

# THE TIDE TURNS



**T**he prospects of a union breakthrough against Detroit's Open Shop seemed impossibly remote the morning of November 25, 1935.

Several thousand workers had gone on strike ten days earlier at the Motor Products Corporation, a manufacturer of automobile frames and body parts on the city's East Side (site 28). Demanding higher wages and removal of company-paid detectives from the plant, the strikers had initially won the backing of all the unions competing for members at Motor Products—MESA, AIWA, and the AFL's federal local.

But AFL support was grudging. Both AIWA and MESA were winning new members in the plant at the federal local's expense, and AFL leaders called

the AIWA-led strike "irresponsible" from the outset. It only took a company promise (never kept) of future union-representation elections to persuade AFL leaders to break ranks and lead their members back to work.

On November 25, the police escorted hundreds of AFL members and leaders past jeering picket lines on Mack Avenue. AIWA and MESA leaders called the AFL capitulation "the most disgraceful scene ever enacted in Detroit." The company called it the beginning of the end for the remaining strikers. They were right.

**D**etroit's union movement seemed as fragmented and weak as ever. But even as the AFL's strikebreakers crossed

MESA and AIWA picket lines that November morning, the elements of a unified and broad-based union movement were beginning to fall in place. That very month, the AFL's national leadership had split into two openly warring camps—a majority still committed to the Federation's traditional craft unionism, but a growing minority now committed to new forms of industry-wide organization.

The tremors that opened this rift in the AFL's leadership began shaking the organization in 1934. Strikes by dockworkers on the West Coast, truck drivers in Minneapolis, autoworkers in Toledo, and textile workers in New England and the South grew into passionate crusades after police gunfire killed 21 strikers in these four conflicts.

Rather than surrender to the fatal violence, tens of thousands of workers joined mass picket lines and general strikes, shutting down San Francisco, Minneapolis, and Toledo. Such tactics won at least partial victories in all but the textile strike.

This groundswell of militancy led to the final breach between craft-union leaders who repudiated the strikers, and industrial unionists who saw them as the wave of the future. In November, 1935, a half-dozen of these rebellious leaders formed the Committee For Industrial Organization (CIO) within the AFL. Their chief spokesman was John L. Lewis, President of the United Mine Workers.

Industrial unionism had finally found its voice. "Let him who will, be he economic tyrant or sordid mercenary," Lewis declared over NBC Radio in 1936, "pit his strength against this mighty upsurge of human sentiment now being crystallized in the hearts of 30 million workers. . . . He is a madman or a fool who believes that this river of human sentiment can be damned by the erection of arbitrary barriers of restraint." Lewis, in fact, knew better than most that anti-union employers would not surrender to mere "human sentiment." The CIO needed organizers: hundreds of organizers prepared to take on the biggest corporations in the world in a no-holds-barred campaign. To secure these leaders, Lewis turned to the militants he had expelled from his own union in the 1920s—John Brophy, Adolf Germer, Powers Hapgood—and veteran organizers like Rose Pesotta from the Ladies Garment Workers Union and Leo Krzycki from the Amalgamated Clothing Workers. Brookwood Labor College, founded in New York in the 1920s by A.J. Muste, also provided CIO unions with organizers, including Roy Reuther, Sophia Goodlavich, Merlin Bishop, and Frank Winn.

These men and women were Socialists, a fact the politically conservative Lewis (he'd endorsed Coolidge and Hoover in the 1920s) certainly was aware of. But he needed industrial organizers of proven ability, and, despite the fact that he barred Communists from his own union, he was also willing to work with radicals like Wyndham Mortimer, Bill McKie, and "Big" John Anderson to build the CIO. "In a battle, I make arrows from any wood," Lewis responded when asked about his collaboration with Communists. "Who gets the bird?" he later added, "the hunter or the dog?" There was little doubt which role Lewis saw himself in.

The Communists, for their part, had stopped attacking their Socialist and liberal rivals as "Social Fascists." Such carping had isolated Party members from the labor movement at precisely the point when many workers were joining unions and fighting for recognition. To participate in this upsurge, the Party dissolved the Auto Workers Union late in December, 1934, and proposed a Popular Front with moderates and liberals. Individual Communists thereafter muted their radical politics and harnessed their considerable organizing skills to the CIO bandwagon.

The AFL's top leaders also compromised their views in an effort to salvage some control over events. Local leaders and members of the Federation's federal autoworker unions had long demanded their own national organization—coordinating the unionization of a large corporation's scattered operations was otherwise impossible. In August, 1935, the AFL grudgingly responded to this pressure by chartering the United Automobile Workers (UAW) as an international union within the AFL. But

the Federation's cautious leaders initially muzzled the new organization by postponing elections and appointing conservative officers.

