

THE 1936-1937 FLINT SITDOWN STRIKE:
WHAT HAPPENED TO THE WOMEN?

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PRESENTED TO THE AMERICAN CULTURE FACULTY AT THE
UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN-FLINT
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE
MASTER OF LIBERAL STUDIES
IN
AMERICAN CULTURE
DECEMBER 1, 1986

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

Unless otherwise noted, the individual quotes in this paper are from oral history interviews. The interviews were compiled by me or taken from the files of the Labor History collection at the University of Michigan-Flint. To make the reading of the paper less cumbersome, I noted each quote source only by the person's name.

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The purpose of this paper is to examine the roles of the women and the pressures on them during the 1936-1937 sitdown strike against General Motors in Flint, Michigan. In order to accomplish this, the paper is divided into five chapters.

Chapter one of this paper contains a close look at Flint. Social and economic conditions in the Flint area just before the strike are examined as well as a brief look at Flint's history of being primarily a one industry town. A view of Flint at the time of the strike through the eyes of some women who lived there is presented as well as "official" figures and comments.

In order to present a rounded picture of what life was like for the women who were interviewed, the paper has chapters concerned with women and their relationship with the union, women, the strike and the community, the women's auxiliary and the emergency brigade, and roles which women fulfilled during the time around the strike.

The focus of this paper is on working-class women because they have been ignored so long, both by reason of gender and class. This is no way meant as a slight to the various women and men who were also involved in this historic occasion. Rose Pecotta and the labor organizers played an important part in this strike as did Frances Perkins, the (female) Secretary of Labor under President

F.D. Roosevelt. Evelyn Preston, President of the League of Women Shoppers in Flint , was a supporter of the strikers but not a member of the working-class. There were women reporters from several newspapers including one from the London Daily Herald who played a part. To imply that only the working-class took part would be remiss. But most of these people, as well as the those in the women's movement, were middle-class. Their goals of liberation, the vote, and other changes in the system were not high on the priority list for the working-class women. When struggling or survival, for existence itself, the women's movement seemed remote to them.

There are many books and publications about this strike but they do not tell the women's story. While they may mention women in a brief, off-hand way, most do not acknowledge that women were really important in the effort. Sidney Fine's indepth book SITDOWN does not even give women the credit which is their due.

I submit that women were not only important but crucial to the success of the strike. Without their support and courage the men would never have held out for forty-four days and the UAW would never have gained the power which it did. I contend that the real heroes of the strike were the women, whether active or not. They kept life going in the face of oppression, opposition and intimidation so that the

union could gain recognition and thus help the workers, some of whom were women.

FLINT

In his oral history transcript, Mr. Weinstone states that Flint, Michigan is "not a regular city". That assessment of the city crops up repeatedly in the literature about organized labor and industrialization. It is generally agreed that Flint is and has been primarily a one industry town. By the turn of the century when the automobile industry was firmly entrenched there, historians noted that only the industry had changed with the passage of time. In the early 1800's when Flint was little more than a few cabins and a tavern on the military road between Detroit and Saginaw, it was a place for the trappers to trade furs. While it never became a major fur capital in Michigan, it did prosper and grow.

By mid-century Flint had several lumbering businesses to harvest and process the abundant white pine of the region. When the city was incorporated in 1855 and for the next twenty-five years, the major industry was lumbering. "In the early 1870's when Flint's population was about 5,000, the city had 18 lumber dealers, 11 saw mills, 9 planing mills, a box making factory and a dealer in pine lands." (Gustin 1976:51) The lumber industry, like those to follow, was labor intensive. This resulted in a migration of "French Canadians, Scandinavians, particularly

Norwegians...and later Irishmen, Scots and men of German descent."(Custin 1976:57) Gustin points out that "...many of the lumberjacks lost their money in heavy drinking and fighting at the end of the winter." (1976:57)

When the ruthlessly exploited pine forests became depleted and the transition was made to cutting hardwoods, the tavern floors in Flint were no longer to be worn down by the hob-nailed boots of the lumberjacks and sawmill workers. Skilled and semi-skilled workers of the next primary industry in Flint used the hardwoods to manufacture carriages, wagons and road carts. Horse-drawn vehicles manufactured in Flint became known throughout the United States and soon the city became known as the "Vehicle City". The workers in this industry were for the most part, family men. Many owned their own small farms and others, like the factory workers who came after them, dreamed of owning one. These men then became the core workers in the next primary industry, automobile manufacturing. While Flint had been primarily a one industry town, now it was to become a one industry, one company town.

The population of the city of Flint had had rapid growth spurts in the past, but nothing was to compare with the growth related to the budding automobile industry. Nothing prepared the city or its residents for the massive influx of workers and their families brought to town to work

in "the plants". "No other American community had shown such spectacular growth in population."(Rodolf 1940:498) "If General Motors had a heart, it was Flint. This raw industrial town, 65 miles north of Detroit, was a shabby shrine to the automobile...The factories sucked in thousands of men from the farms of the Midwest and the South so the population doubled every half decade." (Bernstein 1970:519)

In 1900 the population of Flint reached 13,056. It increased to 38,000 in 1910, 91,599 in 1920, and 156,492 in 1930...the incoming thousands overtaxed Flint's limited housing supply and some workers were compelled to live for a time in tar paper shacks, tents and even railroad cars. The same lodging rooms were rented to night shift workers for the day and to day shift workers for the night.(Fine 1969:102)

Joan Meister, in her article "Civic Park: General Motors' Solution for the Housing Shortage", tells of Flint's reputation as a "beautiful little town with comfortable large homes, surrounded by lovely lawns, gardens and shade trees." She writes that "many visitors enjoyed the park-like setting of the late nineteenth century Flint." Because of the rapidly expanding automobile industry, this image was seriously tarnished by 1921. Polk's Flint City and Genesee County Directory for 1921 states that there were "651 families living in tar paper shacks and 96 families living in tents in and around the city."

In 1919 General Motors, the largest employer in Flint, launched a large scale housing project under the

direction of their subsidiary, Modern Housing Corporation. Skilled and semi-skilled workers were to be given first chance at buying the new houses to be constructed on the west side of town. In reality, the foremen and supervisors came first followed by the more highly skilled workers.

There were 950 houses built in what was to be called Civic and Chevrolet Parks in the first year. By 1933, 3,200 homes had been built in the development on 50 by 100 foot lots. While this sounds like a lot of houses, it must be remembered that the Flint Daily Journal March 31, 1919 noted that "...For every house in Flint that became empty there were 50 to 100 applicants." The depression stopped construction so that by 1935 housing was once again woefully inadequate for the needs of the people. The Flint Public Welfare Board issued a report (1935) that stated that "the board had been unable to find satisfactory housing at reasonable rates for families on relief and that the poor of the city lived in shacks, huts and hovels." (Fine 1969:105)

While the much touted purpose for building the housing was the acute shortage of decent homes, it would seem reasonable that an even better one from the point of view of the corporation was that they were in danger of losing good trained help if proper housing could not be found for them. An added dimension to this was the further dependence of the workers on GM. Now many had house payments

to make to their employer in the form of payroll deductions. Welfare capitalism as practiced by General Motors had simply taken another twist. GM controlled the majority of employment in Flint, reigned over the social life of the town, dominated the financial life, controlled the recreational and educational activities of the workers through the Industrial Mutual Association (IMA) and now it would control housing too.

Joan Meister states that "Executives...had begun to take an interest in the welfare of employees...the interest in housing was in order to provide for employees in rapidly growing cities where construction lagged behind needs." It strains credibility to think that the executives of a corporation which on July 3, 1928 paid, on top of the regular \$5 dividend, an extra \$2 on each share of common stock, had an "interest" in housing for workers. Had this extra bonus for the stockholders been distributed among the blue collar employees "...it would have meant about \$175 for each one. But of course this would not have been 'good business'" (Dunn 1929:38) It would have meant a great deal to the workers who were making an average of little more than \$1000 per year. (Those executives always had an "interest" in the welfare of the employees or perhaps it should be written that they had an interest in keeping the employees just out of the grips of welfare.)

GM had long been known for "welfare" schemes for the purposes of developing plant loyalty, heightening efficiency, tying the men to the company and offsetting agitation for trade unions. (Dunn 1929:148) Stock ownership, compulsory group insurance plans, employee magazines and newspapers, entertainment and recreational features such as bands, choirs, horseshoe pitching tournaments, organized baseball, boxing, and other events were provided for the purpose of binding workers closer to the corporation. Glee clubs and bathing beauty contests were all put on to boost "company spirit". (Dunn 1929:150)

Workers were encouraged to own their own homes. Home ownership was in reality a burden to workers because it limited their ability to move about freely to seek the highest wages for their skills. Home ownership lessens the mobility of people because only extreme hardship would cause a man with a partially paid for home to pull up stakes and seek work elsewhere. The workers might better have taken the advice of an article in the June 27, 1936 Flint Journal and bought a "Home on Wheels" as a good way to escape taxes and as an "easier way to make a living by casual occupation". Of course, the Dupont Family who owned controlling interest in General Motors, conceivably owned a good deal of the house trailer company also. It should also be noted that the workers because of low annual wages, most

often lived from paycheck to paycheck so few would be able to put together enough money to purchase a mobile home.

