

HARD TIMES

tors were parasites, trying to tear down the structure. There was no law of agreed principles. It was nothing but a contest of staying power. It was a jungle.

People would regard a depression today as man-made. In the past, depressions fell in the same category as earthquakes and bad weather. An act of Providence or God. I don't think there'd be the acquiescence of the Thirties. I think there'd be a rebellion. I think even in these suburbs out here you'd get a rebellion. Exactly what they'd do about it, I don't know. I think there'd be a vigorous and, ultimately violent, insistence: if not my measure, then some other measure. Something and soon.

There was some of this in the Thirties, the left wing. Some were called Communists; some were Communists. They pointed up, as they called it, the contradictions: people starving, with farmers being told to kill off their pigs. There was anger and frustration with the inability to put the productive capacity to work to meet the needs of the people. There wasn't much of this talk in the Thirties—these were the nuts, the fringe. They wouldn't be the fringe today. . . .

Three Strikes

Bob Stinson

THE SIT-DOWN

"Everybody has to have something they're really sold on. Some people go to church. If I'd had anything I'm really sold on, it's the UAW."

Regularly, he visits the regional headquarters of the United Automobile Workers Union in Flint, Michigan. He's a small-boned man, in specs, sports shirt and a business suit.

"I started working at Fisher Body in 1917 and retired in '62, with 45 and 8/10 years service. Until 1933, no unions, no rules: you were at the mercy of your foreman. I could go to work at seven o'clock in the morning, and at seven fifteen the boss'd come around and say: you could come back at three o'clock. If he preferred somebody else over you, that person would be called back earlier, though you were there longer.

"I left the plant so many nights hostile. If I were a fella big and strong, I think I'd a picked a fight with the first fella I met on the corner. (Laughs.) It was lousy. Degraded. You might call yourself a man if you was on the street, but as soon as you went through the door and punched your card, you was nothing more or less than a robot. Do this, go there, do that. You'd do it.

"We got involved in a strike in Detroit, and we lost the strike. Went back on our knees. That's the way you learn things. I got laid off in the fall of '31. I wasn't told I was blackballed, but I was told there was no more jobs at Fisher Body for me. So I came to Flint and was hired right off the bat. I'm positive my black marks in Detroit followed me later. (Laughs.)

"We had a Black Legion in this town made up of stool pigeons and little bigotty kind of people. They got themselves in good with the management by puttin' the finger on a union organizer. On the same order as the Klan, night riders. Once in a while, a guy'd come in with a black eye. You'd say, 'What happened?' He'd say, 'I was walking along the street and a guy come from behind and knocked me down.'

"The Black Legion later developed into the Flint Alliance. It was supposed to be made up of the good solid citizens, who were terrorized by these outside agitators, who had come in here to take over the plant. They would get schoolkids to sign these cards, housewives. Every shoe salesman downtown would sign these cards. Businessmen would have everyone in the family sign these cards. They contended they had the overwhelming majority of the people of Flint.

"Most people in town was hopin' to hell the thing'd get solved. They had relatives and friends that they knew working in the plant was no bed of roses. They did accept some of this outside agitator stuff that got in the paper. I think anybody who reads this stuff day after day accepts a little bit of it. The great majority of the people was neutral.

"There was fear. You kept your mouth shut when you was in strange company. Every time you put a union button on, you were told to leave the plant. You were fired so fast, it made your head spin.

"We'd meet in an old ramshackley building. No doubt, stool pigeons came. Frenchie was exposed. Somebody got up on the platform and said, 'I know this guy's a stool pigeon, 'cause I gave him information and it passed right from him to the foreman!' They trapped the guy. Nobody touched him. He just walked down the stairs."

He tells of constant betrayals by the AFL International to which they had belonged, and of the subsequent organization of the CIO, led by John L. Lewis.