When delegates to the UAW's next convention, in April, 1936, finally won the right to elect their leaders, they settled on Homer Martin, a former Baptist minister and one-time autoworker from Kansas. The fledgling organization immediately allied itself with Lewis's Committee For Industrial Organization and invited the independent unions in the industry to join its ranks. MESA's two Detroit locals, led by fellow Scotsmen Bill Stevenson and "Big" John Anderson, split off from their parent organization and merged with the UAW in July. The AIWA and a third independent union, the Associated Automobile Workers of America, joined that same month.

The emergence of the UAW as a unified and democratic union gave a tremendous boost to organizing efforts in Detroit's auto industry. There were signs of new life in other sectors of Detroit's labor movement as well.

*Below: During 1935 and 1936, production on this Hudson Motors assembly line climbed dramatically. Industry-wide output in each of these two years was higher than the annual production averages of the 1920s, though still only 80 percent of 1929's record-setting peak.*

*Opposite page: Cigar workers demonstrating in Detroit's Poletown.*



# Spies In Factories Is Common Practice Fruehauf Tells NLRB

Vosler, Trailer Company Vice-President,  
Admits He Hired Pinkerton Agency  
To Stool On His Employees.

COMPANY TRIED TO BREAK UNION

*Left: A Black Legion member in full dress.*

*Inset: Government investigators exposed and partially neutralized the employers' illegal spy networks.*

The climate of fear among union supporters lifted in 1936, aided, in part, by public investigations into right-wing activity. The most spectacular of these began in May, 1936, with the arrest of 16 members of the "Black Legion" for murdering a young government worker. Subsequent arrests and trials uncovered 57 murders and attempted murders attributable to the vigilante group, formed in 1933 by "Male, White, Protestants." According to their oath, Legionnaires pledged themselves to "exterminate Anarchists, Communists, and the Roman [Catholic] hierarchy."

Most of the victims were trade unionists, radicals, and blacks. Many of the killers, on the other hand, were factory foremen and off-duty policemen—one prominent Legionnaire testified that at least 100 Detroit patrolmen were Black Legion members. With the highly publicized trials and convictions during 1936 and 1937, the black robed "death squad" collapsed.

Rebellious truck drivers in the AFL's Teamster Local 299, a small union of general freight drivers, ousted the local's corrupt leaders and began a recruiting drive with three new organizers—one of them Jimmy Hoffa, former Kroger warehouseman. Waiters and Waitresses Local 705 of the AFL's Hotel and Restaurant Workers also expanded its staff and began an organizing drive in the opening months of 1936.

While many workers opposed joining these unions, or, fearful of losing their jobs, chose to remain neutral, a growing

number, particularly among the young, were eager to risk joining a militant movement for change. Their confidence was buoyed by a growing sense of common interests bonding workers together. That emerging "solidarity" had many long- and short-term causes. Americanization campaigns and steep declines in immigration after the 1921 Immigration Act had diluted the "alien" stigma that isolated many unskilled workers from the rest of the population. The city's workforce had also been sifted through a prolonged process of deskilling and

mechanization that blurred the old hierarchy of industrial trades. Craft distinctions certainly had not disappeared, but they had become more fluid and unstable. The Depression narrowed the gap between skilled and unskilled still further, for floundering companies usually found more to cut from the above-average wage of their skilled craftsmen.

Indeed, the Depression had been a relentless leveler. Workers who had defined themselves in terms of their trade, their race, their nationality group,

or their ambitions, had been merged, at least temporarily, into a single group: the unemployed. Racial and ethnic conflict might flare up as workers competed for jobs, but the very severity of the Great Depression indelibly stamped all its victims with a shared belief in the need for organization.

Unemployment had also partially merged the working worlds of men and women. The steep layoffs in Detroit's heavy industries idled many men whose wives and daughters still worked in service or retail trades. Unemployment among Michigan's wage-earning women was 30 percent lower in 1935 than among men, and in Detroit, the number of working women actually rose by 10,000 during the 1930s—even as the number of employed men fell 74,000. Since fewer couples could afford to get married, single women were also holding onto jobs longer. Three out of four wage earners were still men, but women's wages, before and after marriage, had taken on an added importance within blue-collar households.

