

MADISON LABOR RADIO

READERS Frank and Dolores Emspak

Sit Down Strike

LEDE: On this date in 1937 sit down strikes of workers at General Motors Flint MI was in its third week. But not all of GM was shut down. The union had to expand the strike to win and they did so. The victory launched the United Automobile Workers. Frank Emspak has the story.

SCRIPT

READER ONE: Sean Fain, President of the UAW called the UAW's successful autumn strikes the stand-up strikes. He compared them to the sit down strikes of 1937 and said that our generation will be measured against that 1937 standard of fortitude and determination.

The sit-down strikes and their targets were not happenstance but the result of planning and analysis of GM, and their supply chain.

Robert Travis was the chief strategist and organizer of the strikes. In this interview from 1973 he describes what he did starting with the Fisher one plant. Frank Emspak reads Travis' remarks.

READER TWO (TRAVIS) "I decided we would concentrate on Fisher 1 because it made bodies for Buick- and if they could stop the bodies from being made they could stop Buick.....wherever we had people in Fisher one... we would set up a stewards system."

READER ONE: There were several thousand workers in 3 shifts in that plant. In November of 1936 three workers were fired. Travis reacted by calling a meeting of the twenty five or thirty union stewards.

READER TWO (Travis") " This is a thing we have got to support. Go back in and shut your department down... shut them down"

READER ONE: And they did and won the jobs back. According to Travis after the Fisher experience people began to have faith in the union but the union still had not

reached the take off point. After Fisher the union used its newspaper to headline every attack on workers by the GM security force.

READER TWO: (Travis) : “So we would play up every incidence of security and generally to develop confidence that we knew what the hell we were doing. Result is that the greater number of things we exposed, the more confidence developed among the rank and file in our ability to do things”

READER ONE: By late January the union believed it had enough strength to take over Chevy Plant number four- from the inside- the largest plant in the Flint GM complex. Fisher was already on strike.

READER TWO: TRAVIS “We had to do something. So we stopped Buick, so we had to stop Chevrolet. My strategy was that was going to strike plant 9- because it made the bearings for Chevrolet”

READER ONE: But while Travis publically talked about Plant Nine Travis had something else in mind.

READER TWO (TRAVIS) “My real strategy was to make sure that all the stool pigeons knew we were going to take plant nine. It worked”

READER ONE: At the change of shift some of the pro union workers began to strike at Plant nine provoking the GM police and drawing them to that location. The goal was to keep the GM police tied up for twenty minutes or so. Earlier in Fisher strike the union had organized women supporters to be ready to defend their husbands, friends and relatives. In a car caravan of hundreds they went to Plant Nine in support of the strikers.

Meanwhile Travis had arranged for other union supporters to go to the Chevy Four plant and take control of it. Travis described the scene.

READER TWO: TRAVIS “Stooges all went up to the mezzanine...so I sent word up to them... you’ve got 10 minutes to make up your mind. You gonna stay with us and strike this goddam place and bring Chevrolet to her knees so that we have decent conditions or you have a chance to get out...in 10 minutes-- a helluva bunch of then went out... as soon as they went out we welded the doors shut... we had plant 4. Plant four was the motor plant for every motor for Chevrolet in this

country"...there was 4,000 workers in plant 4. So it was a big plant. We had- we stopped it and that was the beginning.

READER ONE: Travis was right. It took until February 11th 1937 but GM signed a contract with the UAW. The successful occupation of plant 4 launched the UAW and gave a huge shot in the arm to all the unions organizing in the steel and electrical industry.

Now eighty six years later, we are seeing a rebirth of the UAW using a strategy dependent on the organization and will of the union members to fight. Only time will tell if the workers succeed.

READER TWO: The quotes from Bob Travis are from the original recording made in 1973 and available at this station. Thanks to Dolores Emspak for her narration. I am Frank Emspak for Madison Labor radio.

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