C. W. Editor Calls On G. M. Strikers In Plant at Flint

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Summary: Supports the sit-down strike as a nonviolent tactic in labor organizing. Describes in detail a visit to strikers against General Motors in Flint, Michigan. Notes Communists take advantage of strikes to promote their philosophy of life and calls for Catholics to become "apostles of labor" to reach the masses. (DDLW #317).

St. Antonino, Archbishop of Florence back in the fourteenth century, anticipated Marx when he said that all value depends upon labor, whether of hand or head. He was a man who was called upon to pass judgment on many of the vexed economic problems of his day.

I was thinking of St. Antonino and labor's place in the scheme of things as I came up from Cincinnati, where I had been invited to visit Archbishop McNicholas, and I was thinking that, now again, industrialists, bankers, merchants and labor leaders were looking to churchmen to make pronouncements on the moral aspects of our economic problems.

It was the moral aspect of the sit-down strike that was bothering the general public and since the general public gets only what the newspapers and radio present to them, and since neither churchmen nor the general public can climb in windows of barricaded, struck plants to talk to strikers and get a picture of the situation, it was up to us to try to get that picture.

At present writing there are 30 major strikes going on all over the country. Last month, the General Motors strike and the sit-down tactics used at Flint was headline news. A picture of one sit-down strike will be more or less representative.

Battle Front

Flint, Michigan, is a small town about an hour and a half north of Detroit by bus. The main streets are paved, but most of the side streets are dirt roads. The houses are, for the most part, small and poor. In many industries the employer takes pride in the town, sees to it that it has playgrounds, libraries, swimming pools, paved streets, comfortable houses for the workers to live in; but not so

General Motors. General Motors is the absentee employer, the great corporation, soulless and indifferent. The town of Flint is an ugly little industrial town.

The two Fisher body plants stretch for blocks and blocks. I could not get near the Chevrolet plant, which was held by the strikers, because the National Guard, 4,000 of them, guarded the entrances of all the streets that led to that plant. At some streets machine guns were set up. At all the streets the guardsmen came at you with shining bayonets if you approached. Most of' the boys were young, high school, factory workers, many of them unorganized workers themselves.

Speed Up

George Torr, who had been an auto worker for 10 years, was driving me around. He was a paint sprayer, and went to work at 7 every morning and worked until 4 or 5 in the afternoon. He felt the effects of the paint, he said. He and his fellow workers had to stand with arms uplifted, spraying headlights on cars, and when he asked the boss to get the workers a platform so that they would not have to stand in a tortured position all day, his request was disregarded. Six weeks passed and they asked again. A third request would have cost them their jobs.

It was the speedup which bothered the men most. They worked packed tightly around the cars, with not a second off to get a drink of water or go to the toilet. It was only recently that they got five minutes off, morning and afternoon. The more money men made on the piecework plan, the more the speedup, in order to cut down the wages.

"When I got home nights, I could only eat and fall into bed," Torr said. "Eight o'clock was my usual bedtime. Eat, sleep and work– that's all my life was."

Torr is a young man–his own mother is only 45–and he has two children, eight years old, and 2 months. His job during the strike was on transportation duty, driving organizers and strikers around.

Courtesy

It was around 11 o'clock when we drove up to Fisher Body No.1, where the strike had started. Only one end of the long plant was occupied by the four or five hundred men. The plant stretches a long way down the street and the front is faced with a strip of lawn but no riot fences. The whole length of the building is open, so there were strikers standing guard at every window. A wooden box had been built up as a platform at one window so that it was possible to clamber up to the window and climb in more or less as one would straddle a fence. Half a dozen guards were here to examine the visitors' credentials. Only those newspaper reporters were allowed in who possessed Newspaper Guild cards (a new tactic with strikers who are not afraid to antagonize the press since they believe it is on the side of capital anyway).

THE CATHOLIC WORKER is generally recognized as a labor paper, as well as a religious one, and by virtue of its latter aspect it is permitted to retain a more or less neutral attitude in regard to unions. Many of the men were familiar with the paper, so it was easy to get permission to get into the plant.

No Sabotage

Inasmuch as the sit-down strike has been used as a non-violent tactic to prevent scabs from taking the jobs of the worker, and to prevent the employer from removing the machinery and thus depriving the worker of his right to work and earn a living, we of THE CATHOLIC WORKER have upheld it. Objection has been made that the men wreck the plants they occupy, but I went all over the Fisher Body plant and saw no evidence of deliberate injury.

