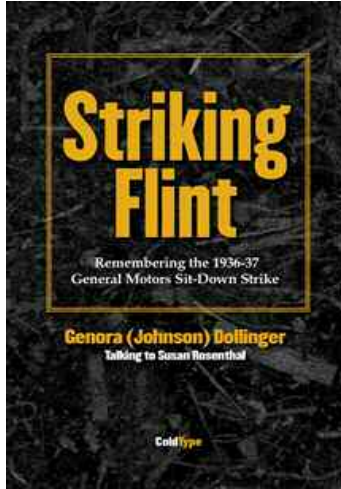


Striking Flint

Remembering the 1936-37
General Motors Sit-Down Strike

Genora (Johnson) Dollinger
Talking to Susan Rosenthal

ColdType



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Preface

There are times in history when the forces of capital and labor are so evenly matched in combat that the actions of a few brave individuals can tip the balance in favor of their class. Genora (Johnson) Dollinger was one of those courageous and clear-sighted people. Her greatness lay in her determination to press forward to win a decisive victory for labor and her deep conviction that such a victory could only be won by the workers themselves.

The struggle to organize the growing American automobile industry began with a strike at a Studebaker plant in 1913. In 1930, workers at Fisher Body in Flint struck and closed their plant for a week. Early in 1933, auto workers struck Briggs Manufacturing Co., the Hudson Motor Car Co. and the Motor Products Co. In 1934 auto workers won a bloody strike at Toledo's Auto-Lite plant and signed up thousands of new members. But there was still no national union of auto workers, only individual, federally-chartered locals affiliated with the American Federation of Labor (AFL). Growing impatience with the craft-dominated AFL spurred the formation of the national, industry-based United Automobile Workers of America (UAW) in 1936.

On November 17, 1936, the first auto industry sit-down in U.S. history began at Bendix products in South Bend, Indiana. Workers occupied their plant for a week to win recognition of the UAW. But the spark that led to the unionization of the giant General Motors Corporation, and eventually of the entire auto industry, was ignited on December 30, 1936, when auto workers in Flint Michigan sat down and occupied their plants.

Genora (Johnson) Dollinger was called "the Joan of Arc of Labor" for her role in the Flint sit-down strikes. At the age of 23 she organized the Women's Auxiliary of the UAW and led its military wing, the Women's Emergency Brigade. Brigade members armed themselves with clubs to defend sit-downers from GM's plant police, hired Pinkerton strike-breakers, and the Flint city police who also served the corporation.

Genora was also instrumental in overcoming the opposition of those who initially rejected her husband's strategy for capturing

Chevrolet Plant 4. The union's successful occupation of Plant 4 marked a decisive turning point in the history of American labor. The largest corporation in the world was forced to sign a contract with an industrial union representing all its workers. The victory of GM workers led to a wave of industrial organizing that revolutionized relations between capital and labor in the United States.

I interviewed Genora in February 1995. Despite her advanced age and very poor health, Genora's passion for the cause of labor was undiminished. My hope is that her story will inspire the militants of today and tomorrow to push forward to win the final victory for labor.

Susan Rosenthal

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Introduction



Genora (Johnson) Dollinger: April 20, 1913 - October 11, 1995

Genora Johnson was born in Kalamazoo, Michigan, but the family residence was in Flint. She became a socialist at age 16, and in 1931 she joined the newly organized Flint chapter of the Socialist Party.

Her militant actions during the Flint sit-down strike of 1936-37 were the subject of two award winning documentaries: *The Great Sit-Down Strike*, made by the British Broadcasting Corporation, and the Academy Award-nominated documentary, *With Babies and Banners: The Story of the Women's Emergency Brigade*. However, I believe Genora's contribution to the strike has not been fully acknowledged for a number of reasons, including the fact that she never wrote her own account of the strike.

After the Flint strike, Genora was active in the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). She also helped organize the first union for unemployed workers, that was affiliated with the UAW, and served as its secretary. During the war she dodged the blacklist by moving to Detroit, where she took a job at Briggs Manufacturing and was elected Chief Steward of UAW, Local 212.

After the war, Genora served on a committee to investigate the

brutal beatings of two prominent members of her Local. However, she became the third victim when two thugs beat her with a lead pipe while she was asleep in her bed. Six years later, the Senator Kefauver Investigating Committee confirmed that the beatings of five Briggs workers and the shooting of Walter and Victor Reuther were instigated by well known Detroit corporate officials in collusion with the Mafia.

