

## Labor Unions - Flint

### The Basics

#### Time Required

Three 45 minute class periods

#### Subject Areas

High School US History

Emergence of Modern America, 1890-1930

#### Common Core Standards Addressed:

Writing Standards for Literacy in History/Social Studies 6-12

#### Author

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### The Lesson

#### Introduction

John D. Rockefeller stated, "The individual has gone, never to return." This statement epitomizes the plight of the workers during the late 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries.

The overall objective of this unit is to enable the students to realize the hardships that laborers, particularly unskilled laborers, faced in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century. They will also gain an appreciation for the workers' desires and determination to gain respect and humane treatment from their employers through the use of strikes during this time. So, even though, the individual may have gone, never to return, individual workers who united together were able to eventually overcome many difficult circumstances.

#### Guiding Questions

1. The teacher will write the following inquiry activity on the overhead for the class to ponder.



If the students cannot ascertain the answer, the teacher will give the answers  
(+people=steel)

2. Review of prior learning activity: Explain how the following terms are important regarding industrial production:

**Wealth****“Wage Slavery”****Exploitation****3. Inquiry Activity Using Quotes Regarding Labor and Unions: Who Said It?**

Give students a handout or have an overhead transparency of the following quotes, the name or group that said the quote should be masked so that they students cannot see it. Student discussion, guided by the teacher, should lead to determining the answer.

*“The individual has gone never to return.”* [This statement epitomizes the plight of the workers during the late 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries.]—**John D. Rockefeller** (masked)

*“The unskilled are impossible to organize.... We can’t be bothered with them, nor must we become involved in such issues as the problems of Negroes and the inequities of female labor.... Our first and only duty is to those who belong to our unions, the skilled craftsmen of America.... The unskilled are as an albatrosses dangling from the necks of the labor movement....”*—**Samuel Gompers** (masked)

*“Thou shalt not take thy neighbor’s job.”*—**Andrew Carnegie** (masked)

*“Whatever its future, the IWW has accomplished one tremendous big thing.... that is the individual awakening of “illiterates” and “scum”... to the realization of their dignity and rights in this, or any other society.... They have learned.... consciousness of self.”*

**WE WANT BREAD AND ROSES TOO!!!!**—**Magazine Writer and Workers during The Lawrence Textile Mill Strike 1912** (masked)

*“The only difference between a penitentiary and the GM plant...[is] that the GM worker could go home at night...It is cruel; it is absolute cruelty”*—**A worker in the Flint GM plant** (masked)

*“Where you used to be a man,...now you are less than their cheapest tool.”*—**A Flint Chevrolet worker, to Senator Robert La Follette in 1936** (masked)

**Learning Objectives**

Students will be able to know the basic events of the Flint GM Sit-Down Strike in 1936-1937. They will understand both why the strike occurred and why it succeeded where many previous strikes had failed. They will also be able to appreciate the courage and resoluteness of the workers during this strike.

**Preparation Instructions**

Song used in this lesson:

“There’ll Be a Hot Time in the Old Town Tonite”  
“Women’s Auxiliary Song”

## Lesson Activities

### 1. Day One:

- a. Give students a brief background on the GM Sit-Down Strike taken from: Sidney Fine's *Sit-Down: The General Motors Strike of 1936-1937* and chapter three in Timothy P. Lynch's *Strike Songs of the Depression*. The lecture will be divided into a section on management and a section on labor:

**MANAGEMENT:** Background on the Formation of General Motors. Show students on a map how widespread its production was throughout North America. By 1936 it was "colossal" with total assets of \$1.5, and 69 plants in 35 cities (in 14 different states) with over 230,000 workers. It produced a variety of cars "Chevrolet for *hoi polloi*...Pontiac for the poor but proud, Oldsmobile for the comfortable but discreet, Buick for the striving, Cadillac for the rich" (Fine, 21). It had become the largest automobile manufacturer and controlled over 40% of the new passenger cars in America since the late 1920s. Discuss the importance of the following people/organizations in the development of GM. Optional: Give students one of the following and they can find out how they were important to GM: **Billy Durant, David Dunbar Buick, Louis Chevrolet, Alfred P. Sloan, Jr., the Fisher brothers, William S. Knudsen**

