

Where
the past
is present

DETROIT HISTORICAL SOCIETY

TEACHER RESOURCE LESSON PLAN

LABOR ORGANIZATION AND DETROIT'S SIT-DOWN STRIKES, 1937



Battle of the Overpass at Ford's River Rouge Plant on May 26, 1937

Courtesy of the Walter P. Reuther Library, Wayne State University

INTRODUCTION

This lesson was originally published in *Telling Detroit's Story: Historic Past, Proud People, Shining Future* curriculum unit developed by the Detroit 300 Commission in 2001.

The right to organize had been granted by the National Labor relations Act of 1935. The right to organize was won by workers in a series of confrontations known as sit-down strikes. Through this lesson, students in grades nine through twelve will gain a better understanding of this process.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

Students will:

- Understand the significance of the sit-down strikes in the ultimate success of the labor movement.
- Critically analyze primary source material.

- Recognize different points of view in historical events.
- Develop reasoned arguments on a public policy issue.
- Demonstrate the ability to summarize ideas into a brief statement.

MATERIALS USED

- Reading: "Sit-Down Strikes and Labor's Right to Organize Detroit, 1937"
- Document: "National Labor Relations Act"
- Letter: "Chrysler Workers Letter"
- Letter "K.T. Keller's Letter"
- Poster: "March 23rd Rally at Cadillac Square"
- Telegram: "Detroit Chamber of Commerce"
- Worksheet: "The Detroit Sit-Down Strikes"

LESSON SEQUENCE

Opening the Activity:

1. Divide the class into groups with 3-4 students.
2. Distribute and read "Sit-Down Strikes and Labor's Right to Organize Detroit, 1937."

Developing the Activity

1. Distribute one document set to each group and a worksheet to each student.
2. Tell students that these documents relate to a critical series of labor activities centered in Detroit in 1937.
3. As a group they are to review each document and complete the worksheet provided. While each student should complete their own worksheet, they should be encouraged to work together. *Note: the primary purpose of this part of the exercise is for the students to familiarize themselves with the documents.*

LESSON PLAN: LABOR ORG. AND DETROIT'S SIT-DOWN STRIKES

Concluding the Activity

1. Review the worksheet. The primary purpose of question 1 is to ensure a basic understand of the documents.
2. Discuss the responses to question 2. The purpose of this question is to help students critically analyze information. Except the excerpt from the NLRA, each of these documents is written from a very definite point of view and is intended to persuade. Students should be particularly careful of the writer's motives in reading this type of materials.
3. Discussion questions:
 - Discuss the tactic of the sit-down strike. What advantages did it have over traditional strikes?
 - The primary objective of the sit-downs was to win union recognition and compel companies to accept collective bargaining. Describe collective bargaining.
 - Why did workers feel this was so important?
 - Keller points out that workers would be forced to join the union (a closed shop). What are your feelings about closed shops?

- Communists were a part of union organizing efforts. Does this change your view of unionization?
- Some companies were in collaboration with Fascist-type organizations to help break up unions. They also developed an elaborate security system to spy on workers as a way to break up union organization. Does this change your attitude towards unionization efforts?

EXTENSION ACTIVITIES

- Assign students to review Detroit newspapers from March through June of 1937 to understand the extent of the sit-down strikes.
- For homework, ask the students to write a 100-word commentary on any of the documents that would appear as a news report on the radio in 1937.

ASSESSING THE LEARNING

- Class participation
- Completed worksheet from each student



Wives of Employees Parading During the UAW's Campaign to Organize Workers at Ford, 1941

Courtesy of the Walter P. Reuther Library, Wayne State University

READING: SIT-DOWN STRIKES AND LABOR'S RIGHT TO ORGANIZE DETROIT, 1937.

The success of the modern labor movement in the United States can be traced to the 1937 sit-down strikes. The right to organize had been granted by the National Labor Relations Act of 1935. It had to be won, however, by workers in a series of confrontations with corporations who were strongly opposed to labor unions. The primary tactic employed by workers was the sit-down strike.