Genora ran as a candidate of the Socialist Workers' Party for U.S. Senator from Michigan in 1948. From 1960-66, she was the Development Director of the Michigan Civil Liberties Union. She was one of the first presidents of Women for Peace, an anti-Vietnam war organization. During her term, she enlisted most of the union leaders of Detroit and Michigan into public opposition to the war.

In 1977, Genora was invited by the officers of the UAW and GM to attend the 40th anniversary banquet celebration of the sit-down strikes and the winning of union recognition. Refusing to attend the banquet, Genora flew to Detroit to hold a press conference denouncing the union leaders for their participation in the "love fest," which she called an example of "Tuxedo Unionism."

At age 81, Genora was still active, organizing the Labor Party Advocates in California. In October, 1994, she was inducted into the Hall of Fame of the Michigan Women's Historical Center in Lansing. On her induction, Victor and Sophie Reuther wrote,

"Genora is of the great tradition of Mother Jones who in an earlier generation was to the mine workers what Genora became to the auto workers. A living legend in her own time!"

Sol Dollinger

Conditions Before the Strike

“We hire Chevrolet workers from the neck down.”

– Arnold Lenz, Chevrolet-Flint Plant Manager, 1936

Conditions in Flint before the strike were very, very depressing for working people. We had a large influx of workers come into the city from the deep South. They came north to find jobs, because there was no work back home. They came with their furniture strapped on old jalopies and they'd move into the cheapest housing that they could find. Usually these were just little one or two-room structures with no inside plumbing and no inside heating arrangements. They just had kerosene heaters to heat their wash water, their bath water, and their homes. You could smell kerosene all over their clothing. They were very poor.

One woman came from a small section of Flint around Fenton Road, where many of these poor southerners settled. She would walk the picket line in the snow in tennis shoes with no gloves. She was a wonderful person. She was there every day, and we'd have to make sure she got warmed up in the union headquarters before she went out on the picket line again.

Before the strike, the women didn't have the opportunity to participate in any activities. The small neighborhood churches were the only places they had to go to. They knew some of their neighbors and they would go to some of these little churches, but that's all. The men frequented the beer gardens and talked to other men about shop problems or whatever. They got to be shop buddies.

When you worked in the factory in those days, no one cared what your name was. You became “Whitey” if you happened to be blonde. Or you might be “Blacky” if you had black hair. If you asked, “Well, who is he?” you'd get, “I don't know, he works in department so-and-so, Plant 4, on the line half way down.” It was just “Blacky” or “Shorty” or some nickname. They were wage slaves with a complete loss of identity and rights inside the plant.

At first, when these workers were approached to join the union,

they were afraid they might lose this job that was so very valuable to them. At that time, men working in the auto plants were getting around forty-five cents an hour. The younger girls that worked in the A.C. Sparkplug division of General Motors, were being paid twelve-and-a-half cents an hour to make minor car instruments. That was the only plant that employed women.

I'll tell you about the conditions of these young women. After the strike, a Senate investigating committee found that in one department of A.C. alone, the girls had all been forced to go to the county hospital and be treated for venereal disease traced to one foreman. Those were the conditions that young women had to accept in order to support their families. Sometimes they earned just enough to provide food for the family and they couldn't lose their jobs because nobody else in the family had a job.

Flint was a General Motors town- lock, stock and barrel! If you drove past one of the huge GM plants in Flint, you could see workers sitting on the front lawns along the side of the plant just waiting for a foreman to come to the door and call them in. And maybe they'd work them for an hour or maybe for a day, and that was it. But workers were so desperate that they would come and sit every day on that lawn in the hopes of being called in and possibly getting a permanent job. That's how poor these General Motors workers really were, at least the ones in hopes of getting a job at GM.

I had a most wonderful father-in-law, a very fine union man who had a little college education in South Dakota, then moved to Flint to work in the auto factories where the big money was supposed to be. Big money then was nothing when you stop to think of it today. But compared to jobs in the rest of the country and considering there was a national depression, it was big money. And if you were a tool and die maker, you made a little more. But the tool-and-die men were not in favor of organizing the plain, ordinary industrial workers. They wanted their skilled unions kept separate. And, of course, they wanted their wages to be kept higher.

Conditions were terrible inside the plants, which were notorious for their speed-up systems. They had men with stop watches timing the workers to see if they could squeeze one or two more operations in. You saw Charlie Chaplin in the movie, *Modern Times*? Well, this is exactly what happened. They did everything but tie a

broom to their tail. It was so oppressive that there were several cases of men just cracking up completely and taking a wrench and striking their foreman. When that happened, the worker was sentenced to what was then called an insane asylum in Pontiac, Michigan.