Among the existing housing units in Flint, 14.34 percent required structural repairs, more than 20 percent were without a bath, 12.7 percent had no indoor toilet facilities, 6 percent had no running water at all, 18 percent had no central heat, 1.9 percent of the units were altogether unfit for occupation...A local housing expert reported at the time of the sitdown strike, that approximately one fifth of Flint's inhabitants lived in homes that he did not consider adequate in terms of the American standard of living. (Fine 1969:102)

Henry Kraus described a house visited by Wyndym Mortimer in the summer before the strike:

The house was tiny. It was one of Flint's typical workers' dwellings: one story; diminutive rooms reeking of mold; the wallpaper discolored from age; the ceiling low, hardly a foot above one's head when one stood up; the whole structure so rickety and fragile that it creaked from end to end at any step. There was no bath and only an outhouse toilet. Yet an heroic attempt had been made to make the place look tidy while a pot of ferns, a couple of headrest doilies and some cheap knickknacks gave a few pathetic decorative touches to it. (1947:22)

Mrs. Rollin J. Moon, in an interview May 10, 1979, said that at the time of the sitdown strike her family of seven lived in a converted three car garage-house in Burton. The eighteen foot by twenty-eight foot structure had formerly been a "blind pig", an unlicensed establishment where alcoholic beverages could be purchased and consumed illegally. While it was not "exactly a palace", it did

provide a roof over their heads that didn't leak and was "situated on some land" so that the family could raise their own vegetables and fruits for canning and preserving for the winter's food.

Ann Brown remembers that she and her husband and young child had a small apartment at the time. It was two rooms above the garage of a family who no longer needed the space. She felt fortunate to have a private apartment because many young couples of her acquaintance were living home with "one set of parents or the other for much of their early married life."

Before coming to Flint, Ella Coleman lived in Battle Creek. Her husband came to Flint seeking employment. He found work but could not find a house to live in. For several months he commuted to Battle Creek to see his family every two weeks and lived in a boarding house while he searched for a place to move his wife and children into. While he found lots of empty houses, there were none that were affordable for a factory worker. Finally he rented a small apartment on the south edge of town in a "sort of run down section" where there were others in the same predicament. With seven children, they were very crowded but together they felt they "could stand anything."

After coming to Flint from Missouri to join her husband who had found employment in the Fisher plant, Sue

Weston was very disappointed in Flint."It seemed to be a place of haves and have nots. The houses were either really swell and elegant or dumps. There didn't seem to be much places for people to live." She and her husband were able to find room with friends just outside of Flint in a section of Burton Township known as "Little Missouri" where they stayed, living nine people in a four room house for "several months" until the Westons could find a place of their own to rent. They finally were able to rent a "home-built" two room house in the same vicinity. She remembers that it had an outhouse and a pump in the back yard. The back rooms where they washed up and stored the extra wood and coal had a dirt floor. (March 1982) While this may not seem luxurious, Lenka Evanoff, an immigrant who lived in the city, recalls that the pump in her back yard on Dakota served most of the houses on her block.

In referring to the one industry, one company status of the city in 1934, Victor Ruether wrote:

Flint was a GM town to the bone. Eighty percent of Flint families were dependent for their living on Buick, Fisher Body, Chevrolet, or AC Spark Plug. The rest of the working families were on relief. The people were gaunt and seedy-looking; years of unemployment had left hollows in their faces and fear in their eyes. Their housing was more miserable than that in any other highly developed industrial town in the country. In a sense, Flint was a segment of the deep South transported north, for General Motors had primarily employed white Southern workers, who were lured up during the twenties by the growing automobile industry. A large number of them went

south again in 1929; the rest suffered the depression out--on the welfare lines.(1976:143)

Flint had a severe shortage of public services and a high incidence of health problems compared to cities of its size. Among twenty-two cities from 100,000 to 250,000 population in 1934, Flint ranked:

19th....Infant death rate and death of children from diarrhea and enteritis.

17th....Maternal deaths.

13th....Diphtheria death rate.

10th....Tuberculosis death rate.

tied for 13th and 14th ...Typhoid fever death rate.(Fine 1969:102)

It was very unhealthy to be either an infant or a mother in Flint. Many of the women interviewed told of friends and family who had lost children to diphtheria, flu and other treatable diseases.

An article in the Flint Journal June 28, 1936 proclaimed that the "Relief load was cut by 61 percent...from March 1935 to March 1936...26,910 receiving direct relief in Genesee County on the average in 1935...down to 10,249 in 1936." The article went on to say that the peak load on welfare was 35,360 in January 1935.(p.11) By September 1st in an article on page 13, it was announced that "Food Allowance (Relief) Low" and that

"...Genesee County had the poorest record for the distribution of surplus commodities in the state." Sidney Fine affirms this by saying "...welfare facilities in Flint were quite inadequate to cope with the serious decline in employment (of the 1930's)." (1969:204)

Ellis Carver remembers that during the 1930's he was forced to accept welfare because there was no work. When he "went on the welfare" he had to go out and dig ditches to "pay" for the help he received. Mrs. Lembie Mattson said that her husband "worked for welfare on the roads" during the same time. She recalls the "humiliating experience to get it. (Welfare) workers acted like it was their own goods, not the taxpayers'."

Receiving welfare did finally become a little easier during the strike.

"Documentary evidence of anti-union bias on the part of Victor S. Woodward, welfare administrator, had been printed by the Flint Autoworker ...so the union felt justified in asking for a change during the emergency. Governor Murphy responded by sending in the state welfare chief...to take over the Flint office, while announcing that need alone would determine the giving of aid. The union's request that the intake staff be increased was agreed to and the waiting period was cut to four days." (Kraus 1947:172-173)

The reason for the union's request for more intake help was that the number of people on public relief in December before the strike was 8,448 and by February that had

increased to 42,459..."about one-quarter of the city's population were receiving relief." (Fine 1969:204)

Work in the automobile factories was hazardous, unhealthful, unsanitary, unstable and often short lived. The much touted high wages were not a reality for most of the workers. There was no job security and no seniority rights. Employment depended upon the whim of the supervisors and a layoff could occur at any time without warning and often did. The Works Progress Administration study of 1937 estimated that a maintenance level budget for a family of four in Detroit was \$1434.79 per year. The average yearly wage for hourly workers in Flint at that time was between \$1200 and \$1300. (Fine 1969:61) One Chevrolet worker told an investigator: "Of course we make enough to live on while we are working, but we don't work enough time." (Fine 1969:61)

With all the deprivations and discouragements a sense of working-class awareness and solidarity did not emerge for most of the population of Flint. Even though many possible causative factors for class-consciousness such as uprootedness, occupational insecurity, lack of formal education among workers and obvious property differences (Eitzen,1982:105), true class consciousness and class struggle never completely developed among the majority of workers of this city. While there was a sense of being

victimized by GM, there was also a general underlying belief in the rags-to-riches, Horatio Alger, hard-work-is-always-rewarded school of thought.

The workers regularly viewed the unethical practices which were used to maintain a cheap labor force. The practice of "undercutting" or firing one man and hiring one or even two women to take his place at even lower wages was widespread. Animosity between workers was palpable. The workforce was kept segmented to the benefit of the corporation. When workers were fighting among themselves, individual against individual, men against women, black against white, skilled against unskilled and native against immigrant, the cohesiveness necessary for class unification was destroyed. Although Flint was a one industry, primarily blue-collar town, there were many diverse elements in the workforce which were continually segmented and no real sense of worker against employer or stockholders surfaced in the beginning. It was almost as if the (later day) idiom "What is good for GM is good for the United States (Flint)" mentality had permeated into the unconscious of the residents.

WOMEN AND THE UNION ORGANIZATION IN FLINT

Life was hard for the men who worked in the plants but it was even harder for the women. When their shift ended, the women in the factories went home and started working all over again. Few of the factory workers could afford the labor saving devices used by the middle-class to help with the housework such as a vacuum cleaner, a refrigerator or an electric washing machine. Clothes had to be scrubbed on the scrubboard or boiled clean on the stove. Children had to be tended and meals had to be prepared. After working in the airless, overheated factories, these women returned to dismal, unattractive homes, for the most part located within sight and hearing of the factories. Insufficient food and improper rest took their toll. For these women there was no rest, no recreation and little social life.

