

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

Introduction

"Which side are you on?" Taken from a 1931 song popular with members of the labor movement, the question particularly resonated with General Motors autoworkers in Flint, Michigan, during the winter of 1936-37. With the depression still raging, jobs remained scarce, unemployment rates high, and suffering a daily part of the lives of many. Michigan autoworkers wondered whether joining the United Automobile Workers, a newly created union, and participating in the sit-down strike that had idled several GM plants would improve their working conditions or cost them their jobs. With their livelihoods hanging in the balance, many weighed loyalty to GM, the world's largest industrial corporation, against the consequences and outcomes of union participation.

The battle between GM and the UAW occurred at a time when labor unions were struggling to get on their feet. Labor leaders had experienced only minimal success forging unions of skilled workers along craft lines and had failed, with the exception of the UAW, to establish industrial unions that united workers across single industries regardless of skill level. One of many challenges labor leaders faced remained the fierce resistance of owners and managers who quelled union drives within their factories.

This module recounts the events of the Flint sit-down strike, an episode one historian described as "the most significant labor conflict in the twentieth century" (Fine 341). The evidence provided in the module outlines the positions of union and corporate officials during the strike; explores how workers experienced the forty-four-day ordeal; and examines the broader responses to and implications of such a critical turning point in American labor history.