**LABOR:** The UAW was formed in 1935, and was working to try to gain the right to represent auto workers throughout the industry. Workers in the automobile industry were generally higher paid than in many industries. Most, but not all, of the GM workers were given an hourly wage by 1936. In 1929, its employees worked an average of 40.5 hours per week and were paid an average of 75.6 cents an hour. The average hourly wage for all production workers for all manufacturing was 55.6 cents an hour (Fine, 22)

Worker complaints/issues: There were many issues that were prominent, such as unsafe working conditions—for instance, one punch-press operator in a GM plant had lost three fingers and a thumb! (Fine, 56) But two complaints seem primary: 1.) The right of the UAW to represent all the workers and for the workers to join the union without discrimination 2.) The speed of the assembly line. One of the frequent complaints of workers in the automobile industry was the speed of the assembly line which had been introduced by Henry Ford and was used industry-wide by the 1920s. Though less than 20% of the workers in the industry were engaged in assembly-line operations directly, the assembly line still determined the "rhythm of production" (Fine, 54) At the time of the strike, they made 60 cars an hour. One New York Times reporter wrote that "The essence of Flint, was speed...Speed, speed, speed—that is Flint morning, noon, and night." (Fine, 55)

### b. Homework:

- 1.) Have the students research and identify the importance of the following people in the Sit-Down Strike of 1936-1937 (each student will be given one): **Robert Travis, Bud**

- Simons, William “Red” Mundale, Wyndham Mortimer, Homer Martin Victor, Roy, and Walter Reuther, John L. Lewis, Governor Frank Murphy.**
- 2.) Pass out the lyrics to the song, “There’ll Be a Hot Time in the Old Town Tonight.”

## 2. Day Two

- a. Discuss the people that the students were given to research. Give the students a handout to fill in while they learn from their fellow students.
- b. In all of the strikes we have discussed, the courage and determination of the workers for justice has been an important factor. Discuss NEW FACTORS that made the outcome of this strike different from the former strikes we discussed:
- 1.) The **UAW** which began in 1935 and became part of the Congress of Industrial Organization, which was led by the industrious John L. Lewis and was more actively working for unskilled workers’ rights.
  - 2.) **President Franklin Delano Roosevelt** and New Deal Legislation, particularly the following two:

**National Industrial Recovery Act (NIRA) Section 7a** gave “the right to organize and bargain collectively through representatives of their own choosing,” and to be free from “interference, restraint, or coercion” in designating these representative or in organizing or “in other concerted activities for the purpose of collective bargaining or other mutual aid or protection.” Also, no employee was required to join a company union or to refrain from joining or assisting a labor organization of his own choice. (Fine, 29)

**National Labor Relations Act (Wagner Act)** This act gave workers the right to organize and collectively bargain through representative of their own choosing without discrimination. It also created the National Labor Relations Board to help enforce this act.

- 3.) **Frank Murphy**, the new Democratic governor of Michigan. Murphy, whom the UAW expected to be friendlier to them than the prior government, was also a very supportive of FDR and in fact communicated with FDR throughout the strike.
- c. **Background of the Sit-Down Strike:** Other strikes in the automobile industry prior to the Flint Sit-Down Strike: There were other strikes in the automobile industry that preceded the GM Flint Sit-down strike. In 1934 and 1935 there were strikes in the Cleveland Fisher plant and Toledo Chevrolet Plant. They were smaller and only partially successful. The executives were caught “off-guard” and took steps (such as espionage and hiring more guards) to ensure that strikes did not spread. In fact, in September, 1936, shortly after the Sit-down strikes temporarily paralyzed the French automobile industry, the top GM executive, William Knudsen, visited France and was warned by one French auto manufacturer that this could happen to GM. Knudsen replied, “No, that could not happen in the United States. The American people would not stand for them [sit-down strikes]” (Fine, 128). Interestingly, France’s first Socialist premier, Leon Blum had just taken over France and refused to use force to take over the plants. Instead, he helped to conciliate between the unions and the owners, thus setting

an example for Governor Frank Murphy. In November and December there were strikes at the Atlanta and Cleveland Fisher Body plants prior to the Flint Strike. The Kelsey-Hayes Wheel Company Sit-Down strike in Detroit between December 11-23, gained some small victories for the UAW and led to an increase in UAW membership because it provided the “aura of victory” (Fine, 133).