By 1936, these Depression experiences had transformed peoples' sense of the future. Story-book tales of upward mobility seemed a little ludicrous in the midst of widespread unemployment and poverty. In contrast to the wide-eyed individualism propagated in the 1920s, a shared sense of crisis and common misery gave many a feeling that their future depended on the fate of their whole plant, their neighborhood, their "fellow worker." Significantly, this collective future seemed to brighten during the year. For the first time since 1929, business seemed to be in a sustained recovery, with production of automobiles topping 3½ million—still well below the 1929 record of 4½ million, but a considerable improvement over the paltry 1 million cars produced in 1932.

Some may have welcomed this as a return to the "good old days," but more than a few now recalled that even in the best of times, they had always been treated like mere replacement parts for the machinery they tended. Workers expected a change for the better, and as the new production season began in the closing months of 1936, many grew confident they could win those changes sooner rather than later.

Their confidence was confirmed in the labor movement's unprecedented political gains. When the Supreme Court overturned the National Industrial Recovery Act in 1935, Congress quickly salvaged the worker rights guaranteed under Section 7a by enacting Senator Robert Wagner's "National Labor Rela-

## Solidarnosc Detroit

*The reason they responded to our education was their experience during the period of unemployment. That was a kind of school that they went through, that the only thing we had to do was to remind them of that experience. . . . how helpless they were because they had no organization.*

**Stanley Nowak**  
early UAW organizer

In the first months of organizing, the UAW found its most enthusiastic supporters among foreign-born workers and their American-born sons and daughters. Organizers who could not secure commercial meeting space always counted on the Slovak Hall, the Dom Polski, or the International Workers Order to open their doors.

The UAW focused on Detroit's Polish workers. "I spoke twice a week on a Polish radio program in Polish," Stanley Nowak later recalled. "I wrote leaflets that were distributed on Sunday mornings in front of the Polish churches; I organized meetings in the Polish halls, and even some open-air

meetings in parks and playgrounds." The weekly Polish-language newspaper *Glos Ludowy* (The Peoples' Voice) expanded its press run to 10,000 copies and devoted the bulk of its coverage to the CIO and UAW organizing drives.

Ethnic pride and class consciousness merged in organizations like "Polish Workers Local 187," one of the first UAW bodies formed in Hamtramck. Politics in this overwhelmingly Polish city were still dominated by the graft and corruption associated with its numerous saloons (three of Hamtramck's four mayors had been indicted while in office and two imprisoned). But in 1936, political debate shifted dramatically to the left with the appearance of the Peoples' League. In the April elections, League candidates ran on a platform favoring the CIO and opposing police interference in strikes.

Mary Zuk, League candidate and leader of the Housewives Committee Against the High Cost of Living, handily won election to the Hamtramck city council. When upwards of 10,000 workers sat down in the Dodge Hamtramck plant in the spring of 1937, it was Zuk who introduced the resolution that put Hamtramck officially on the side of the strikers.





**Above:** Passing food to the Midland Steel sitdowners.

**Inset:** John L. Lewis, founding President of the CIO.



tions Act.” In November, 1936, politicians pledging to uphold this “Wagner Act” won sweeping victories over conservative and right-wing candidates, paced by President Roosevelt’s landslide re-election. “If I worked for a wage,” announced Frank Murphy, the former Mayor of Detroit who became, that November, the Governor-elect of Michigan, “I’d join my union.”

**O**n November 27, 1936—one year after the fiasco at Motor Products and just three weeks after Murphy’s election—the first wave of a flood tide of worker unrest washed over Detroit’s Open Shop. At 11:30 a.m., 1200 workers at Detroit’s Midland Steel plant sat down and occupied their workplace (site 37). Following the example of Ohio’s rubber workers, who had recently occupied the tire plants of Akron, the Midland strikers refused to budge until management met their key demands: recognition of the UAW as their sole

bargaining agent, and a 10¢-an-hour wage increase for all departments.

Their “sitdown strike” foreshadowed a dramatic shift in the balance of power between Detroit’s employers and workers. In the past, management had always relied on the police to forcibly break through union picket lines and convoy strikebreakers into the plant; once inside, the strikebreakers could then be housed in makeshift dormitories and put to work on the machines left idle by strikers. But Midland’s sitdowners had decisively turned the tables. Now they were on the inside, protecting their jobs and machines, while bewildered policemen trudged outside the plant in the snow and rain. When the Ford Motor Company sent Service Depart-

ment men to pick up the body frames Midland normally supplied, they were greeted by sitdowners who had barricaded the plant gates in anticipation of such a visit.