The speed-up was the biggest issue. The men just couldn't take it. They would come home at night, and they couldn't hold their forks in their swollen fingers. They would just lie down on the floor. Many of them wound up in beer gardens to try to forget their problems and their aches and pains.

They had many medical problems, too, because you couldn't go to the rest room whenever you felt like you had to. When "Mother Nature" called, that was just too bad. You had to wait for the foreman to summon a relief man to come and take your place on the assembly line. Sometimes that took awhile. In one plant a worker brought a chamber pot and put it on top of the assembly line. All the workers got a big bang out of that, but he was fired. He lost his job just for that kind of protest.

They used to say, "Once you pass the gates of General Motors, forget about the United States Constitution." Workers had no rights when they entered that plant. If a foreman didn't like the way you parted your hair- or whatever he didn't like about you- you may have looked at him the wrong way, or said something that rubbed him the wrong way- he could fire you. No recourse, no nothing. And practically all foremen expected workers to bring them turkeys on Thanksgiving and gifts for Christmas and repair their motor cars and even paint their houses. The workers were kept intimidated because if they didn't comply with what the foreman told them to do, they would lose their jobs and their families would starve. You can see what a feeling of slavery and domination workers felt inside the GM plants.

Not only that, but when workers started talking about organizing, management hired lip-readers to watch the men talk to each other, even when they were right close to each other, so they could tell if they were talking union. One of our friends who was a member of the Socialist Party wore the first UAW button into the Chevrolet plant. He was fired immediately. He didn't even get to his job. They spotted the button and that was it. If you went into a beer

garden or other place like that and began to talk about unions, very often you didn't get home without getting an awful beating by GM-hired thugs.

That was the condition inside the plants. Combined with the bad conditions on the outside: poor living conditions, lack of proper food, lack of proper medical attention and everything else, the auto workers came to the conclusion that there was no way they could ever escape any of this injustice without joining a union. But they didn't all decide at one time.

Preparing for Battle

“General Motors Corp. spent \$994,000 for labor spies between January and June, 1936. GM also had more tear gas and other riot control equipment in its possession than the combined supply available to all cities nationwide.”

– The UAW Local 659 Searchlight, February 3, 1995

A considerable amount of preparatory work was done before the strike. That preparatory work was done by radical parties. We had several very active organizations in Flint and Detroit: the Communist Party, the Proletarian Party, the Socialist Labor Party, the Socialist Party and the International Workers of the World (IWW). And, with the exception of the Communist Party, we all had our headquarters in the Pengelly Building, a very old building that became the major strike headquarters of the whole United Automobile Workers Union of Flint. Even as the strike was going on, we still had our rooms on the second floor, while the main activities in the auditorium were on the third floor.

Two years before the strike broke out, the Socialist Party in Flint organized the League for Industrial Democracy, (LID). We held meetings in garages and in basements, secret meetings, so the people wouldn't get caught and beaten up. As we got bigger, the Socialist Party started sending us their speakers from New York. Many of them were from the Brookwood Labor College. We put out leaflets and sold tickets for these meetings, which were held in the basement of the biggest Methodist church and in the Masonic Temple.

We held lectures in socialism mainly, plus labor history and current events, focusing on what was happening politically. Those were very popular meetings. We would get three and four hundred people at some of our meetings. This was all before the strike, in preparation for when the struggle actually broke out, when the workers couldn't take any more and rebelled. A core of socialists understood that this would eventually happen. I was busy organizing the LID and the Socialist Party during this time before the strike. I was well

known in Flint.

Our Socialist Party was the next biggest organization to the Communist Party. The Socialist Party held on-going classes in labor history, public speaking, and parliamentary procedure. These classes were very important and produced many capable people. One of the Reuther brothers, Roy, was a member of the Socialist Party. Roy had organized several workers' education projects and was sent into Flint to organize the UAW early in 1936.

Our newspaper, The Socialist Call, was distributed widely as an aid to our recruitment of GM workers into the Socialist Party. We laid a solid groundwork so that some of the first people who took the initial brave actions in the shop were Socialist Party workers.

The Communist Party met at the north end of Flint because that's where most of the immigrants from Russia, Poland and Hungary lived. They were mainly Buick workers. They had a lot of social activities, dances, and political meetings. They also had an insurance organization, the International Workers Order. Robert Travis, the top UAW organizer in Flint, was in the Communist Party, and he selected Roy Reuther to work as his second-in-command during the strike. But, in my opinion, the main leaders of that strike, the ones who were able to organize, to speak in public meetings and so on, came out of the Socialist Party.

