

GM Passes Ford, 1918-1938: Designing The General Motors Performance-control System

Moral Economy, Structural Leverage,
and Organizational Efficacy: Class Formation
and the Great Flint Sit-Down Strike, 1936–1937

Joshua Murray, *Vanderbilt University*
Michael Schwartz, *Stony Brook University*

ABSTRACT

In this article we use the Great Flint Sit-Down Strike as a strategic case for examining the issue of movement success in seemingly disadvantageous structural conditions. Through an application and elaboration of social movement and organizational theory to the Flint sit-down strike we identify four key factors that help to explain the emergence of successful collective defiance by labor: (1) the violation of the autoworkers' moral economy by General Motors; (2) the organizational flexibility of the UAW in adding, new, revised, or revived mobilization and direct action strategies to protest repertoires to take advantage of preexisting social structures; (3) the identification of the sit-down strike as a strategy that leveraged the positional power of autoworkers; and (4) the on-the-ground organizational model used by the UAW, which allowed for democratic decision making that took advantage of local conditions.

The Great Flint Sit-Down Strike of 1936–37 was a watershed moment in the history of the US labor movement. It marked the first time that one of the Big Three automakers (General Motors, Ford, and Chrysler) was successfully challenged by workers. The success of the strike also started a chain reaction that resulted in the unionization of the auto industry and the success of other industrial unions.¹ Consider that at the start of the Flint, Michigan, strike,

1. Beverly Silver, *Forces of Labor: Workers' Movements and Globalization since 1870* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

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