The sit-down strike was a relatively new form of labor action. In a more traditional strike, workers walked off the job and usually picketed outside of the company. Often the goal of picketing was to prevent strikebreakers from entering the shop. In a sit-down strike, workers seized control of the facility. They evicted supervisory personnel and refused entry to outsiders.

The Flint sit-down strike against General Motors early in 1937 encouraged other workers to adopt the same tactic. Sit-down strikes spread throughout the country. Detroit, however, was the center of labor activity.

In the winter and spring of 1937, Detroit became a hotbed of labor unrest. Workers in more than 100 Detroit companies "sat down" in order to secure the right to organize unions. There were many more all across the country.

The unprecedented labor action terrified many Americans. Today, it is easy to minimize their concerns. However, the world was a dangerous place in 1937. It was the era of Mussolini, Hitler, and Stalin. Threats from the Communist left and Fascist right were very real. It appeared to a large number of citizens that the sit-down strikes were the beginning of a revolution aimed at destroying the American system.



National Guard Troops and UAW Picketers During the General Motors Sit-Down Strike, 1937

Courtesy of the Walter P. Reuther Library, Wayne State University



Battle of the Overpass at Ford's River Rouge Plant, May 26, 1937

Courtesy of the Walter P. Reuther Library, Wayne State University

Given the atmosphere, government authorities were in a very difficult position. Clearly, the sit-down strikes were an illegal seizure of private property. However, any attempt to evict strikers would lead to considerable violence. In addition, workers had legitimate complaints. To them, unions and collective bargaining seemed the only answer.

In Michigan, Governor Frank Murphy was at the center of the controversy. A strong supporter of labor, Murphy was nonetheless responsible for enforcing the laws. The sit-downs created difficult personal and political dilemmas for Governor Murphy.

DOCUMENT: NATIONAL LABOR RELATIONS ACT

The National Labor Relations Act July 5, 1935 (Wagner Act)

RIGHTS OF EMPLOYEES

Sec. 7. Employees shall have the right to self-organization, to form, join, or assist labor organizations, to bargain collectively through representatives of their own choosing, and to engage in other concerted activities for the purpose of collective bargaining or other mutual aid or protection, and shall also have the right to refrain from any or all of such activities except to the extent that such right may be affected by an agreement requiring membership in a labor organization as a condition of employment as authorized in section 8.

UNFAIR LABOR PRACTICES

Sec. 8. It shall be an unfair labor practice for an employer--

- (1) to interfere with, restrain, or coerce employees in the exercise of the rights guaranteed in section 7
- (2) to dominate or interfere with the formation or administration of any labor organization or contribute financial or other support to it.
- (3) by discrimination in regard to hire or tenure of employment or any term or condition of employment to encourage or discourage membership in any labor organization...
- (4) to discharge or otherwise discriminate against an employee because he has filed charges or given testimony under this Act
- (5) to refuse to bargain collectively with the representatives of his employees...

LETTER: CHRYSLER WORKERS LETTER

March 20, 1937

The following letter signed by the chairman of each strike committee has been sent to Gov. Murphy by sit-down strikers in Chrysler plants.

Hon. Frank Murphy
Governor of Michigan

We sit-down strikers in the Chrysler plants want to state our case directly to you. We want to state it as strongly and as vigorously as possible. And we want you to know that what we have to say is supported by more than 50,000 other Chrysler workers, more than 100,000 automobile workers in Detroit, 200,000 in Michigan, and 300,000 in the United States.

First, governor, we stand foursquare behind our leaders who declined to attend your conference Wednesday. If they had any part in proposing the sort of boards your conference proposed, they would have betrayed us. We have had boards before. They don't work. And we automobile workers who work in the shops know better than anyone else that they don't work. We know the only thing that does work is collective bargaining. Our employers have refused to recognize the principles of collective bargaining, so we have resorted to the only weapon we have to make them abide by the law. . .