Equally important, morale among the sitdowners remained unusually high throughout the eight-day occupation. Instead of only periodic and often lonely picket duty, the sitdowners now lived together in a tightly knit, 24-hour strike community. The once alien and dingy plant became the scene of a continuous round of pinochle and poker, calisthenics, and even football, played in the plant yard. By the time the occupation ended, most of the sitdowners had also memorized the first verse and chorus of *Solidarity Forever*:

*When the Union's inspiration through  
the workers' blood shall run,  
There can be no power greater any-  
where beneath the sun.  
Yet what force on earth is weaker  
than the feeble strength of one?  
But the Union makes us strong.  
Solidarity forever!  
Solidarity forever!  
Solidarity forever!  
For the union makes us strong.*

The words were not mere rhetoric. In a city with a long and dismal record of racial conflict, the Midland sitdown stood out as an unprecedented example of racial unity. Scores of black and white workers participated jointly in the occupation, and Oscar Oden, a black assembler, was elected to the strike committee. Unity also prevailed between the Detroit AFL and the UAW-CIO, despite the fact that CIO unions had been expelled from the national AFL that same month. Frank Martel, the Detroit AFL’s long-time President, endorsed the strike and exhorted the sitdowners to “Hold Fast To Your Guns.” (Martel’s figure of speech was potentially misleading, for the sitdowners had no firearms inside the plant.)

The 200 women workers who joined the sitdown on its first day were not, however, asked to “Hold Fast.” Fearing a scandal if the women stayed overnight in the factory with the men, the UAW asked them to evacuate the plant—but the women did not return to their homes. Under the direction of Dorothy Kraus, they established a strike kitchen in the nearby Slovak Hall on Strong Avenue (site 38) and organized committees to visit and reassure the wives of men still occupying the plant.

When a shortage of body frames forced Chrysler and Ford to lay off 100,000 workers in early December, the

pressure on Midland to settle finally grew irresistible. On December 4, the UAW's chief negotiators, Wyndham Mortimer and Richard Frankenstein, announced the terms of a tentative agreement: abolition of piecework wages as soon as possible; a 10¢-per-hour pay raise for all but the higher classifications; and recognition for the UAW's elected grievance committee.

For the first time in the city's history, a major auto company had been forced to come to terms with a union representing all its workers. The example was not lost on UAW organizers centered in Flint and Detroit's West Side.

**F**lint, less than 60 miles north of Detroit, was the homebase of General Motors, the auto industry's undisputed leader. If the UAW was to organize the industry, it would eventually have to win the allegiance of that city's 50,000 GM workers, concentrated in more than a dozen major engine, body, and assembly plants. Detroit's

West Side was equally crucial. GM had three major factories on the West Side (sites 21, 34, and 35), and dozens of independent parts suppliers also produced everything from brakes to body trim for Ford's huge River Rouge plant in neighboring Dearborn.

Ranged against these corporate giants was the UAW's West Side Local 174. By all appearances, the companies had little to fear: when the local formed in September, 1936, it had only 78 members, a handful of organizers, and a treasury that frequently dipped below \$10. With these meager resources, Local 174's President, a 29-year-old toolmaker named Walter Reuther, set out to organize the more than 150,000 auto-

workers in West Detroit and Dearborn.

The first target was the Kelsey-Hayes Wheel Company, a West-Side employer of 5,000 that made brakes for Ford. After UAW organizers Victor Reuther (Walter's brother), George Edwards, and Merlin Bishop hired on at the firm's McGraw Avenue plant (site 39), the UAW asked the company for a bargaining conference and began building its membership. The chief tactic was to call "quickie" strikes in one department after another. These brief sitdowns gave the union visibility, attracted new members, and put the company on notice that it could not fulfill its supply contract with Ford unless it improved working conditions and bargained with

*Below: a sitdown ho-down inside the Kelsey-Hayes factory compound, December, 1936.*

*Unlike the Midland strikers, Local 174 did not evacuate the 80 women who joined the sitdown. The company immediately seized on their presence by circulating rumors of women held against their will and engaging in "immoral behavior." The UAW responded by inviting the police to interview the women and verify their voluntary participation. All 80 remained for the duration of the occupation—"with matrons provided to insure propriety," according to the *Detroit Labor News*, "and stop any malicious gossip."*





Nest 79, Polish Falcons.

## Two Halls, One Union

During the sitdown, Local 174 established its headquarters and strike kitchen in the nearby Polish Falcons hall on Junction Avenue (site 40). It was here the UAW also held its first mass meeting of Kelsey-Hayes workers the day before the sitdown.

Management had already sent out telegrams inviting workers to a meeting of its Kelsey-Hayes Employee Association, the company-sponsored union they tried to revive as a counter to the UAW. Coincidentally, the company meeting was to be

held at the Dom Polski Hall (site 4), just a few blocks down the street from the Falcons.