The women at home did not have an easy life either. Without two paychecks, life in Flint was very spartan. These women canned food from the garden, took in other people's laundry and ironing, and often did without necessities. It took a hard-working, penny-stretching person to be able to survive on sporadic factory wages. The women often raised the children, ran the farm and-or the household without their spouse. The men would leave for

work that might or might not be there and spend most of their waking hours either waiting for or working for General Motors. If they had been among those chosen for work, they would arrive home dead tired, often too tired to eat or even wash up. Many women told of men who simply fell into bed after a grueling day at the plant. If they had been among those not chosen they would arrive home depressed, frustrated and sometimes drunk. Flint had become known as a town with two places to relieve frustration and depression, bars for its men and churches for its women.

Shirley Foster was teaching in a school on the east side of Flint during this time. In talking about the students at her school she remembers:

There was a terrible amount of children with no food at noon time. You have to remember that mostly foreign born and factory workers lived on the east side...students were both poor and hungry; there were sometimes problems especially with learning. Many of the children came out of problems in the community caused by high unemployment and poverty...We didn't call it maltreatment of women and children then. There was no such thing as abuse.

Her principal went to some local farmers and got cans of skimmed milk (which they had been giving to their pigs) for the children to have at lunch time. The teachers in her building ate lunch at least one day a week at school so that they could share it with some of the really poor students.

Attempts had been made to organize the automobile

factories since the early years. Most of the unions doing so were craft oriented and thus sought to have just a select few workers join their organization. Wyndam Mortimer, using a personal recruitment style, incorporating both wives and women working in the plants, slowly and methodically worked "planting the seeds for an uprising" and laying the foundation for the UAW in Flint during the summer of 1936:

As Mortimer's efforts took him frequently into the worker's homes, the attitude of their wives became important. Often they were antagonistic. Some would stomp out of the living room when he introduced himself and would sit brooding in the kitchen. If they remained they might break into the conversation...Mortimer would try to bring the women into the discussion. After a while he would ask them to arrange little gatherings for their friends...These little family parties proved awful popular. The woman of the house became involved through the chief function she knew. Readyng the house for the party and dishing out sweets (provided by Mortimer) were a more intimate approach to her than any argument. (Kraus 1947:19)

Dorothy Kraus, who came to Flint to help organize the women, says that her impression Flint was "of this horrible town, really ugly, absolutely incredibly uninteresting...Some of the people lived in little houses outside the city...very isolated...with vegetable gardens, which supplied them with a lot of their food, which is already an indication of how poor they were," She goes on to describe the "huge, ugly, horrible factories, just grinding out...the noises and the smells." Her final

statement about the visual impact of Flint is all revealing:
"Gosh, I never felt that I would ever want to live in a city
like that, it was just pitiful..."

In his book Organize: My Life as a Union Man ,
Mortimer says about Flint: A cloud of fear hung over the
city, and it was next to impossible to find anyone who would
even discuss the question of unionism.(1971:104) When he
was able to break through the fear and arrange a meeting in
the home of a worker, he and Bob Travis who was to follow in
his organizing steps, found that the women often had never
worked outside the home and were not familiar with the
economic games played by both the union and the
corporations. Their confinement and relative isolation from
others with differing opinions limited their knowledge of
the world and especially of the extent of the oppression
which they unwittingly endured. Dorothy Kraus said:"In
visiting the homes (in Flint)...two things impressed upon me
which I found there. One, every home had a Bible and outside
the Bible there were very few other books." Most of the men
and women of Flint were not educated nor politically aware
enough to realize the vast potential which went untapped by
neglecting to politicize the workers and include the women
in the struggle.

"Among the early working women who were converts to
Mortimer's UAW were Marie Schlacter and Pat Wiseman at

Fisher One. At first there was little to do for the union. They were confined to such things as pasting stickers on the bodies as they went down the line so that the other workers would be aware that there was union activity in the plant." (Kraus 1947:38) Here, as elsewhere throughout the union movement, the men secured all the privileged offices and positions for themselves.

While active union women were unique in Flint, there had always been women rebels involved in the plants. The women, it must be remembered, worked under worse conditions than the men.

(Women) were once--in 1919-1920--quite active in the shop units of the Auto Workers Union in Detroit, Grand Rapids and other cities. They have taken a vital part in such strikes as that of the General Motors workers at the Oshawa, Canada plant in 1928...In the New Bedford, Passaic and other...American strikes, the women were in the vanguard of the battle and usually leading the picket lines. (Dunn 1929:77)

That women had made sacrifices which had made victories possible in strikes in the past was little remembered in Flint in the 1930's. Mrs. Rollin Moon says that they just weren't allowed at the organizational meetings since the failed strike of 1930. She speculated that part of the reason may be that organizing was "dangerous work even for men." Sue Weston thinks that "maybe there are just some things that men like to do without having women around."

The summer of 1936 was a particularly difficult one. Temperatures were soaring. July 13, 1936 The Flint Journal headline was "GM Permits Shutdowns in Heat Wave." The article under the headline stated that the 6 day heatwave so far had set records...Many of the men ...hesitate to give up the chance to work steadily, although the heat has made conditions in some plants almost unbearable...It will be strictly up to the men (whether to work or not). (p.1) An article on page two stated that "...Autoworkers get relief from heat with salt tablets...little white pills kept in containers at the drinking fountains in most of the factories." By July 15th weather conditions had not changed. The headline for that day was "Worst Heatwave in City's History Takes Lives of Nine."

The work pace in the auto industry was so furious that during the heat wave in July, with the temperatures at 100 plus degrees for a full week, scores of workers died, hundreds were hospitalized and the ambulance siren could be heard uninterruptedly...(Lens 1973:293)

Sue Weston, when talking about that summer said:

It was the hottest summer I remembered. The plant was 120 degrees. My clothes was plastered to me by all the sweat. We couldn't set down at work or the foreman would hollar that there's 500 people jist waiting for your job if you can't handle it. If a worker claimed to be sick, the foreman would jist laugh and say 'die and prove it.'

Tensions were high outside the factories, also.

Wyndham Mortimer was in Flint at the time organizing for the

UAW and the Black Legion, a viciously anti-union organization was becoming more active. The Legion "did not hesitate to beat or shoot union organizers, radicals, blacks, Jews and Catholics..." (Lens 1973:298) An article in The Flint Journal June 28, 1936 tells "...there are evidences now of Black Legion attacks on persons physically unable to fight back...(they) beat the wife of a man they had threatened. They didn't touch the man." (p.4) On July 21 a page one article was headed "Dean Reveals Black Legion - Shot a Negro." Another page one article September 1, 1936 stated "Oakland Jury Report Flays Black Legion...members include a state legislator, county prosecutor, Pontiac City Treasurer, Pontiac and Royal Oak Chiefs of Police, Drain Commissioner and Liquor Control Commissioner."

The legion was active inside the plants, too.

At Fisher One in Flint, the center of the city's Black Legion activity, evidence of a tie-up with the supervisory staff was not lacking. Marie Schlacter, an employee...made a startling discovery one Saturday afternoon. She was in the plant late and on her way out, she ran into Nellie Compton, a forelady, and a group of foremen busily engaged in sewing and trying on black hoods and robes. Marie tried to run off unobserved but she was seen by the forelady. This woman who's standard reply to stated grievances of her female workers was: "They'd like to have ice water in hell but they don't get it!"--half frightened the poor girl to death and gave her a long lay-off as a warning to keep her silent over what she had seen...(Krause 1947:38)

The UAW tried to get the plant conditions improved

and tried to become the sole bargaining agent for all the working people in all the GM plants. Gm turned them down saying that conditions were not as bad as claimed. Robert Morse Lovett, a GM stockholder did not agree with that analysis. He wrote:

We should be informed of the fact that since the settlement arranged by President Roosevelt three years ago there has been constant chiseling by some of our employees to the disadvantage of others. In the Chevrolet plant, men are dismissed for wearing union badges and for speaking of the union in the lunch hour. At the AC spark-plug works, girls are entitled to pay increases based on the length of their employment, but they are dismissed when they rise too high in the scale. They may be taken back after a time as beginners...The managers to whom we pay grotesquely huge salaries act the part of ownership, and their behavior is an insult to the intelligence and humanity of those to whom they are legally responsible. (1937:8)

Lovett went on to say that the union was "the only effective form of labor organization applicable to a gigantic and far-flung industrial aggregation such as GM, and the only practicable method of forcing the elimination of unfair labor practices under which the workers suffer..."(1937:8)

In December of 1936 the union requested a conference with GM to engage in collective bargaining on behalf of the hourly employees. (Seidman 1937:20) The request was denied. The UAW had no plans to strike against the Flint GM plants until after January 1937 for the following reasons: A bonus of about \$50 per worker was due to be handed out around December 18th; A new governor was being sworn in who might

be sympathetic to labor; and the fact that the "Christmas season was psychologically a poor time to ask workers to go on strike." (Fine 1969:139)

The workers at the Cleveland Fisher Body plant didn't wait for the union to declare a strike. On December 28, they closed the plant and remained inside. The strike spread to Flint on December 30, when no more than 50 workers sat down at Fisher Two and stopped production there. Later the same day the workers took over Fisher One. Thus began the longest sitdown strike in automotive history. (Lens 1973:303)

The first thing they did after securing the plants was to send the women home. Although there had been some women leaders in the past, the union was not taking any chances that this strike was going to be disrupted by accusations of immoral behavior. The purpose of the strike was to gain national bargaining power for the UAW so that all workers could benefit. The sitdowners had to be very careful to avoid immorality charges and lose their cause to a side issue.