We have suffered for years in the shops of the Chrysler Corporation. We haven't been paid wages enough to support our families in decency and health.

We have seen each year an increase in the speed of the line. And still the foreman and gang leaders stand over us and demand more and more production.

Last summer hundreds of us fell like flies on the job because the heat and speed of work were more than we could stand. It wasn't until we threatened to strike that the management slowed down the line.

Last fall thousands of us were discharged in violation of our seniority standing. We had to threaten to strike to get re-hired.

While we were exercising our right to organize, we were opposed by one of the most vicious and unspeakable spy systems ever employed in the industry. Chrysler Corp. retained an agency that hired criminals and ex-convicts to do their filthy work. This is a matter of public record. We were subject to intimidation by foremen and petty bosses. Our members were fired for no other reason than that they had joined a union. These things that they did to us were lawless.

Then when we had built our union in spite of these obstacles, the Chrysler Corp. refused to recognize us. And this refusal, governor, was a lawless act. . .

We don't intend to leave these plants without a satisfactory settlement. You can do one of two things. You can use your influence to see that our grievances are adjusted. Or you can use the state's troops to try to force us out. The first way will lead to industrial peace and the elimination of the causes for strikes. The second way will lead to bloodshed and violence and more strikes. We're resolved to protect our rights to our jobs with our lives. The choice is flatly up to you.

Respectfully,

Sit down strikers in the Chrysler plants

LETTER K.T. KELLER'S LETTER

This appeared as a full-page advertisement in the Detroit News, March 13, 1937

TO THE DISTRIBUTORS AND DEALERS OF THE CHRYSLER CORPORATION:

During the afternoon of Monday, March 8, the C.I.O. Union, directed by persons who were not in our employ, with employees belonging to the Union, seized eight of this Corporation's principal plants in the Detroit area, including its general office, and are still holding them. Our executives, plant managers and their staffs are being kept out by force.

The agents of the Union took over the plant gates and barricaded them.

They refused to let either the factory employees or office employees leave or enter the plant without their permission. In many cases, they took the company badges of the employees away from them. They did not permit employees to leave the plant unless they signed Union cards.

A military organization manned by this Union's agents was set up in the plants, and the company's plant protection men were ordered out of some buildings, leaving the Corporation's property wholly in possession of these Union agents.

Our mail trucks, carrying company mail from the post office to its offices, were stopped by Unions' agents and delivery of mail obstructed.

The company consequently has been unable to carry on its business in its own offices. The company has set up offices elsewhere in Detroit. Its files and office records in the plants are in possession of this Union.

As it is well known, there was no dispute over wages and working conditions of over 60,000 employees. Our rates of wages are substantially in excess of 90 cents an hour, and the weekly, monthly and annual earnings of our employees have been not only the highest in the history of the company but among the highest of all American industry.

This company has conducted its industrial relations by and in accordance with general acknowledged standards of fairness and equity, with the purpose of giving our employees the highest possible earnings and the best working conditions the prosperity of the business can afford. We've constantly negotiated with these people over a period of more than three years and at their request entered into further negotiations with them on Wednesday, March 3. While these negotiations were going on, the agents of this Union seized the plants.

This Union is demanding a closed shop. They have stated that their demands mean one of three things: either an employee signs up with the Union; or you will be ostracized and subjected to intolerable intimidation and coercion both in the shop and at home; or Union men will refuse to work with him. Under these conditions, however designated, it is impossible for us to make products of Chrysler quality and Chrysler price.

As citizens of your communities, as well as representatives of the Chrysler Corporation, it is important that you understand these plain facts. In our close relations with you, we believe that we should tell you frankly what our situation is, and we ask you for your understanding and cooperation. We are advising you of it so you may conduct your affairs accordingly. We ask you to be patient with us in our attempt to do our office work in temporary offices without the records and files necessary for carrying on business in the normal way.