At 10 a.m. that morning, Local 174 held its own rally at the Falcons Hall. Afterwards, a crowd of several thousand UAW members marched to the Dom Polski Hall with their telegrams, took over the smaller meeting, and passed two resolutions: to abolish the Kelsey-Hayes Employee Association, and to support the UAW.

the union.

On December 10, 1936, Victor Reuther called one such strike in Department 49, where foremen were "riding herd" on the men and women in the hub and brake-drum section. "Twenty minutes before the shift was to end, I ran and pulled the main switch and shouted 'Strike! We've had enough of this speed-up!' The call for strike action spread through our whole department . . . and we soon had an enormous gathering crowded around us." When Reuther explained to the company's personnel director that only his brother

could get the workers to return to their jobs, the production-conscious manager agreed to allow Walter inside the plant.

What happened next typified the brashness that became the UAW's trademark. Victor, speaking from atop a large crate, continued to "talk union" to a crowd of 500 workers until company officials returned with his brother. "I stepped off the box," Victor remembered, "and Walter stepped on and continued with the same speech. Danzig [the manager] grabbed his trouser leg: 'What the hell is this? You're supposed to tell them to go back

to work.'

'I can't tell them to do anything,' Walter replied, 'until I first get them organized.' "

**T**he company, eager to meet its supply contract with Ford, feared that retaliating against the organizers would only provoke a more disruptive confrontation with the union. But the company also did not want to negotiate the issues of production speed and overtime pay that won the union such support. After several more quickie strikes brought these issues to the fore, company managers finally retaliated, barring the UAW negotiating committee from the plant and threatening to fire anyone who stayed on company premises after quitting time. Some 300 union supporters defied the company's ultimatum and, following the example of Midland Steel, barricaded themselves inside the plant.

Removing them proved to be more difficult than the company anticipated. In these opening episodes of Detroit's sitdown wave, no one had yet determined the legality of the sitdown tactic. The company claimed the occupiers were guilty of criminal trespass, but city and county officials refused to evict the peaceful protesters, particularly since the strikers had originally been invited onto company property as Kelsey-Hayes employees.

While public officials debated the point, the company tried to force the issue by infiltrating twelve professional strikebreakers into the McGraw Avenue complex. Entering on the fourth night of the occupation, their apparent goal was to provoke a violent incident as a pretext for calling in the police. But before the intruders could make their first move, UAW lookouts trapped the men in the plant's infirmary. "This was a Friday and there were a half-dozen union meetings in town," Sophia Goodlavich Reuther, Local 174's secretary, later wrote. "We called all the unions and asked them to come in a body to enforce the picket line. When they did, there were a few thousand strong yelling, 'Throw the scabs out, throw the scabs out!'" After a brief standoff, the thoroughly rattled strikebreakers finally surrendered, leaving the plant under police escort.

Five days later, with Ford threatening to find another brake supplier, Kelsey-Hayes signed a truce agreement and the plants were evacuated. As the sit-downers marched out the night before Christmas eve, 2,000 supporters and a union band helped them celebrate the

new 75¢-an-hour minimum wage the company had agreed to for both men and women. In subsequent negotiations, Kelsey-Hayes also agreed to premium pay for overtime, seniority rules to protect job security, and a 20 percent reduction in the speed of the assembly line.

**H**ours after the strike's settlement, organizers Victor Reuther and Merlin Bishop left for Flint, where both played pivotal roles in the upcoming GM sitdown strike. That historic 44-day occupation, lasting from December 30, 1936 to February 11, 1937, riveted world attention on the UAW and elevated John L. Lewis to national prominence. When Governor Frank Murphy sent 3,000 National Guardsmen into Flint and deployed them between the sitdowners and the Flint police, GM abandoned all hope of forcibly evicting the strikers and eventually conceded victory to the UAW.

The world's largest corporation could be challenged and defeated by unarmed workers. The victory had an electrifying effect in Detroit. "Somebody would call

*Below: National Guard troops march through Detroit on their way to Flint, January, 1937.*

*Inset: The Flint sitdowners.*

the office," recalled Robert Kantor, an organizer for Local 174, "and say, 'Look, we are sitting down. Send us over some food.'" Local 174 grew at a rapid clip, with sitdowns at Cadillac and Fleetwood (sites 21 and 35) during the GM

strike, and with sitdowns in dozens of smaller plants afterwards. Within ten days of the victory at Kelsey-Hayes, Local 174's membership had jumped to 3,000; by the end of 1937, it reached 35,000.