In the past, married women generally left the plants in which the sitdowns were taking place because of their family responsibilities. At the earlier Kelsey-Hayes strike, two regular plant matrons were put in charge of the "women's dormitory " and the "girls" were not allowed to

leave their dormitory after 11 pm. In other plants where both men and women were on strike, the women entered the factory at eight each morning and stayed until six, only the men remained all night. (Seidman 1937:33) Flint was not nearly that progressive.

The women in Flint were not given a choice and not all of them were happy about it. Dorothy Kraus in speaking about this issue said: In the Kelsey-Hayes strike the wives were discontented with this arrangement. They didn't like the idea of women being in the plant at the same time, even though we assured them they were apart, they weren't with the men...and because of that we weren't going to take any chances of having this discontent in Flint.

Not all the women were contented to play the role of supporter for the men during the strike. Henry Kraus was at union headquarters the next day and reported:

A number of women workers at Fisher One heeded Bob Travis' call and came down to union headquarters at the Pengally Building the morning after the strike started. But not so Pat Wiseman who had wanted to sit in like the men and was angered at the discrimination of being ordered out. Heck, for six years she had done men's work in the plant, most of the time as a stripper. She had carried the heavy apparatus on her hips like any man, working near the baking furnaces where even those "superior males" had sometimes toppled over in a faint...Pat, whose deep voice was eventually to command as much respect as that of any male in the union's councils, spurned such womanish work as kitchen duty during the strike. If she couldn't sit in, she'd picket outside and she never missed a day. Once a male companion on the token line which was maintained...asked her

jokingly what she expected to get out of it, a union job?..."I'll tell you why I'm doing it," Pat snapped back, her nostrils flaring. "You're getting fifteen dollars a week more than I am for the same number of hours and I'll be damned if I don't work as hard as you do!" (1947:98)

Although Pat was an exception with her actions, her feelings were echoed by many. Sue Weston had worked along side the men and made less money, also. Her attitude was one of resentment about the injustice of it all but she was resigned that "that was the way things worked" and nothing she could say would change things. "Women who complained a lot about conditions were outcasts from everybody. The men didn't like to work work with them anyway and so they told them to stay home and mind the house if they couldn't hack it in the plant. The wives and other people in the community acted like women who worked in men's plants were just in there for the ...attention anyway."

Most of the women in the plants had never attended a union meeting even though the union promised equal wages for all workers. They were familiar with the way the corporation got around the protective legislation and they also were aware that the men felt threatened by them. Women had been economically disadvantaged and treated like children for so long that one more promise or cause did not mean that much. Promises had been broken before. Sue Weston said that the working women in the plants wanted

better conditions and more money "but didn't really, deep down expect the union to help them much." She indicated that they "went along" with the strike and the union organization effort but with a feeling of personal helplessness and inferiority. They did not, in all actuality, have a lot to say in the matter, and if they did who would really listen?

There were Fisher One women who accepted domestic type assignments without complaining. Many of the strikers' wives volunteered to help out in any way they could, even though most did not have union backgrounds. They could "only look back on church or social activity, the Ladies' Aid and sewing clubs. It was often difficult to make the transition to the new type of organization where so much more depended on one's efforts." (Kraus1947:98) That these women managed households, raised children and often did part-time work such as extra laundry or domestic work counted for naught. Anything female was discounted as trivial especially when it was not related to an outside wage-earning job, and even then because the work was usually "female" work it didn't really count as being serious.

In talking about the leadership of the strike and the union, Dorothy Kraus remembers :

They were--well, I hate to use the word "chauvinistic" but they felt women had their role, and their place, in their place. And outside of that...Shall we say they were very nice, and they

tolerated women. But I would not use (progressive or liberal)...that they were so advanced...to think or say that their attitude towards women was very different (from that of older men) I would say no.

...As soon as you (a woman) were with men, you were treated differently, and you had a feeling that the way they looked at you and the way they acted, they would much rather you were away, you weren't there. There was a definite feeling on the part of the men--"You're a nice girl and you do your job."...There was no feeling of equality, I must admit that. But you accepted it because you knew that you couldn't make an issue of it. You couldn't say, "Look, that isn't the way you should treat a woman," or "that isn't the way you should even act or look at her." But you had to accept those things. They weren't unpleasant to that extent...but I felt it. I knew that it existed but accepted it because it was a crucial moment. You had to win the strike. You had to continue working and no matter what anybody else thought or said, you continued.

Labor leaders talked to the local organizers and urged them not to exclude the family members of the strikers. To leave out the women could be dangerous to the strike. Women left alone, isolated from the strike activity, subjected to the animosity of the community, the press, the church, and to their own doubts could get depressed and angry and undermine the morale of the strikers. Women not used wisely also had the same potential.

WOMEN, THE STRIKE AND THE COMMUNITY

Outside pressures on the wives and families of the strikers were great. The strike was not popular or well received in Flint. There was much anti-strike and anti-striker activity both overt and covert. Not only the strikers and workers in the plants which were on strike were affected but the workers from the other plants shut down because of the strike. Hostility was high from those indirectly affected. They did not know who to be angry with, the corporation or the union for their state of affairs.

Mrs. Rollin Moon remembers that some of her husband's relatives who were laid off because of the strike came to the house and tried to get her to talk to him and convince him that taking over somebody else's property was wrong and it was wrong to keep people out of work who wanted to work. They thought that her husband was "wicked" to take part. Contact was lost with these relatives for years because of hard feelings about the strike. Clara Kahlert tells of arguments in which members of her family "came to blows" over the issue of staying in the plants. The fist fights were quick and brutal but the hard feelings over this major disagreement remained for years.

According to a Gallup poll, there was "more support for the UAW and the strikers outside of Flint than at the center of the conflict." (Fine 1969:230) "Only in rare instances did professional people show any open sympathy for the strike." (Kraus 1947:170) An anti-strike organization called the Flint Alliance was formed to "smother the strike movement." (Lens 1973:308) Several doctors, the mayor of Flint, businessmen, storeowners and other professionals were known to be active in the Alliance but it mainly consisted of white-collar workers and their families. Kraus points out that "housewives and even schoolchildren were registered to swell the lists" of members of the Alliance. (1947:116) Many of the volunteers who worked for the Alliance were women who were "determined to save their husbands' job by ending the strike." (Karman 1962:110) The slogan for the Alliance was "The Flint Alliance--for the Security of Our Jobs, Our Homes, and Our Community."

All of the "members" of the Flint Alliance were not on the rolls voluntarily.

On the day following the setting-up of the Flint Alliance foremen, superintendents and company union representatives came into Buick, Chevrolet and AC with their pockets bulging with application cards. These they circulated openly through every department along with supplementary petitions expressing 'loyalty' to the company, 'satisfaction' with the conditions of work and 'appreciation' for the 'cooperative efforts' of the management...Naked coercion was often used in obtaining signatures to the petitions. (Kraus 1947:117)

Of workers and wives who did join the Alliance voluntarily, it must be remembered that this-back to-work movement was essentially a GM ploy to split the town by its seemingly peaceful intent. The divide and conquer tactic was one often used successfully by the giant corporation. This town which Lawrence Taylor called the "scabbiest hole in the country" had been enduring the paternalism of GM for years and many didn't quite realize that all the "nice" things done for workers did not make up for the wrongs done to them by the corporation. (Kraus 98)

Clara Kahlert, when talking about a fight between her relatives, tells of their pro-GM arguments. "They listed all the things that GM "gave" us that summer to make life outside the plants easier." The Flint Journal confirms the list: June 28, 1936, Plant Party for Chevrolet Families. 27,500 attended in Flint. The purpose is to give workers and their families 'a better understanding of the Chevrolet Motor Co., its policies, procedures and product; July 4, 1936, 40,000 expected to take part in Chevrolet outing; July 18, 1936, 50,000 Attend AC and Chevrolet picnic at Potter's Lake; August 27, 1936, Flint Boy Wins \$5000 Scholarship in Fisher Body Guild Competition.

The Flint Journal wasn't the only paper to pound away to Flint about the good and generous General Motors. The supposedly neutral IMA News wrote of the "sinister force behind the strike: Russian Communism" in a "conspiracy

to destroy all for which life is worth living." (January 7-8, 1937) It told of the many advantages of workers who were employed at GM. The paper went on to extoll General Motors' well publicized one big family relationship with its employees.

