

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

Evidence 3: Alfred P. Sloan to GM Employees, January 5, 1937

A

Introduction

Alfred P. Sloan responded to the list of UAW demands with the memo below, which was posted on GM billboards and widely published in the press. As with all the statements issued by both sides during the strike, Sloan aimed to reach not just GM employees but also the wider public. In this letter, he attempted to persuade his employees to remain loyal to GM by arguing that the company's position was reasonable. At the same time, he was trying to shore up public support for GM.

Questions to Consider

- What kind of language did he use to describe the actions of the UAW and the sit-down strikers? What was his intent in using such terms as "ruthless tactics" and "labor dictators" to describe the activities and leaders of the UAW?
- What did he present as the UAW's aim in the strike?
- According to Sloan, what was the "real issue" of the strike?
- What was his specific response to UAW demands? Which demands did he fail to address?

Document

In view of the fact that several of our manufacturing plants have been forced to close down, possibly necessitating similar closing on the part of others in the not-distant future, and realizing that this means a great deal to you and your families, as well as to the business, it seems only fair that I should tell you the circumstances that have brought this about in order that you may better understand and therefore judge more intelligently.

First, let me say that General Motors products were never in greater demand than today. This good business insures plenty of jobs, with generous hours of employment, for some time to come. Wages are higher today, by far, than the corporation ever paid before. And not only that, but

the amount that each dollar buys is importantly greater than it was during the last period of good business, say in 1929. Again, important progress has been made in providing steadier work through the year; thus on these and every other count General Motors workers are earning more than they ever have in the entire history of General Motors, and as much, if not more, than the workers of any other business. No one can honestly say otherwise.

Yet under these conditions you are being forced out of your jobs by sit-down strikes, by widespread intimidation, and by shortage of materials produced by similar tactics in many allied industries. Your employment and wages and the welfare of your families are being endangered by actions beyond your control and that of your company. The same ruthless tactics are threatening the general recovery of business, in which the automobile industry had the leading part.

You are being told you had better join a union. You are being told that to bargain collectively you must be a member of a labor organization. You are being told that the automobile industry is to be run as a closed shop. You are being told that if you do not join now it will be impossible for you to work in any automobile plant when the union wins, unless you pay. In other words, you will be without a job, therefore you might sign up, pay dues, or else.

I want to say to you most frankly, that this is positively not so. Do not be misled. Have no fear that any union or any labor dictator will dominate the plants of General Motors Corporation. No General Motors worker need join any organization to get a job or to keep a job.

General Motors grew up on the principle that a worker's job and his promotion depend on his own individual ability--not on the say-so of any labor union dictator. And on that principle, General Motors stands and will continue to stand. Many of the men who operate General Motors plants came up from a worker's bench. You know them. You see them on the job every day. They are the ones who design our products and plan their manufacture. It is your work and their work, financed by our stockholders and sold to the public at large all over the world which makes jobs and wages possible--nothing more or less, and that will always be so.

Neither is it necessary for you to join any organization in order to bargain collectively. General Motors is pledged to collective bargaining on the basis

of absolute and uninfluenced freedom of choice on the part of any worker to join any organization without coercion, restraint or intimidation. General Motors stated its position most completely on this important principle of employer-employee relationship in August, 1934. You were duly notified. General Motors practices that form of collective bargaining continuously, as honestly and intelligently as it knows how.

I mention all this because efforts are being made, in various ways, to make you as well as the public believe that General Motors refuses to bargain collectively with its workers and exercises discrimination against men who elect to join one organization or another. Nothing could be farther from the truth.

But, after all, this is not the real issue that has brought about the situation we face today. That real issue is perfectly clear, and here it is: --

Will a labor organization run the plants of General Motors Corporation or will the management continue to do so? On this issue depends the question as to whether you have to have a union card to hold a job, or whether your job will depend in the future, as it has in the past, upon your own individual merit. In other words, will you pay to a private group of labor dictators for the privilege of working, or will you have the right to work as you may desire. Wages, working conditions, honest collective bargaining, have little, if anything, to do with the underlying situation. They are simply a smoke screen to cover the real objective.

Now, you are entitled to know what General Motors position is. That is the real purpose of this message to you. Here it is: --

1. General Motors will not recognize any union as the sole bargaining agency for its workers, to the exclusion of others. General Motors will continue to recognize, for the purpose of collective bargaining, the representatives of its workers, whether union or non-union.
2. Work in General Motors plants will continue to depend on the ability and efficiency of the worker--not on the membership or non-membership in any labor organization whatsoever. This means that you do not have to pay tribute to anyone for the right to work.
3. General Motors will continue to pay the highest justifiable wages in the future, as it has in the past, and just as it is doing in the present. It believes in high wages. It is justly proud of its record in that

respect.

4. General Motors' standard work week will continue to be 40 hours. Time and a half will be paid for over-time.
5. Seniority rights will be observed under the rules laid down by the Automobile Labor Board appointed by the President of the United States in March, 1934.

These rules are recognized as fair and just to all works and permit no discrimination against any worker on account of any organization membership.

I tell you all of this not only in your own interest, but in the interest of your family and for the future progress and stability of the business, as well. And, let me add, that General Motors will continue to keep its plants going just as long as its workers can safely work, and as long as we are able to obtain the essential materials from other plants on which we are dependent in order to build our various products. I realize what this situation means to you. Its has been brought about through no lack of effort on the part of the management of General Motors Corporation to make the business a good business, not only for the workers and the stockholders, but likewise a contributing factor to the prosperity of the country, and after all, that means much to all of us.

Source:

Flint Journal (5 Jan 1937), 4.