THE FLINT SIT-DOWN happened Christmas Eve, 1936. I was in Detroit, playing Santa Claus to a couple of small nieces and nephews. When I came back, the second shift* had pulled the plant. It took about five minutes to shut the line down. The foreman was pretty well astonished. (Laughs.)

The boys pulled the switches and asked all the women who was in Cut-and-Sew to go home. They informed the supervisors they could stay, if they stayed in their office. They told the plant police they could do their job as long as they didn't interfere with the workers.

We had guys patrol the plant, see that nobody got involved in anything they shouldn't. If anybody got careless with company property—such as sitting on an automobile cushion without putting burlap over it—he was

* The men who worked from 4:30 P.M. to 12:30 A.M.

talked to. You couldn't paint a sign on the wall or anything like that. You used bare springs for a bed. 'Cause if you slept on a finished cushion, it was no longer a new cushion.

Governor Murphy* said he hoped to God he would never have to use National Guard against people. But if there was damage to property, he would do so. This was right down our alley, because we invited him to the plant and see how well we were taking care of the place.†

They'd assign roles to you. When some of the guys at headquarters wanted to tell some of the guys in the plant what was cookin', I carried the message. I was a scavenger, too.

The merchants cooperated. There'd be apples, bushels of potatoes, crates of oranges that was beginnin' to spoil. Some of our members were also little farmers, they come up with a couple of baskets of junk.

The soup kitchen was outside the plant. The women handled all the cooking, outside of one chef who came from New York. He had anywhere from ten to twenty women washing dishes and peeling potatoes in the strike kitchen. Mostly stews, pretty good meals. They were put in containers and hoisted up through the window. The boys in there had their own plates and cups and saucers.

Didn't the guys want a drink now and then . . . ?

That was one of the hard ones. Even though you had strict discipline in there, anybody wanted to climb through the window, you couldn't stop him. He could leave any time he wanted. There was always some of the boys who would take a day off, go out and see how the old woman was doing. When they'd come back in, if somebody didn't search 'em, why, there'd be a pint.

The plant police would start bringin' in some women. That was damn quickly stopped.

We had 'em outnumbered. They may have been anti-union at the time, but it wasn't more than three or four years later before the plant guards' union was organized. I don't blame 'em. They were dependent on their supervisors for jobs just like we were.

Most of the men had their wives and friends come down, and they'd stand inside the window and they'd talk. Find out how the family was. If the union supplied them with enough coal. . . .

We had a ladies' auxiliary. They'd visit the homes of the guys that was in the plant. They would find out if there was any shortage of coal or food. Then they'd maneuver around amongst themselves until they found some place to get a ton of coal. Some of them even put the arm on Consumer Power if there was a possibility of having her power shut off.

* Frank Murphy. He subsequently became a Supreme Court Justice.

† See Harry Norgard's interpretation in the sequence, "Strive and Succeed," p. 439.

Any of the wives try to talk the guys into coming out?

Some of 'em would have foremen come to their homes: "Sorry, your husband was a very good operator. But if he don't get out of the plant and away from the union, he'll never again have a job at General Motors." If this woman was the least bit scared, she'd come down and cry on her husband's shoulder. He'd more than likely get a little disturbed, get a hold of his strike captain. . . . Maybe we'd send a couple of women out there. Sometimes you just had to let 'em go. Because if you kept them in there, they'd worry so damn much over it, that'd start ruinin' the morale of the rest of the guys.

Morale was very high at the time. It started out kinda ugly because the guys were afraid they put their foot in it and all they was gonna do is lose their jobs. But as time went on, they begin to realize they could win this darn thing, 'cause we had a lot of outside people comin' in showin' their sympathy.

Time after time, people would come driving by the plant slowly. They might pull up at the curb and roll down the window and say, "How you guys doin'?" Our guys would be lookin' out the windows, they'd be singin' songs and hollerin'. Just generally keeping themselves alive.