General Motors and their "workers' associations" had been flooding the country with propaganda about the "good" company and the "bad" or "red" union for years. Many people, especially those who lived in company towns like Flint, had become drugged and paralyzed by all the propaganda. Some were strike weary. This, after all, was not the first (nor was it to be the last) strike they had endured and the memories of the failed strikes in the past had to have stirred at least a few unpleasant thoughts. Hardly a working-class family in Flint did not have at least one member who had been involved in one strike or another. "The strikers were always pictured as being a band of thieves who had stolen the employers property, and the police were always the brave knights in shining armor who would save America from the horrible reds."(Mortimer 1971:145)

Fear and intimidation played a large part in the strike. Because the sit-down tactic had not been used on such a grand scale before, people were very unsure about its legality and morality. Debate raged in the community about the occupation of private property versus the right to a job with decent working conditons.

Even those taking part in this historic event admit to having their doubts. Both Clara Kahlert and Sue Weston tell about the strong conviction that "something had to be done to improve working conditions" and that the workers had a right to strike and stop work but ...did they have the right to kidnap private property? Could the legal threats which GM constantly threw at the strikers mean imprisonment for the men? What would be the outcome for the families if the law stuck tight with GM as it always seemed to do? The arguments raged in both families and sometimes resulted in arguments, tears, name calling, and physical fights. Sue recalls one night when her brother came home from being inside the plant for a change of clothes and a bath. "We had, as usual, a whole group of people in the kitchen talking about the strike. When Jack came in, all my sisters and my mother rushed up to give him a hug like he was home from a long trip or something. The men started asking a lot of questions and an argument started before he could even get into the tub about whether the sit-in was right or not. From then on he called before coming home because he said that he could not handle any more doubts about the union."

Children were not exempt from discussions and judgements about the strike. Mrs. Moon remembers that her 11 year old son "got in lot of fights over the strike." In one in particular, he had a tooth broken off. "(Other kids) said that his dad was keeping their dad away from home. Their

dad should be home and shouldn't be in there; that they'd never win out anyway. That's what their mother told them."

Ann Brown remembers a shouting match which got particularly ugly on the sidewalk outside her small apartment. "Some boys were shouting terrible things at another boy who's father was known to be a union sympathizer." She said that the boys began to throw stones and other things picked up from beside the sidewalk at each other until one of them finally got hit and cut severely.

Teachers in the schools were said to have discriminated against students who displayed support for the strike. "High school students were asked to write essays on the criminal wrongs and dangers of the sitdown strike, with the palpable intention of causing a rift in family loyalties." (Kraus 1947: 171) Geraldine Blankenship, who was 17 years old and in high school at the time of the strike, remembers one teacher in particular who was very anti-union. "My English teacher...if I would ever write anything pro-union would give me a 'D' on it. I remember one time...I had written a similar theme earlier in the semester before the strike for another teacher and had gotten an "A+" on it...(My English teacher) would say it is a terrible thing to break the law the way the strikers were doing. They were troublemakers, communists, no goods. It was a very bad thing they were doing."

Robert Gibbs also felt that most teachers were

anti-union. He recalled class debates in which the topics were union versus non-union workers and factories. His Civics teacher "taught them that strikers were illiterate and wrong to go on strike" even though there were many kids in the class who's fathers were known to be involved. This teacher "looked right at some of the (strikers') kids while telling us that the strikers were criminals."

Shirley Foster, a teacher in the Flint schools at the time of the sit-down, was instrumental in the forming of the AF of T, teacher's union early 1936. She said that not all the teachers were in favor of either the AF of T or the UAW. When asked about discrimination against the students she replied " I saw a bit of it myself but it was known that I was very much in favor of (shop workers) getting a living wage so the children could at least be able to afford to bring a lunch to school." She felt that because of her strong convictions about the unions and the conditions in Flint, other teachers did not confide in her about incidents of discrimination.

When discussing the schools Shirley was quick to point out that "the schools were connected in one way or the other with General Motors. Many (members) on the Board were GM connected bankers or real estate people. They all did the bidding of GM. There were no working people on the Board. There were no liberal professionals at all on there."

It was common knowledge that the local paper, The Flint Journal was very sympathetic to General Motors. When reviewing the issues that were put out during this era, the bias is quite blatant. Not only did the paper discriminate in print but when the union tried to purchase space for an advertisement they were turned down cold.

The women and families also had to face fear being flung out from the radio. Father Charles E. Coughlin a self-styled, down-home, radio priest, who was very popular with the factory workers and their families, preached about the "self defeating philosophy" of the sitdown. (Kraus 1947:13) This Roman Catholic priest from Royal Oak, Michigan had a weekly radio program on WJR every Sunday at 2 pm. Mortimer calls him "an excellent example of how a fascist demagogue is able to influence and sway millions of hungry and desperate men and women. His unctious and soothing voice poured forth a river of dubious stories, half-truths, and plain lies." Mortimer said that Coughlin urged listeners to "blame your troubles on Moscow" rather than examine the main enemy at home. (1971:74) Another radio minister who railed against the strikers was J. Frank Norris "the howling Baptist from Ft. Worth". Mortimer called him a "leather-tongued demagogue". (1971:127)

Although the area churches did not take an "official policy stand" concerning the strike, the radio ministers were not the only ones who "encouraged" workers to go back

to work. Mrs. Rollin Moon recalls the preacher at Asbury Methodist Church "preaching from the pulpit that the strike was morally wrong. (It) was making hardships for everyone and was gonna make harder times ahead...(the strikers) are gonna regret it...Urge your men to stay home." While all that made her feel uncomfortable, she finally quit going to the church when he told the congregation that "if the strikers went back to work and gave a portion of their pay to the church they could buy an organ." It was bad enough getting guilt from relatives and neighbors without having it "piled on at church".

Ann Brown saw the same exhortations from the pulpit at her catholic church but unlike Mrs. Moon, agreed with them. Looking back at that time she recalls thinking that "if the workers would just come out like they were asked, then General Motors would be reasonable with them." She also recalls being "just plain tired of the whole mess as it dragged on far too long."

In an unpublished paper, "The Flint Sit-Down Strike of 1937: Where were the Churches?", Pastor Keith Pohl concludes that: "There seems to be no evidence that would lead one to conclude that anyone in any church rushed to the forefront to defend the strikers."(p.10) While some of the churches did provide support by letting the strikers use their basements for meetings, writing letters of support to the governor and providing food for some of the families,

most of this was done in a low key manner. A seemingly typical response to a request for a prayer for the strikers was that of the minister of St. Paul's Episcopal Church, the church which was attended by GM's C.S. Mott and other wealthy people in Flint: "As far as I am concerned, there are three sides to this controversy, the strikers, the corporation's side, and the right side." (The Flint Journal 1-11-37) That is public eccumenical fence sitting to the highest degree.

Rev. Rex Holman of the First Congregational Church in near-by Owosso was in opposition to the strike. Many people who were interviewed by Pastor Pohl felt that Rev. Holman was the spokesman for the Flint clergy. (p.11) His sermons were noted in the Flint Journal on January 30, 1937 and February 6, 1937 and both times he accused the UAW of being communistic "as are many Flint Pastors...The fact that Flint ministers said nothing meant that if they were not communists they were at least dupes."(p.13) The Flint Journal quoted him as saying, "I hereby publicly call upon Mr. Knudsen and Mr. Sloan under no circumstances to give in to this gang of Communists." (2-6-37)

The conclusion that Pastor Pohl draws from his research was that "If there is a valid generality with which I could conclude it would be the role of silence. It seems that the vast number of churches and clergy in Flint said nothing, did nothing and tried to avoid the dispute until it

went away." (p.23) I would add that while they did nothing publicly, officially, or with great fanfare, from the response to my interviews I would feel safe in saying that there was as Sue Weston puts it "a goodly amount of pressure from the pulpit to end this nonsense".

Another form of pressure was put on the wives and families by the corporation. One method often used was the personal call. "GM foremen began to visit the homes of the strikers in an effort to influence (the wives) to bring pressure on their husbands to quit the plant." (Fine 1969:173) Wives were asked to write letters to their husbands pleading with them to come home because of family illness.(Kraus 1947:258) Some of the company people posed as salesmen and "indefatigable contacted the wives of the sitdowners all through the strike, systematically cultivating their panic." (Kraus 1969:240) GM president Alfred P.Sloan sent a "paternalistic letter for all company employees, assuring them of his concern for their welfare and promising to protect them from the "labor union dictators" who were trying to "exact tribute" for the right to work. (Lens 1973:308)

In the movie With Babies and Banners , women who actually took part in the sitdown events discussed the way "management got to the wives" and tried to turn husbands and wives against each other." In this excellent movie participants tell what it was like in Flint at that fateful

time. Pressure, whether real or imagined, seemingly came from all sectors of the community.

