

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

Evidence 5: General Motors Statement, January 21, 1937

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Introduction

Statements issued in early January highlighted the differences between GM and the UAW's positions on collective bargaining and representation. While the two continued to spar verbally over the ensuing weeks, they failed to move from the original positions they had each laid out in the early days of the strike. Moreover, GM refused to negotiate while their plants were occupied by sit-down strikers; the UAW refused to withdraw the workers until meaningful negotiations had begun.

The two antagonists fostered support for their respective stances in numerous ways. GM, for example, most likely supported efforts to organize the "Flint Alliance for the Security of Our Jobs, Our Homes, and Our Community." George E. Boysen, a forty-seven-year-old businessman who had worked as paymaster for Buick, a GM subsidiary, and later served as a city commissioner and mayor of Flint, headed the Flint Alliance. The ostensible goal of the organization, which was open to all citizens, was to provide a voice for those who wanted to end the strike and secure "industrial peace" in the community of Flint. It hoped to achieve its goal by "smothering the strike movement." By January 14, 1937, Boysen claimed that 25,887 of the city's residents had joined the alliance or signed GM loyalty pledges.

Even if GM had not acted as the original impetus behind the Flint Alliance, it nonetheless pushed employees to sign petitions in which they pledged loyalty to the company. It then used those petitions as evidence of support for the corporation, claiming that the sit-down strikers and their supporters represented only a small percentage of the GM workforce and that the vast majority of workers opposed continuation of the strike.

Questions to Consider

- What specific evidence did GM officials provide to support their

- argument that most of their workers opposed the sit-down strike?
- How do you think the UAW would respond to this claim?

Document

A total of 110,262 General Motors employe[e]s from forty-three plants affected, employing 139,312 men and women, more than 79 percent, have protested against strikes which have forced them into idleness or imperiled their present jobs.

Reports of this activity by employe[e]s are coming into Detroit hourly as the back-to-work movement sweeps across the country in thirty-six cities where plants are located. Hundreds of additional workers are enrolling daily.

Through petitions, mass meetings and other demonstrations, employe[e]s have expressed satisfaction with present bargaining methods to secure adjustment of grievances and more favorable wages, hours and working conditions, and request immediate resumption of operations in letters and telegrams. Some of these have been sent to President Roosevelt. Others have gone to Governors of various States. Appeals have also been sent to William S. Knudsen, executive vice president of General Motors.

At Flint, 29,908 employe[e]s in the Chevrolet, Buick, Fisher Body and AC Spark Plug plants, which employ a total of 37,800 factory workers, have signed the petitions. Strikes have been called in only two Fisher Body plants in Flint, and Buick and Chevrolet operations are practically at a standstill. More than 85 percent of the General Motors workers in the city are idle. . . .

Source:

Detroit News (22 Jan 1937), 1.