Workers were receptive to the idea of a union, but so much fear came along with it. When we started signing people up to be in the union, General Motors organized a huge rival organization called the Flint Alliance that cost nothing to join, but you signed a card so that they had a record of you. A great deal of anti-union propaganda was disseminated into the homes of workers through the Flint Alliance. The workers knew conditions were horrible, but they were in fear of losing their jobs if they refused to join the Alliance. They also saw what happened to some of their buddies who would go to a union meeting and get beaten up and come to work the next day with black eyes or a busted head.

So workers didn't all rush to join the union. In fact, if General Motors had known the real number of union members at the time those plants went down, a successful strike wouldn't have been possible. We had to keep the actual membership figures as secret as we could.

As I said, a fermentation was taking place for a couple of years before the first sit-down. No question about it. Many revolutionaries, so-called, talk about "spontaneous combustion of the workers." I can't see that at all, because it took time for the organizers in various plants of this whole General Motors empire to talk to the workers and to bring them to classes-to make some contact-create a bond. You had to trust your fellow worker if you were going to be an active union member because we had an awful lot of spies in there, a lot of people who would get special favor for squealing on somebody else.

I should add that the one big daily newspaper, the Flint Journal, was controlled completely by General Motors. They wrote things like, "You don't bite the hand that feeds you," and "These people coming in are all imports from Soviet Russia, and they want communism." So everybody was labeled a Communist who joined the union. The radio stations (we didn't have television then) and every avenue of information was controlled by GM.

The only thing the union had at first was mimeographed sheets. Finally, we were able to put out a weekly, the Flint Auto Worker, with reports of what the union was doing and what we were working for- what kind of a society we wanted. We handed these out at the plant gates after work. And the distributors often got beaten up by the company's paid agents. They had Pinkerton men in there, two or three different spy agencies, plus the people that they would pull out of their own ranks, General Motors protection police. It was a dangerous period- no question about it.

And we had our sound car, an ordinary car fitted with loudspeakers on top with large batteries. During the strike we would send it around to the various plants that were still operating- A.C. Sparkplug and Buick. As the workers were going in, we would taunt them with the conditions that they had to face, and we'd give them a little pep talk, "As an individual you are only one, but the union gives us strength." Many of the workers in those plants came down and walked the picket lines in sympathy, but there was not enough preparation done in those plants and not enough leadership, for them to take the chance to shut their plants down.

Sit Down!

*“They have taken untold millions that they never toiled to earn.
But without our brain and muscle not a single wheel can turn.
We can break their haughty power, gain our freedom when we learn,
That the union makes us strong.”*

– Verse from the song, “Solidarity Forever”, written by Ralph Chaplin

The first sit-down was on December 30 in the small Fisher Body Plant 2 over a particularly big grievance that had occurred. The workers were at the point where they had just had enough, and under a militant leadership, they sat down. When the UAW leaders in the big Fisher Body Plant 1 heard about the sit-down in Fisher 2, they sat down, also. That took real guts, and it took political leadership. The leaders of the political parties knew what they had to do because they’d studied labor history and the ruthlessness of the corporations.

Picket lines were established and also a big kitchen in the south end of Flint, across from the large Fisher 1 plant. Every day, gallons and gallons of food were prepared, and anybody who was on the picket lines would get a ticket with notification that they had served on the line so they’d be able to get a good hot meal.

The strike kitchen was primarily organized by the Communist Party women. They brought a restaurant man from Detroit to help organize this huge kitchen. They were the ones who made all of those good meals.

We also had what we called scavengers, groups of people who would go to the local farmers and ask for donations of food for the strikers. Many people in these small towns surrounding Flint were factory workers who would also raise potatoes, cabbages, tomatoes, corn or whatever. So great quantities of food were sent down to be made into dishes for the strikers. People were very generous.

John L. Lewis and the United Mine Workers helped us financially so that if there was somebody in serious difficulty we could help them out a little bit. Later on, the garment workers sent money. But

with thousands of workers, you couldn't help everybody, so many families were taken care of by committees forming in plants, whether they were on strike or not. Committees in Buick, Chevrolet, and Fisher Body took care of some of the urgent cases so nobody starved or got into really major medical difficulties.