THE WOMEN'S AUXILIARY AND THE EMERGENCY BRIGADE

Dorothy Kraus came to Flint because "Walter (Ruether) asked me to organize the kitchen...Although he didn't say 'organize the women' actually that's what he meant. The only thing was that they (the men) couldn't think of the women as being organized..."

The first thing she had to do was get women workers, wives, sisters, mothers and girl friends to help in preparing and supplying the food for the strikers in the plants. If and when she got the wives to rally around feeding the men, then they would be "much more attuned and congenial toward the union."

On New Year's Eve a street dance was held in front of Fisher Two. After the dance some women met in the Pengelly Building, which was union headquarters at the time, and formed what was later to become the Women's Auxiliary. The purpose of the group was to address the problem of the alienation and isolation of the women and show support for their men both inside and outside the plants. They set up a speakers bureau and publicity department, took part in picketing on a regular basis, staffed a first aid department, maintained a nursery and collected food and money for the strike.(Fine 1969:200) At this point Fine

calls the group the Auxiliary but Dorothy Krause claims that while an auxiliary was talked about for when the strike was finished,.. "we didn't have the energy nor the time, not the possibility of actually organizing an auxiliary at that time."

Not all the women were supportive of the strike. Many who were left home alone were shocked and only found out about the sitdown when their husbands and fathers didn't return home at the end of their scheduled shift. The strike had come with no warning to them. They were not prepared for the impact of it. "They often regarded this as an equivalent to desertion and there were stormy scenes...with threats of 'going home to mother' and even divorce expressed. But most of the angry wives 'just brooded'." (Kraus 1947:238)

What proved to be a very important committee was formed because of these uninformed, distressed women. The auxiliary formed a "Goodwill Committee" to visit the homes of the strikers and try to explain to their families the meaning of the strike. The committee members were not always welcomed on their visits. Doors were sometimes slammed in their faces by the very women they were trying to help. When they did get in, they tried to enlist the support of these women as well as to help them surmount the fear and desperation by offering food, coal, and friendship.

When discussing the auxiliary and the efforts at

community outreach, Dorothy Krause said:

Many of them didn't want to be near us. They wouldn't trust us. They thought that we were leading their men to do something that they'd never get over...they'd never get their job back...To begin with, we worked with the wives of those who were sitting in...And then, whenever there was a meeting at the Pengelly--and there was a meeting every single day--we would announce, "Please tell your wives to come. We want them, we need their help. They won't have to do too much work but we need them." And little by little the wives would come. Not too many in the beginning. Then we had visiting committees to visit them and they encouraged them to come. Alright, they had children they couldn't leave. We could organize it so that somebody could sit with their children for two hours; just come for two hours, we'd urge.

As you can see, one of the objectives of the "Goodwill Committee" was to get the women to the Pengelly Building, the strike support center. Once they were there, they were welcomed and if possible, put to work. There was much to be accomplished and shared: baby-sitting for the picketers, visits to the other housebound women, messages to be carried between strikers and families and union, food and supplies to be solicited and, most importantly, to be close to and experience the sense of community, commitment and togetherness with the others who were involved. If the women felt that they were an integral part of the strike, then they were not likely to sabotage it with demands upon their husband to leave the plant or to quit the union effort. In short they were to become part of the strike .

The Flint police and plant guards tried to capture the Fisher Two plant and evict the strikers on January 11.

Violence broke out; fourteen strikers were wounded and thirty-six policemen were sent to the hospital.(Lens 1973:311) This "Battle of the Running Bulls" or "Battle of Bulls Run" as it was later referred to, failed to dislodge the strikers from the plant but more importantly for the women, it resulted in a new women's leader. Twenty-three year old Genora Johnson asserted herself in the excitement of the battle and talked to the crowds from the sound car. She called the police "cowards" for shooting at "unarmed and defenseless men" and spoke directly to the women in the crowd urging them to help by joining the men on the picket line after warning them that they might get hurt.(Fine 1969:200)

The next day at the Women's Auxiliary room in the Pengelly Building, a petition was available to sign which stated: "I wish to join the Emergency Brigade and be on call day and night." (Krause 1947:235) Genora Johnson's participation in the battle the night before "convinced her of the need for the 'courageous women' to band together to fight beside their men should a similar crisis develop." By January 20 the Brigade was organized and ready to work. (Fine 1969:200)

The initial 50 member Brigade, led by Johnson, grew to 350 as the strike wore on. They wore red berets and a red arm band with the letters WEB in white. (Women's Emergency Brigade) The women of the Brigade were serious

about their organization. This was demonstrated repeatedly throughout the strike as the women contributed their strength to that of the men. They demonstrated in Flint with parades and once even organized a children's picket line. After one of their demonstrations, The Flint Journal (February 4, 1937) characterized them as an "unruly mob". A LaFollette investigator viewing the same crowd thought that they were "fairly good humored but determined" and the two state police observers described the crowd's mood as "ugly". Henry Kraus wrote of the same demonstration:

Were they tough? Were they vulgar? They seemed like just simple, decent, ordinary American work fold. They sang union songs and yelled union cheers:

We're the wives, we're the mothers
Of our fighting union brothers.
We'll fight for our kith and kin,
And when we fight, we fight to win.

(1947:236)

Not only did the women cheer, but they also had a theme song. The second verse tells of their pride, goals and determination in taking part in the historic strike:

The women got together and they formed a mighty throng,
Every worker's wife and mom and sister will belong,
They will fight beside the men and help the cause along,
Shouting the Union forever.

(Flint Autoworker , January 26, 1937)

On February first, the women's Brigade participated in a diversionary strike at Chevrolet plant 9 and then went to Chevrolet plant 4 where the most important take-over was happening. They formed a blockade across one of the gates

and refused to allow the police into the area which the strikers were trying to secure. These women used everything in their power including their gender to hold back the police and plant guards so that their men could close the plant down. It was imperative to stop the plant from shipping out the all important engines to other assembly plants out of state. The women pleaded motherhood, feminity and pointed out that they were just supporting their men like good wives. The stall worked. The plant was taken. (With Babies and Banners)

After the first glow of the excitement of the strike wore off, some of the men became bored and restless. Although activities were planned for them, most of the men were accustomed to working long hard hours and then drinking long and hard. No liquor was allowed in the plants and if you were caught with it, you were expelled. Others missed their families and the warmth and security of home. Ping Pong, dart games, educational classes, "housekeeping", exercises and the various other time fillers did not replace normalacy.

A "Women's Day Parade" was planned in conjunction with the day in which the strikers were to evacuate the plants. When the plans changed, the union declared February third "Women's Day" anyway. The demonstration was organized in order to heighten the support for the strikers. Women from Detroit, Toledo, Lansing, Bay City, Pontiac and

elsewhere came to Flint for the occasion. The women, according to Dorothy Kraus, came "all dressed up" expecting to greet their husbands, fathers and friends. Six or seven hundred women paraded all through the business district of Flint on that day in a show of support for the strike. Then in "one of the most amazing labor demonstrations ever seen in America", singing pickets, six abreast, circled the plants for an hour while "the sitdowners leaned out the factory windows to join in the singing and cheering." (Fine 1969:280) Clara Kahlert remembers that "there was a fiddler who played on for just hours so we danced in the snow and on the slippery streets until we were cold to the bone." The women's rally had a positive effect on the men. Their spirits picked up and their determination was renewed.

The women in the Brigade made trips to other cities to show support for the strike, inform others as to what really was happening, raise funds for the kitchen and for supplies, and to put pressure on politicians. They went to Saginaw, Lansing, Bay City and Pontiac. Not all the trips were as smooth as the women had expected. The police stopped them outside of Pontiac and would not let them enter the city. One trip to Saginaw ended in a near catastrophe.

Final recognition of the major role played by the women in the strike came when a car carrying a group of Emergency Brigadiers from a visit to Lansing was sideswiped off the road by three cars. The technique used was the same as that of an earlier attack of the Saginaw vigilantes. Two of the women were thrown into the windshield suffering bad lacerations and three

others received severe sprains and bruises. (Kraus 1947:260)

For the women, this incident was viewed with both a sense of pride and a sense of fear. While it was dangerous, it was nice to know that they were so important that the anti-strike faction tried to scare or eliminate them. Their power as a morale booster and as a part of the strike was recognized.

The women in the Brigade were not always involved in dangerous exciting duty. As the sitdown wore on, the support of the women became increasingly important. Some of their projects were designed to relieve the tensions during the final period of the strike when the threat of vigilante action was rampant. (Kraus 1947:261) They entertained the sitdowners with giant charades and "living formations". Dances were held by them on the lawns outside the factories and some of the foreign born women gave exhibitions of their native folk dances. When the women appeared before the occupied plants, the men "rushed to the windows and the roofs to give them a cheer." It had a rallying effect on the men. (Fine 1969:201)

Lenka Evanoff, who was born in Macedonia, Yugoslavia, remembers this as a time of much activity and work. She took tales of her native country to the schools telling about labor struggles through the ages "so the children would have something to be proud about." To her it was important that the children not be ashamed of what their

fathers and brothers were doing; it was important to show the other children that the strikers were not bad people, just people who had been pushed beyond the point of human endurance; it was important to show the community that factory workers were people with wants and desires which were not unreasonable.

