day and work week.
4. Establishment of a minimum rate of pay commensurate with an American standard of living.
5. Reinstatement of all employe[e]s who have been unjustly discharged.
6. Seniority, based upon length of service.
7. Recognition of the international union, United Automobile Workers of America, the sole bargaining agency between General Motors Corporation and its employe[e]s, for the establishment of joint tribunals and joint rules of procedure for the adjusting of any and all disputes that may arise from time to time between employe[e]s of General Motors Corporation and the management.
8. Speed of production shall be mutually agreed upon by the management and the union committee in all General Motors plants.

Source:

Flint Journal, Extra (4 Jan 1937), 1.