After the first sit-down started, I went down to see what I could do to help. I was either on the picket lines or up at the Pengelly Building all the time, but some of the strike leaders didn't know who I was and didn't know that I had been teaching classes in unionism and so on. So they said, "Go to the kitchen. We need a lot of help out there." They didn't know what else to tell a woman to do. I said, "You've got a lot of little, skinny men around here who can't stand to be out on the cold picket lines for very long. They can peel potatoes as well as women can." I turned down the idea of kitchen duty.

Instead, I organized a children's picket line. I got Bristol board and paints, and I was painting signs for this children's picket line. One of my socialist comrades came up and said, "Hey, Genora, what are you doing here?" I said, "I'm doing your job". Since he was a professional sign painter, I turned the sign-painting project over to him and that was the beginning of the sign-painting department.

We could only do the children's picket line once because it was too dangerous, but we got an awful lot of favorable publicity from it, much of it international. The picture of my two-year-old son, Jarvis, holding a picket sign saying, "My daddy strikes for us little tykes," went all over the nation, and people sent me articles from French newspapers and from Germany and from other European countries. I thought it was remarkable that the news traveled so far.

Women Come Forward

“The women of Flint have made their fame and are known throughout the world for their heroic stand during the great General Motors strike...”

– Robert C. Travis, Strike Organizer, 1937

I should tell you how the Women’s Auxiliary was formed. The last days of December 1936 were when the sit-downs began. Following that came New Year’s Eve. Among working class families, everybody celebrates New Year’s Eve. I was amazed at the number of wives that came down to the picket line and threatened their husbands, “If you don’t cut out this foolishness and get out of that plant right now, you’ll be a divorced man!” They threatened divorce loudly and openly, yelling and shouting at their husbands. I knew I couldn’t go and grab each one of them to talk to them privately. So I could only watch as some of the men climbed out of the plant window up on the second floor, down the ladder to go home with their wives. These were good union members, but they were hooted and hollered at by their comrades in the plant who were holding the fort in the sit-down. This was a very dangerous turn of events because I knew how few men were inside holding that plant, and it worried many of us.

The next day, we decided to organize the women. We thought that if women can be that effective in breaking a strike, they could be just as effective in helping to win it. So we organized the Women’s Auxiliary and we laid out what we were going to do.

Now remember, the UAW was still in the process of getting organized. It didn’t have elected officers or by-laws or any of the rest of it. So we were free to organize our Women’s Auxiliary, to elect our president, vice-president, recording secretary and heads of committees, all on our own.

We couldn’t have women sitting down in the plants because the newspapers were antagonizing the wives at home by saying that women were sleeping over in the plant. In fact, GM sent anonymous

messages to the wives of some of the strikers alleging that there were prostitutes in those embattled plants. But we knew we could get women on the picket lines.

So we organized a child-care center at the union headquarters, so children would have some place to go when their mothers marched on the picket line. Wilma McCartney, who had nine children and was going to have her tenth, took charge of that. At first, the women were scared to death to come down to the union, and some may have been against the union for taking away their pay check so they couldn't feed their children who were hungry or crying for milk. Then this wonderful woman, this mother of nine children who was pregnant with another, would talk to them about how it would benefit them for their husbands to participate actively. And if they won the strike, it would make all the difference in the world in their living conditions. We recruited a lot of women just through the child-care center.

We also set up a first aid station with a registered nurse in a white uniform and red union arm-band. She was a member of the Women's Auxiliary. The women in the Auxiliary also made house calls to make sure every family had enough to eat, and they gave advice on how to deal with creditors.

But that wasn't enough as far as I was concerned. Women had more to offer than just these services. So we set up public speaking classes for women. Most of the women had never even been to a union meeting. In those days, many of the men would go to union meetings and say to the women, "It's none of your damn business. Don't you mix into our affairs." So the women didn't express any of their ideas about what could be done to better their conditions.

One of our Socialist Party women, Tekla Roy, took over the public speaking classes and was very popular. She was a very tall woman with a low and resonant voice. She seemed like a person who could handle any man or any opposition. She also taught labor history: what had happened in America in the early days when child labor was eliminated, and how the women garment workers in New York were the first to organize unions in the United States. Women came out of those classes thinking, "Well, women did play a role in the unions. We have got a right to say something." We trained them in how to get up in union meetings and what appeals

to make. We gave them an outline of a speech and they practiced in the classes.

Some of the men were very opposed to having their wives at the union headquarters and a few of them never gave up their sexist attitudes. But most of the men encouraged their wives. They thought we were doing a wonderful job, making things better for them at home because their wives understood why their husbands had to be on the picket line all day long and do a lot of extra things for the union. They could talk and work together as companions. And the children were learning from their parents' discussions about the strike.