You recognize that the capture of our plants in time of peace and what is going on in the plants today is a form of revolution which concerns not only Chrysler Corporation but concerns you and everybody.

March 12, 1937

K.T. KELLER

President, Chrysler Corporation

POSTER: MARCH 23RD RALLY AT CADILLAC SQUARE

STOP POLICE STRIKEBREAKING BRUTALITY!

Commissioner Pickert and Mayor Couzens are going to have to learn that the legitimate labor movement of the city is a force with rights they cannot violate.

Automobile Workers are determined that strikers in small plants shall not be the victims of police brutality.

Detroit workers are not going to be slugged and black-jacked out of their civil rights.

Protect the Right to Strike!

Cadillac Square

5 O'clock

TUESDAY

March 23rd

All Out, Show Labor's Strength

*Int. Union United Automobile Workers of America,
Conference for the Protection of Civil Rights*



TELEGRAM: DETROIT CHAMBER OF COMMERCE

THE COMPANY WILL APPRECIATE SUGGESTIONS FROM ITS PATRONS CONCERNING ITS SERVICE 1241-S 22

CLASS OF SERVICE This is a full-rate Telegram or Cablegram unless its deferred character is indicated by a suitable symbol above or preceding the address.	WESTERN UNION (55) R. B. WHITE PRESIDENT HEWCOJIB CARLTON CHAIRMAN OF THE BOARD J. C. WILLEVER FIRST VICE-PRESIDENT	SYMBOLS DL = Day Letter NM = Night Message NL = Night Letter LC = Deferred Cable NLT = Cable Night Letter Ship Radiogram
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ZA170 64 3 EXTRA=DETROIT MICH 12 1145A
HONORABLE FRANK MURPHY, EXECUTIVE OFFICE=
STATE CAPITOL BLDG LANSING MICH=

WE RESPECTFULLY URGE THAT YOU IMMEDIATELY CALL CONFERENCE
IN DETROIT OF ALL PERSONS RESPONSIBLE FOR LAW ENFORCEMENT
LOCALLY AND IN AFFECTED NEIGHBORING COMMUNITIES STOP SUGGEST
MILITANT PROGRAM BASED UPON COORDINATED RESOURCES AND
INDIVIDUALS COOPERATING UNDER EXISTING ADEQUATE LAWS STOP
PRESENT INTOLERABLE SITUATION NOT ONLY DEPLORABLE FOR
INDIVIDUALS AFFECTED BY STRIKES BUT FOR GENERAL PUBLIC STOP
DETROITS INTERNATIONAL CIVIC REPUTATION IS ENDANGERED=
DETROIT BOARD OF COMMERCE HARVEY CAMPBELL VICE
PRESIDENT SECRETARY • OF THE PLACES HAVING TELEGRAPH OFFICES

WORKSHEET: THE DETROIT SIT-DOWN STRIKES

Name _____

1. Assume you are writing a chapter in a high school history book on the labor movement in the United States. The data elements you have been given are to be included as documents in that chapter. Write a title and brief introduction or caption for each data element.

• Title: _____

• Caption: _____

2. Except for the NLRA excerpt, these documents were written by people with a specific political objective. They were not neutral. They either strongly supported or strongly opposed the labor movement. It is, therefore, particularly important to critically review what was written. With this in mind, identify three phrases from the documents that may be an exaggeration, prejudicial or otherwise misleading.

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

WORKSHEET: THE DETROIT SIT-DOWN STRIKES

Name: _____

As Governor of Michigan, Frank Murphy was faced with the challenge of how to deal with the sit-down strikes. The two basic choices were:

- Use force to evict the workers
- Allow the workers to occupy the facilities and encourage workers and management to resolve their differences through negotiation

Using the data elements provided and your own ideas, prepare a list of reasons supporting each of these options.

Evict workers: _____

Allow workers to occupy facilities: _____