d. The General Motors Sit-Down Strike of 1936-37

- 1.) Give students a brief timeline of the Flint Sit-Down Strike of 1936-1937 and a map of the GM Plants in Flint. The teacher may project on a computer screen the map found on the website [HistoricalVoices.org](http://HistoricalVoices.org) on the Flint Sit-Down Strike. Timeline should include:

--**Dec 30, 1936:** At 7:00 a.m., more than 50 workers sit down and stop working in GM Fisher Body Plant No. 2, ostensibly because three inspectors were going to be transferred by GM because they refused to quit the union. At 10:00 p.m., the larger Fisher Body Plant No. 1 sits down because of a rumor that GM was going to move dies to Grand Rapids and Pontiac in order to forestall a strike.

--**Dec. 31, 1936:** The strike slowly begins to spread to other GM plants around the country, but the focus remains on Flint because it is the most important.

--**Jan. 4, 1937:** Governor Frank Murphy begins to address the strike. Homer Martin, UAW organizer, submits a list of eight demands to the GM management.

--**Jan. 8, 1937:** Governor Murphy holds an unproductive conference with both sides.

--**Jan. 11, 1937:** “The Battle of the Running Bulls” On this cold night (16 degrees), the GM management turns off the heat to the plants and some of the strikers at Fisher Body Plant #1 force open the doors and the plant guards lock themselves in the ladies room. The Fisher Body plant police call police headquarters to report that the guards have been captured. The police arrive and try unsuccessfully to take over the plants. The strikers defend themselves with ingenuity while Walter Reuther directs and encourages the workers from the company sound car. Fourteen strikers and sympathizers are injured, as well as some of the policemen. This is, in many ways, the turning point in the strike.

--**Jan. 12, 1937:** Gov. Murphy send the National Guard to restore order and protect the strikers as well as the police. He also invites the UAW and GM management leaders to Lansing for negotiations. The strikers begin to post guards to ensure they are not surprised again, and the women outside the

plant form the Women’s Emergency Brigade to support the men in the plants.

--**Feb. 2, 1937:** Judge Gadola issues an injunction for the UAW to evacuate the two Fisher plants. The UAW does not comply, and Gov. Murphy refused to use the National Guard to evict them, preferring to continue negotiations.

--**Feb. 4, 1937:** President FDR calls Gov. Murphy and asks him to tell the negotiators that the public welfare demands that they settle the strike

--**Feb. 8, 1937:** Gov. Murphy writes a letter to John L. Lewis saying that, as the chief executive of Michigan, he must uphold the law.

--**Feb. 11, 1937:** The UAW delegation, led by John L. Lewis of the CIO, secures collective bargaining rights for the UAW for six months and that negotiations on all of the other demands will continue. The strike is over—44 days after it started.

- 2.) Briefly discuss the development of the strike until January 11, 1937. Then, focus on what happened in the “Battle of the Running Bulls” (of the “Battle of Bulls’ Run”, as it is sometimes called). If there is time, play the audio first-hand accounts of this battle found on the Historical Voices website (Robert Mamero, Roscoe Rich, and Ed Erlich)
- 3.) Give a short background on the song, “They’ll Be a Hot Time in the Old Town Tonight.” It was originally written by Theodore Metz, who was inspired to write it when he saw a group of black children putting out a fire in Old Town New Orleans. But, it was based on an earlier song about Mrs. O’Leary’s cow and the Chicago Fire. It became famous in 1898 during the Spanish-American War when Teddy Roosevelt and the Rough Riders adopted it as a personal anthem in Cuba. It remained a popular song in Louisiana, and Bessie Smith sang a popular version of it in 1927. Two workers, Cecil Hubel and Clarence Jobin, composed new lyrics based on the incidents of the “Battle of the Running Bulls” on January 11, 1937. (“Bull” is slang for the police). Discuss the fact that music provided an important source of entertainment and a means of keeping the workers’ spirits up (show pictures of the workers singing and dancing).
- 4.) Listen to the song—you can find many versions of it on You Tube (the tune, not the same lyrics), but I like Bessie Smith’s 1927 version. Or, you may sing it together with the students while they read the lyrics: After listening to it and reading the lyrics, ask the following questions:
  - a. What kind of song is this? Is it sad, angry, triumphant? Does the music go well with the lyrics? Explain.
  - b. What kind of a mood do you think the strikers were in when they wrote and sang the song?
  - c. Evan J. Parker was the plant manager of both Fisher Body No. 1 and No. 2. What do the workers’ think of him?
  - d. How is the contrast between the Parker and the Police highlighted in the lyrics?