A few men still opposed women becoming active or walking the picket lines. I was often called a "dyke." Some men said that women who came down to the picket line were prostitutes or loose women looking for men. But as more married men with families became active in the strike, they kept those elements quiet. We eventually won respect and were praised highly by the leaders of the strike after victory was declared.

Organizing the women in the strike was the most wonderful experience of my whole life. I was not as tall as Tekla but I had experience organizing. I was interested in building the Socialist Party and in building a socialist society, so I had a great deal of influence with these women.

The Women's Emergency Brigade

“Greetings and congratulations to the new officers and to the members of the Women’s Auxiliary and the Women’s Emergency Brigade. The automobile workers of Flint and America owe you a debt of gratitude for the part you played in the winning of The Big Strike and in building our International Union. You are truly crusaders in this new American Labor Movement, and your fighting spirit an inspiration to all workers!”

– Roy Reuther, Strike Organizer, 1937

The company decided they had to break the strike. On January 11, they attacked the smaller Fisher Body Plant 2. I happened to be on the picket line that day, and I was amazed to see what was happening. The plant guards prevented the men from getting any food for about 24 hours. It was very cold, and they turned off the heat in the building. The men inside were very angry.

Then the company police and the city police started shooting. At first they were shooting tear gas inside the plant, but that was too difficult, so they decided to tear-gas and shoot this huge mass of picketers that had formed in front of the plant. The police were using rifles, buckshot, fire-bombs, and tear-gas canisters. It was a shock to a lot of people. We had thought that General Motors would try to freeze us out or do something in the plants, but never open fire on us right in the middle of the city.

The union picketers took their own cars and barricaded off a section so that the police couldn’t get us from both ends. Then, over the radio came the equivalent of saying that there was a revolution starting in Flint. With all the propaganda saying, “The communists are coming into the city to take over the union,” people gathered in vast numbers on both sides of this battle. When the police misfired, tear-gas and bullets went over our heads into the crowds which had come out to watch. It was very frightening. People would run away and dart into restaurants up the street.

The battle continued for quite some time. Workers overturned police cars to make barricades. They ran to pick up the fire bombs thrown at them and hurl them back at the police. It was very, very cold. The men in the plant were using fire hoses against the police, and when the water ran down, it would quickly ice over.

I saw one of our Socialist Party members, Fred Stevens, jump over a gutter where there was icy water flowing down. A little stream of blood spurted down his leg into the water. I couldn't get my wits together for a moment.

The men wanted to get me out of the way. You know that old "protect the women and children" business. If there are any women or children around, usher them right out, protect them. I told them, "Get away from me. I've got as many weapons as you have." I was the only woman who stayed.

The battle went on for hours. Throughout the whole time, the sound car was giving instructions and trying to bolster the courage of the men inside the plant as well as the picketers on the outside. Victor Reuther spoke for a while and then other men substituted for him, giving him relief. But there were only the voices of men. At one point, Victor came over and told us that the batteries in the sound car were running down.

Lights went on in my head. I thought, "I've never used a loud-speaker to address a large crowd of people, but I've got to tell them that there are women down here." So I asked him, "Victor, can I take the loudspeaker?" He said, "We've got nothing to lose."

The first thing I did was attack the police. I called to them, "Cowards! Cowards! Shooting into the bellies of unarmed men and firing at the mothers of children." Then everything became quiet. There was silence on both sides of the line. I thought, "The women can break this up." So I appealed to the women in the crowd, "Break through those police lines and come down here and stand beside your husbands and your brothers and your uncles and your sweethearts."

In the dusk, I could barely see one woman struggling to come forward. A cop had grabbed her by the back of her coat. She just pulled out of that coat and started walking down to the battle zone. As soon as that happened there were other women and men who followed. The police wouldn't shoot people in the back as they were

coming down, so that was the end of the battle. When those spectators came into the center of the battle and the police retreated, there was a big roar of victory. That battle became known as the Battle of Bulls Run because we made the cops run.

By this time, General Motors was going crazy and got Governor Frank Murphy involved. The next day, the National Guard was sent in because it was a very explosive situation. At first, eleven hundred troops were sent, followed by more than two thousand later. By the end of the strike, almost four thousand National Guardsmen were stationed in Flint.

I decided that women could do more than just the duties of the Women's Auxiliary. We could form an Emergency Brigade, and every time there was a threatened battle, we could mobilize. We might make a difference.