Of course the men slept on piles of upholstery and seat cushions which they made into beds, and so without doubt some materials were damaged. But the law against smoking on the main doors of the plant was upheld and the men smoked only in the cafeteria in the basement.

Another small depredation was the use the men made of a bolt of unbleached muslin from which they tore hundreds of strips to use as scarfs.

"That's in case of tear gas attack," Henry Van Nocker, secretary of Local 156 of the union told me. "The gas is soluble and the men wet the scarfs and use them so they can keep up the fight."

Prepared

The men were divided into shifts, and there were hundreds of them sleeping in different parts of the plant. The building being open as it is, and a warrant out for the arrest of the sit-downers, the men expected an attack at any time, and they were ready for it.

Though the sit-down strike is a non-violent method tactic, the men were ready to repel efforts to evict them, and during the forty-one days of their siege, they had fashioned themselves clubs which hung at their belts, and there were boxes of heavy hinges and bolts ready to be used as missiles.

These were their arms and their preparations seemed pitifully inadequate to me in view of the machine guns and riot guns of the militia and the guards of the companies.

Strike Meeting

I talked with many of the men in the plant and their determination to hold out for recognition of their union and mitigation of the speed-up was unanimous.

Most of them were Americans, many of them southerners. I was interested to hear of the square dances they went in for, introduced from the south. There were not a great many Catholics among them. There were some Hungarians and Poles, however, and these were Catholic.

That night I attended a strike meeting in the hall of the Pengelly Building, a rickety old two-story frame block which the strikers had rented. Downstairs there was a restaurant, upstairs union offices, and above that the hall which held about a thousand workers.

The meeting had been going on from seven-thirty and now it was almost eleven. There were young and old, men, women and children. There were babies in arms and little ones sitting around the edge of the platform, thrilled at being out so late. They crowded the chairs, sat on the window sills and packed the doors. Josephine Herbst was one of the speakers, a pro-communist writer who came to report the strike; there was Adolph Germer organizer and officer of the United Mine Workers' Union, of which John L. Lewis is president in addition to being leader of the Committee of Industrial Organization. After the meeting broke up, small groups remained in different parts of the hall talking and one group stayed to sing These were the people, these family groups, against whom the National Guard was called. I stopped in the publicity department downstairs and found Carl Haessler, one of the editors of the Federated Press in charge of the department. I had known him as a Socialist years ago and knew him to be thoroughly Marxist now in his philosophy. Students from Lansing, Michigan, and Madison, Wisconsin, were there assisting him, getting their first taste of actual strike work.

No Thomas Either

One young fellow, blond, wide-eyed, said that he majored in philosophy. "A good foundation," I commented, "for labor work."

"Oh, do you think so," he said eagerly? "But I didn't get any Marx and Engels in college," regretfully. "No real modern philosophers except the aesthetes."

I asked him if he had ever heard of Gilson and Maritain but they were only names to him. He was interested that they were teaching scholastic philosophy in Chicago University and at Harvard.

Note how these college students look upon Marxism as a philosophy of life. Haessler also taught philosophy at the University of Illinois where I had gone years ago.

Communist Influence

My reflections as I came away from Flint had to do with the future of labor in the United States. Not only the necessity for organization but the necessity for a

long range program of action, for an educational program which would deal not only with cooperatives, credit unions but also a philosophy of labor. The CIO is a trade union movement and nobody wastes any time wondering whether John L. Lewis or John Brophy are Reds. The public in general knows that they are not. They are working to organize the industrial workers, those hitherto unorganized ones who make up the great masses of workers in this country. But what of the college students, the editors, the writers, the propagandists who take advantage of every labor struggle to get into it, inject the Marxist philosophy of life, and seek to sway the workers, and prepare them for the "final class struggle?"

Real Catholic Action

Communism is a way of life and it is as a philosophy of life that it must be met. There was plenty of Communist literature, the Daily Worker, the New Masses, sold not only at the union headquarters, but also sent into the struck plants for the sit-downers to read and ponder over during the forty-one days they had interned themselves.

We point the need to Catholic students, not only of philosophy, but of journalism and of history, to go also to volunteer as apostles of labor and to take advantage as the Communist does of the opportunities each strike offers to reach the masses.