Sometimes a guy'd come up to you on the street and say, "How the guys doin'?" You say, "They're doin' all right." Then he'd give ya a song and dance: "I hear the boys at Chevrolet are gonna get run out tonight." * I'd say, "Hogwash." He'd end with sayin': "Well, I wish you guys the best of luck because, God damn, when I worked there it was a mess." The guy'd turn around and walk away.

Nationally known people contributed to our strike fund. Mrs. Roosevelt for one. We even had a member of Parliament come from England and address us.

Lotta things worked for the union we hadn't even anticipated. Company tried to shut off the heat. It was a bluff. Nobody moved for half an hour, so they turned it back on again. They didn't want the pipes to get cold. (Laughs.) If the heat was allowed to drop, then the pipes will separate—they were all jointed together—and then you got a problem.

Some of the time you were scared, because there was all kinds of rumors going around. We had a sheriff—he came in one night at Fisher One and read the boys the riot act. He told 'em they had to leave. He

* Several other General Motors plants in Flint were the scenes of similar sit-downs. "At Chevrolet Four, there was a knock-down and drag-out fight. That's where the Battle of Bull Run happened. The boys took it over, and the city police and the sheriff's men decided they were gonna throw 'em out. Between the tear gas the police used and the nuts and bolts the strikers used, there was hell to pay. We run 'em off. When the tear gas got in the plant, the women's brigade smashed every damn window they could find to let the air in. It was vicious. (Laughs.) Hans Larson, he was shot in the Battle of Bull Run."

stood there, looked at 'em a few minutes. A couple of guys began to curse 'im, and he turned around and left himself.

National Guard troops were there. Some from Pontiac, some from Detroit. I lived within a block where they camped. I would pass these young fellas every day. One boy, pretty young, he had a union button on. Was it his union button or was it his dad's? I walked up to him. "Your captain allow you to wear that button?" He says, "I don't know, but I'm gonna find out." (Laughs.) They were twenty-year-olds. Well-behaved boys. No rough stuff, nothing untoward happened.

The men sat in there for forty-four days. Governor Murphy—I get emotional over him (laughs)—was trying to get both sides to meet on some common ground. I think he lost many a good night's sleep. We wouldn't use force. Mr. Knudsen was head of General Motors and, of course, there was John L. Lewis. They'd reach a temporary agreement and invariably the Flint Alliance or GM headquarters in Detroit would throw a monkey wrench in it. So every morning, Murphy got up with an unsolved problem.

John L. was as close to a Shakespearean actor as any I've ever listened to. He could get up there and damn all the adversaries—he had more command of language. He made a speech that if they shoot the boys out at the plant, they'd have to shoot him first.*

There were a half a dozen false starts at settlement. Finally, we got the word: THE THING IS SETTLED. My God, you had to send about three people, one right after the other, down to some of those plants because the guys didn't believe it. Finally, when they did get it, they marched out of the plants with the flag flyin' and all that stuff.

You'd see some guys comin' out of there with whiskers as long as Santa Claus. They made a rule they wasn't gonna shave until the strike was over. Oh, it was just like—you've gone through the Armistice delirium, haven't you? Everybody was runnin' around shaking everybody by the hand, sayin', "Jesus, you look strange, you got a beard on you now." (Laughs.) Women kissin' their husbands. There was a lotta drunks on the streets that night.

When Mr. Knudsen put his name to a piece of paper and says that General Motors recognizes the UAW-CIO—until that moment, we were non-people, we didn't even exist. (Laughs.) That was the big one. (His eyes are moist.)

* When Governor Murphy was being urged to use the National Guard to oust the sit-downers, Lewis orated: "I shall personally enter General Motors' Chevrolet Plant Number Four. I shall order the men to disregard your order, to stand fast. I shall then walk up to the largest window in the plant, open it, divest myself of my outer raiment, remove my shirt and bare my bosom. Then, when you order your troops to fire, mine will be the first breast that those bullets will strike. And, as my body falls from the window to the ground, you will listen to the voice of your grandfather as he whispers in your ear, 'Frank, are you sure you are doing the right thing?'"