We didn't know that nothing like that had ever been organized before, at least not in this country. We didn't know we were making history. We didn't have time to think about it. The day after the Battle of Bulls Run, just from the people we notified the night before, fifty women joined up right away.

When we held our big Auxiliary meeting, I got up and asked who would like to join the Women's Emergency Brigade. I said, "It can't be somebody who's weak of heart. You can't go hysterical if your sister beside you drops down in a pool of blood." Oh, I made it a bloody sounding thing! After all, sixteen workers and eleven police had been injured in that battle. Anyone who wanted to join had to stand up, announce publicly that they wanted to join, walk over and sign their names in front of everybody. It wasn't a secret organization and we didn't pressure anyone to join. We made it very difficult.

One old woman in her early seventies stood up. I said, "This is going to be too difficult for you." She said, "You can't keep me out. My sons work in that factory. My husband worked in that factory before he died and I have grandsons in there." She went on and gave a speech. She got applause, then she walked over and signed her name. Then a young girl, I think she was sixteen or seventeen, stood up and said, "My father works in that factory. My brothers work in that factory. I've got a right to join, too." She walked over and signed, and all the women applauded. We recruited about 400

women for the Brigade out of about 1,000 women in the Women's Auxiliary.

I organized the Emergency Brigade on a military basis. I knew a captain gave orders, so I was the captain. Then I picked five lieutenants. We organized groups under each lieutenant. We'd give out an assignment and that lieutenant would find a car, round up her people, and off they'd go to wherever they were needed. Three of my five lieutenants were factory girls. One of them was an A.C. worker who was nineteen years old.

Ruth Pitts was from Fisher Body and "Teeter" Walker was from Redmans, a supplier plant for GM cars. Those two lieutenants wore jodhpurs, pants that come out on the side like a military or riding habit. They wore big boots that laced up to the knees, short Eisenhower-type jackets, red berets and arm bands. The workers in Fisher Body 1 made blackjacks for them. They laced them up with car leather on the outside and wristlets to go around the arm. They looked pretty jaunty and they meant business. Those two were always on the front lines.

We decided that we would use red berets as our insignia. They were very cheap at the time, something like fifty cents for a good felt beret. The Women's Auxiliary sewed red arm bands with a white E.B. on them for Emergency Brigade. I have one still. We carried heavy wooden clubs with handles carved to fit a woman's grip. Whenever you saw one of those women, you knew that she was ready for action at any time, morning, night, or anytime.

News about the Women's Emergency Brigade made the front page of the New York Times and other papers across the nation. In France when they heard about women organizing and doing it seriously, not just carrying mops and brooms as the newspapers liked to put it, but carrying clubs, they called me the "Joan of Arc" of organized labor-of women warriors. They thought it was very dramatic.

After we sat down in Flint, which was the heart of the General Motors production empire, fifteen GM plants across the country went on strike. And the news went out about the role women could play. Women in Detroit organized and wore green berets and arm bands; Lansing, blue; Pontiac, orange. These were all cities right around Flint and Detroit, the heart of the empire.

The emergency brigade responded whenever any emergency arose. Saginaw was just a few miles from Flint and that was where the union was having the hardest time. After workers won the Chevrolet strike of 1935, General Motors moved its Chevrolet Parts and Service plants to Saginaw and established a vigilante organization called the Loyalty League to prevent any unionization of those plants.

The union organized a car of men to go from Flint to Saginaw to hold a meeting and help in any way that we could. The meeting went off all right and the local men escaped from the meeting hall, but when our organizers were driving back, vigilantes in big, black Buick cars followed them down the highway into Flint and ran them into a telephone pole. They sent our people to the hospital.

That was a challenge for us after we had gone up there and encouraged them to meet and given them such visions of success. The union organizer was out in the hall as one of our meetings was ending, asking for volunteers to send a second car up to Saginaw right away before despair set in. Two Socialist Party men and three women volunteered to go. They were Mary Donovan Hapgood, who was a writer at the time, and Fania Fish, who later became Fania Reuther, and me. I got the two women to volunteer to go. The UAW organizers were amazed that we were taking such a chance. I noticed that they weren't too quick to volunteer to get their butts up there.

We drove up to Saginaw and met in the basement of a building that had big, high windows. The hall was packed with men and women who spoke about their determination to build the union. We got up and spoke, and we got them to sing, "Solidarity." That pepped the whole meeting up.