An amazing thing about Lenka's involvement is that her husband was not at the time a factory worker. Her sons had worked in various plants during the summer to help defray college expenses but none of them were ever to make a livelihood of working in a factory. There were many others who were also involved who were not autoworkers but rather class conscious people like Lenka.

All the bread baked in one particular oven in the Evanoff bakery was set aside to help the strikers. Other small business people in the community donated goods and services to the strikers in a similar manner.

Lenka's oldest son, Michael, having just passed his bar exam was retained as the local lawyer for the union. He, like his mother, worked long hours with little or no pay so that the working class might triumph over the giant corporation. This grand woman and her family put up organizers when they were helping in Flint, worked in the kitchen and in general were a stalwart supporters of the union organization effort.

All was not fun and games on the picket lines,

however. Many of the people on the sidelines and around the plants taunted the women for their efforts and called them names. There was much pressure and opposition directed towards the women. They were told to "stay home with their babies where they belonged"; accused of being greedy for luxuries and thus "causing" the strike; accused of being "loose and wanton" because they put themselves "on public display" and several times "goons" threatened them with "bodily violence" according to Sue Weston. Lenka recalls that rotten food was thrown at the women on the picket line on one occasion and that some people stopped patronizing the bakery because of her family's sympathy with the strikers.

ROLES

The working-class women in Flint lived a life that kept in rhythm with the factories. Whether their men folk worked for General Motors or not, all were affected one way or another by the massive plants which dominated the city. While the women had some things in common with their men such as status and class it would be incorrect to say that they shared everything. It would be wrong also to say that they had a common cause or interests with middle-class women. With the unequal access to education the working class women were less prepared to "take on the world" or fight for illusory rights such as the vote. When they worked, it was for survival. When they stayed at home, it generally was because of the limited sphere of activity which was perceived for them by themselves or their man while they filled the "sacred" roles of women.

The roles assigned to working-class women in Flint were similar to those in any other industrialized city in the United States. In the family, generally, women have traditionally held a role "secondary" to their husband's. In the home although they did work, that work was little valued in the society and economy at large. The women were socialized to particular expectations which had very limited options for them. To give a simplistic description of that

role would be to ignore the thousands of women who interpreted it differently.

Pat Wiseman, who had worked at Fisher side by side with the men doing the same work, was not allowed to stay in the plant with her fellow workers. She had not only worked with the men but had taken the harassment which had been dealt out good naturedly. She had faced not only the disapproval of the men in the factory but also the subtle disdain of her family and the other women in the community by working at a job that was traditionally male.

The depression decade had accentuated the difficulty of altering the status of women. "It seemed to have a chastening effect on cultural values, calling people back to the tried and true verities of family, hearth and home." (Friedman 1976:386) During that time business, government and labor all had undertaken a concerted campaign to discourage women from taking jobs especially those whose jobs might deprive an able-bodied man from working to support his family.

Working in a "man's" factory in a town in which there was a high unemployment rate must have put considerable additional pressure on Pat. After the insult of not being "allowed" to take an active part inside the factory and partake of the unity and solidarity which occurred between the strikers, to have the suggestion put forth that she work in the strike kitchen was the final

crushing blow. Pat's refusal to take on a "feminine role" when it was thrust unwillingly upon her speaks strongly of her commitment to fairness. If she could work side by side with the men on a day to day basis for six years, then she would do the "masculine" role of picketing outside the plant for the duration of the strike. Henry Kraus said that she never missed a day.(1947:98)

Geraldine Blankenship's mother, Louise, was a traditional housewife and mother who sold cosmetics on the side to "supplement" the family income. She had seen her own mother get up at four in the morning to carry water so that she could do the laundry for 4 or 5 other families. So when Louise's father told her at age 15 that there would be no more school for her because she was to go to work in the woolen mill, she was a little relieved that at least she would be making a little money without killing herself for other people; she would have a "real" job.

Although Jay Green was a political activist and strike leader and had a "very class conscious household " during the strike, Mrs. Blankenship said that after Louise married him it was "understood" that she would no longer work in the mills. Work was scarce for her husband during the depression so Louise "sold cosmetics to make a little extra money for the tough times." While she "didn't work" that was where the \$80 that saw the family through the strike came from. Mrs. Green was a very thrifty person who

always put a little back in case of an emergency but still always managed to have enough for company or visitors. The union helped a little with the food and some with the coal for the Greens during the strike, but most of their survival depended upon the \$80 which Louise had tucked away for a rainy day.

During the sitdown the Green household was much like the many Flint hotels. There was always at least one extra person spending the night and often many more than one. When remembering the strike Geraldine said:

I remember one girl who worked in an office, she slept with my sister. Then there were two men from Toledo. One of them was Tom Dolan and the other...we called "Whitey". They were the regulars and I can't remember the others' names, all of them. Tom and Whitey were there all the time and the others only when they needed a place to stay. Mom worked awfully hard. Tom and Whitey helped my mom sometimes with the laundry. It had to be done at least once a day so when they weren't helping at the union hall or picketing, they came home and helped mom. (The sheets) had to be hung in the basement after being put through the ringer. Whitey ironed. He did a lot of ironing. Tom helped mom with the wash. He would put it through the washer as she was hanging them up. She did laundry for several of the out-of-town people who needed help.

Although Louise Green didn't "work", she most often got up at dawn during the strike and cooked for the visitors, did their laundry, often ironing the sheets to get them dry enough to put back on the beds for the next person, went to the union hall to picket, babysit or help out and then returned home in time to get supper for the ones who

would return to her house for the night. While the beds were never allowed to get cold, sometimes the food did. Geraldine says that her mother was not a joiner of clubs or groups. She didn't have time for that kind of thing because she was too busy just living life.

Mrs. Green fulfilled the role of traditional supportive housewife during the strike. She could be counted on to be hostess to many of the out-of-town advisors who helped with the strike and to a lesser extent to help out at the union hall and food kitchen for a short while. She preferred to do her share by doing what she knew best at home.

The Green home was a rented home located away from the factories and away from the newer arrivals to Flint. Unlike most factory workers, they lived in an older, more respected part of town across the street from Flint's mayor. The Greens, being from the Genesee County area, had many contacts and ties to Flint. While Jay Green worked in the same factory system as did the others, he and his wife were acquainted with the idiosyncracies which take a lifetime to learn about a town. Unlike the workers who came up from the south to find work, the Greens had a stake in the community outside of the factory. Their people, friends and relatives, were here and formed a subtle support system. It was within this system that Louise was the hostess for outsiders. She became a part of the strike but not really "one of the

group" of strikers' wives.

Clara Kahlert was working in AC at the time the sitdown took place. She had four brothers and her father in the factory system in Flint. Her family moved to Flint in 1930 from Taymouth, Michigan to escape the poverty of farm life there. While her brothers sometimes had difficulty finding work during the hard times, pretty Clara never had trouble.

"All I had to do was make the boss think that he would be getting more than work from me. I was careful to have one of my brothers pick me up at the end of my shift so that there wouldn't be any trouble. I had to work because sometimes my paycheck was all that kept the rent paid for the seven of us. We weren't real poor, not like some that came here, but we didn't have anything in the bank and we had lost the farm because we couldn't pay the mortgage."

When Clara's family came to Flint, they first stayed with her father's brother but were soon able to move into a place of their own. They lived in the top floor of a house owned by a widow who was a friend of the family. The woman needed the added income from the rental but was "afraid to rent to the 'hillbillies' with a passle of snot-nosed kids, who were here to find jobs in the factories" so the house had sat empty for some time.

Young Clara wasn't involved in the strike directly but remembers the excitement in Flint at the time. "It was the first time I could remember anybody really sticking together. Oh, we had arguments and fights but the overall

atmosphere was shot through with the electricity of hope. Despair crept in as the strike dragged on but something always seemed to happen to cause our backbones to stiffen again."

Although her mother stayed at home and took no part in the strike, Clara went down to the Fisher Body plant every day after work and joined in the festivities. She attended the dances at the Pengelly Building, joined a labor history class and even picketed once or twice. Her brothers did not approve of her "parading around like a hussy" outside the plant, so her picketing was limited to times when they weren't around.