- e. If this song is indicative of the attitudes of the workers after the battle, what do you think their frame of mind was on January 12? Do you think they realized the importance of this “battle?”
  - f. They discuss the fact that the police are sick (from the gas) and sore (from the “projectiles”), but why do you think they do not mention the injured workers?
  - g. Why do you think the last line was changed to past tense—“last nite,” but the last line of the final verse revert back to the future tense of the original?
  - h. Do you think this “Battle of the Running Bulls” was a turning point? Explain.
- 3.) Homework: Assign the students to access the Historical Voices website to listen to one of the audio accounts of the Battle of Running Bulls, and also assign one of the following audio accounts from women who participated outside of the factory in the “Women’s Emergency Brigade” and be prepared to share with the rest of the class what the women’s perspective and experiences were like.

### 3. Day Three

- a. Discuss the audio accounts briefly and give handout containing an excerpt from “Mrs. Violet Baggett’s Letter” and the “Women’s Auxiliary Song.” Discuss the important role that women played in the strike and how they may have felt.

#### **WOMEN IN THE GM FLINT SIT-DOWN STRIKE**

*I found a common understanding and unselfishness I’d never known. These people are real people and I’m glad I’m one of them. I only wish I’d got mad long ago and investigated, but I didn’t have time for anything outside of my own small circle. I’m living for the first time with a definite goal. I want a decent living for not only my family but for everyone. Just being a woman isn’t enough any more. I want to be a human being. I’m ready and glad to wear my...Women’s Emergency Brigade armband anytime, anywhere I’m needed. I hope if anyone chances to read this they’ll take the time to find out as I did what women can and are doing to help men in their fight for decent wages and working conditions.* Mrs. Violet Baggett, President of the West Side Local Women Auxiliary, Detroit

Quoted in *Labor’s New Millions* by Mary Heaton Vorse

- b. Finish going over the timeline, emphasizing the importance of the takeover of the Chevy 4 Plant. If time allows and you can f show segments on Walter Reuther from *The American Experience*. Discuss the settlement signed by the UAW and GM, that dropped all charges, discrimination, and resumed production with the same workers. It also agreed to immediate negotiations on the UAW’s specific demands, during which the union agreed not to strike. This was a clear victory for the workers and the union and led to many other sit-down strikes throughout the industrial economy of the U.S.
- c. Show the six-minute video from You Tube of the song “1937” written by David O. Norris and sung by Dan Hall. This video contains much of the footage from the strike and provides the students with an opportunity to reflect on the strike. It also begins and ends with the “singer” going down “Chevrolet Avenue” today

and alludes to the fact that we still owe the brave men and women of 1937 a debt.

### **Assessment**

Students can write a hypothetical interview of someone, i.e. Gov. Murphy or Walter Reuther, who lived through this event. Students could “interview” this specific person or a hypothetical person (a guard, a worker, a Communist, a wife, a child, a non-union worker). They should write it as if the interview is immediately after the event. Another possible writing assignment is for the students to pretend they are an editor for a Flint (or Detroit) paper and have to write an editorial for January 12<sup>th</sup> or for February 12<sup>th</sup>. What would you write?

### **Resources**

#### **Lyrics**

“There’ll Be a Hot Time in the Old Town Tonite” available at

[http://www.lyricsfreak.com/b/bessie+smith/therell+be+a+hot+time+in+the+old+town+tonight\\_21003173.html](http://www.lyricsfreak.com/b/bessie+smith/therell+be+a+hot+time+in+the+old+town+tonight_21003173.html)

“Women’s Auxiliary Song”

Tune: “Let’s All Sing Like the Birdies Sing”

[http://www.dhr.history.vt.edu/modules/us/mod06\\_1936/evidence\\_detail\\_12.html](http://www.dhr.history.vt.edu/modules/us/mod06_1936/evidence_detail_12.html)