As the strike wore on, one by one Clara's brothers and father were out of work until the only one in the family working besides herself was her brother who worked at the Buick foundry. With less work, the discussions around the table at supper time became more and more heated. While in general the family supported the union, none were sure that the strike was going to accomplish anything tangible for workers. During one particular discussion, Clara gave her opinion about all that was happening in Flint and was told, "in essence, that I could not possibly understand what was going on because I had only worked in a 'woman's factory' doing light work...And besides that I didn't really need to work...I had been for stretches of sometimes 6 to 8 months, the only person bringing in a paycheck and they

considered what I did 'child's play'."

Clara, at the time, felt that her brothers were right. After all, she wouldn't be working all of her life. As soon as she got married she would stay at home and take care of the house like a proper wife. So, Clara joined in the social aspect of the strike and enjoyed the excitement of the time but with no real hopes for herself with the union or with work. Like the legions of working-class women who had come before her, Clara knew her place.

When Rollin Moon asked his wife if she would "rather him be in the strike or try to find other work," her answer was that "whatever he wanted to do was OK with me." Rollin Moon had been working 16 hours a day for the previous six or seven months and so she was accustomed to being alone for long stretches of time. Her husband came home only two times during the strike. One time was when she asked him to come home because a "piece of pipe blew up in the house". He told her that if it happened again "don't call me--have someone else fix it for you. I'm not coming back." The second time he came home to soak his foot for eight to ten hours. He went back " as soon as he could get his shoe on."

With five small children, the oldest of whom was eleven, Mrs. Moon was not able to take as active a part in the strike as some of the others. Living out in the country and with no transportation, Mrs. Moon was rather isolated from others in the strike community. The Moons did have a

car but with no money coming in for gas, its use was severely limited.

Because she had no close neighbors, "the thing that was the most worrisome was they used to come bother you...try to scare the women at night, to try to get you to get your husband to come home...They pounded on the house and knocked on the windows. They'd say either he come home or we're going to bust in and we're going to kill you...It was really miserable."

The auxiliary did visit Mrs. Moon and take her some groceries "otherwise I don't know what we'd a done." They also gave her a small amount of money so that she could buy some gas and be able to come down to the stike site at least one time to get a feel for what was going on.

Mrs. Moon was not directly involved in the workings of the strike because of circumstances over which she had little control. Her role was that of the supportive wife who carried on at home. While her husband took care of the work end of the marriage in his own way, she, in her own way, held on at home with the kids and the problems around the house.

Ann Brown also was a stay-at-home during the strike but her reasons were very different from those of Mrs. Moon. Ann came from a very strong Catholic background. She had been educated in parochial schools, lived in a very traditional Irish-Catholic family and aspired only to be a

good housewife and mother the same way her mother had been. Her family was (and is) the center of her social and emotional life to the exclusion of all other people and causes. A very important part of her belief system included women doing what was expected of them: keeping the house clean, the children educated in the church, and her husband happy. She "didn't go along with all this tom-foolishness about picketing and helping the strikers." While her husband took part in the strike in the beginning, Ann convinced him that the communists had control of the union and the whole thing would come to no good. (It is interesting to note that she still thinks that the corporation would have given the workers all that they have now if the workers would have been a little more patient. She feels that there would be less trouble in the world if the workers would learn their places and not be so confrontational with strikes and such.)

Another firm belief of Mrs. Brown's is that if the women had not interfered and encouraged the strikers, the strike would have been of short duration and the city would not have been disrupted as much. She asserts that if the women who don't really belong in Flint ("you know, the hillbillies and other white-trash from the south") had known their place and had not been so demanding, there would have been no call to strike. Ann Brown lives in a world of absolutes; she lives in a world of right and wrong, black and white, a world where everyone must follow the same set

of rules with no deviations and no real individuality. To her, the IMA was a positive example of how much the corporation cared about the workers and she truly believes that the corporation does care and will take care of its people if only given the chance.

With her beliefs, Ann stayed home and did not associate with the other women of Flint. She went to church and family gatherings all the while carefully avoiding any discussion of the strike or any negative talk about GM. After what she considered a reasonable time, she called her husband home and "refused to allow him to participate in the rebellion." Ann's strong convictions and absolute certainty combined to convince her husband of the correctness of her position thus cowing him into compliance with her wishes. Her refusal to believe in the working-class status of her family was amply displayed by her denial of any common element between the family and the strikers.

Having worked in the mills of the south since she was eleven years old, Sue Weston had an entirely different outlook on the strike. Sue had worked in Kelsey-Hayes in Detroit, Turnstedt, and at the time of the strike AC. She was thirty years old at the time of the strike and had worked all of her life at very difficult, often dirty jobs. Her husband had died as a result of an injury which occurred in an automobile plant so she was well aware that the corporation did not "take care of its people." She was also

aware that women made considerably less than men but was convinced that nothing would be done about it in her own lifetime.

Although Sue did not work at one of the struck plants, her brother and boy friend both did. She felt as if she was part of the strike community as she worked in the kitchen peeling potatoes or took her turn outside picketing. While she didn't go there every day because she had housework and children to take care of, she did go often enough to be comfortable with the other people involved. Her attitude toward the strike was one of acceptance of the "way things are going to be...If we win that is good for the workers. If we don't, well then we tried and life is not over yet so we had better get on to getting on." No one could accuse her of not pulling her share of the load or of pessimism about the strike but it was as if she never quite dared to hope for too much for fear of disappointment.

Sue's role of support was qualified only in that whether or not the strike was a success her life was not going to be significantly changed. The plants which primarily were filled with female workers were not being targeted for organization and she could not foresee any real improvements for herself. If they occurred, well then that was good but she "wasn't going to hold her breath."

The effect of the strike on many of the women was very positive and can be summed up in this quote from Sidney

Fine:"...the participation of the women in the strike was probably more important for them than the men." Fine goes on to say: "A new type of woman was born in the strike. Women who only yesterday were horrified at unionism, who felt inferior to the task of organizing, speaking, leading, have as if overnight, become the spearhead in the battle of unionism." (1969:201) In quoting the women about their participation in the strike he writes:

I found common understanding an unselfishness that I'd never known in my life...I'm living for the first time with a definite goal...just being a woman isn't enough anymore. I want to be a human being with the right to think for myself...(1969:201)

The names of such women as Clara Kahlert, Sue Weston, Lenka Evanoff, Louise Green and Pat Wiseman are not familiar to many people. Few remember the names of the five school teachers who did not have their contracts renewed in the spring of 1937 because of their support for the strike. They were mostly working-class people doing what they viewed as right. All of these women as well as many more were important to the cause, yet none were heroes in the traditional sense.

The roles of the majority of the women did not change during the strike. They were limited by tradition and custom. The women offered support and nurturing where it was needed and allowed, seldom violating the roles assigned to them by virtue of their gender. During the

crisis, some did put aside their timidity and submission to become leaders.

Many women's inner lives were altered significantly by their participation in the strike, but the roles and expectations of society did not change perceptably. Even though they were severely economically disadvantaged, there was within them and within the society in which they lived, a deep resistance to change. The women in the plants did gain a certain amount of equality with the men but only on a very limited, restrictive basis. After the strike the women returned to the "female" role of monotonous jobs in the plants and housework in the evenings.

That the feelings of solidarity and unity between the women largely disappeared after the settlement with GM could be attributed to the fact that many of the women returned to their roles as housewives and were once again relatively isolated from each other. It must be remembered that many of these women did not always have transportation available to them. Many did not have radios and most of them were uneducated. Without the direct contact afforded them by the strike activities, the feelings of solidarity atrophied and other seemingly important matters came to the forefront of their lives.

Eitzen points out that values do not change as rapidly as the other elements in a culture. (1982:118) This especially appears to hold true with the value which has

been allowed to women. He also states that traditional sex roles are the results of consistent messages from many sectors of society. (1982:156) The community, the churches, the schools, the government and the media all did their part in causing most of the women involved in the strike activities to revert to traditional roles after the strike and even for some like Ann Brown, during the strike. More is the pity. By underutilizing an important element in the community, the union and the corporation may have overlooked the possibility of an earlier, less costly, more peaceful settlement.

The fact that so much of the Sit Down Strike community was not politically educated meant that they were blind to the role of women. The men failed to develop class consciousness and therefore the women often did, too. The results were disastrous for the women given their vulnerable position and isolation both during and after the strike.

That the women, for the most part, returned to traditional roles does not overshadow all the gains which were made during the strike. Both the union and the corporation recognized the immense power of the women as the strike progressed and began at last to include them or at least acknowledge their impact. While working women were not allowed to participate in the actual sitdown, the world was informed of their feelings of being left out through Pat

Wiseman and maybe a glimmer of understanding was glimpsed by the men.

It is my hope that the readers of this paper gained a brief understanding of the conditions under which the women lived and in many cases the overwhelming obstacles which they faced. No societal institution was on their side, not even the union they were fighting for. Even with everything against them, for a brief time, the women triumphed over the obstacles and did their part as quiet heroes in the Great Sitdown Strike. There was no single impact by these women and the roles which they played were as diverse as the individual women.

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