Toward the end of the meeting, we noticed that there were eyes looking at us through those basement windows. We knew we were surrounded by Loyalty League vigilantes, so we gave emergency instructions: "As you're leaving the building, be sure you leave in twos and threes, and be prepared." A group of people were organized to protect the union hall, to get us to our car, and to escort us to the highway.

We were driving a new Pontiac, and we felt safe because we knew that it had a lot of power. As we drove out to the main high-

way, one of the little cars that was ahead of us was cut off by a big, black, Buick sedan that got in front of us. We turned the corner and another one got in back of us. We were boxed in. It was a fearsome thing, expecting to wind up dead or maybe injured for life by being rammed into a telephone pole.

Fortunately for us, our Saginaw brothers were determined to protect us. Two little out-of-date cars pulled up behind us, turned sideways into the road, smashed into the oncoming vehicles, and completely blocked the road.

The driver of our car, seeing his chance, stepped on the gas, shot out around the other car, and sped straight ahead at ninety miles an hour. He opened the car up as fast as it would go. We were frozen. Driving ninety miles an hour then was like speeding through heaven and hell, and it scared the wits out of us. Now it means nothing, but in those days cars didn't go that fast.

Finally when we saw the lights of A.C. Sparkplug on the left side of the highway, Mary Donovan Hapgood, who was sent in from New York to write about the strike, started to sing a union song, "When a scab dies, he goes to hell." We all joined in and our voices were shaking.

We got back safely and a UAW local was established up in Saginaw. They had enough people join the union to become a force that could protect itself. This is the kind of thing that the women stepped in and helped build.

In Flint everybody in the city was dependent on the auto workers. If the workers didn't have money to buy groceries, clothes, or food, everybody suffered. So the strike affected everyone and everybody wanted to join the union. The milk drivers wanted to join but we didn't have any union of milk drivers. We didn't have any union of store clerks or retail clerks. So they all came down to the main headquarters where our amalgamated local took in all of them. They all became members of Local 156 of the UAW- CIO.

People were joining the union all over the city, whether they worked in an auto plant or wherever they were working. We would get calls all the time like, "J.C. Penney girls want to sit down. They want to strike." So we would send the Emergency Brigade women down there in case there was any trouble. Then we had the Women's Auxiliary members go down after we saw that it was

going to be all right and talk to those workers about labor history and about what we were trying to achieve.

Those were the roles women played. There were also many altercations on the picket lines, where sometimes women would come out and help. We didn't always carry the clubs because they were heavy, clumsy things to walk around with on a cold picket line. But we all carried a hard-milled bar of soap in one pocket and a sock in the other. That way, we couldn't be charged with carrying a weapon. But if somebody was creating trouble on the picket line, we'd slip that bar of soap into the sock and swing that sock very fast and sharp. It was as good as a blackjack.

I've had wonderful experiences in working with people, and I have found that sometimes the people who talk the loudest and act the bravest are the ones you can expect the least from. Sometimes, when there was a fight on the picket line you'd see a big, healthy man dive under a car! Yet you'd see other small men or you'd see women take a stand.

Breaking the Stalemate

“General Motors will not be obligated by contract to a principle that the corporation does not approve even though that principle is now a federal law.”

– GM corporate press release, February 8, 1937.

Across the nation, fifteen plants of General Motors were on strike, but we were making no progress. GM and the union had begun negotiations a few days after the Battle of Bulls Run but GM was stalling and bargaining in bad faith. The company tried to start a back-to-work movement with their anti-union Flint Alliance, and they tried to use the courts to stop the picketing and evacuate the plants. This was the same strategy that they had used against the Toledo auto strike in 1934.

It became quite difficult for some people to keep going. Every day the union was getting out bulletins and organizing the picket lines, trying to encourage people, to inspire them. We knew that something drastic had to be done and soon.

Everyone knew that if we could take Chevrolet Plant 4, we could win the strike. Plant 4 was the single largest unit in the whole GM complex. It produced engines for all Chevrolet automobiles across the country and for export, too. If we could stop production there, we'd hit General Motors right in the pocket-book. But no one knew how to do this because Plant 4 was very heavily guarded.

This next part has never been written up in history. My husband, Kermit Johnson, worked in Plant 4 and was the leader of the strike committee for Chevrolet. One night he came home from work with a greasy little piece of paper in his hand. He said, “You know, I've figured out how we can take Plant 4. Plant 8 is located here. Plant 6 is there.” He pointed to the paper. Those plants were all around Plant 4. “If we pull a strike,” he said, “We'll have workers from all these other plants march into Plant 4. The problem is that General Motors has recruited professional Pinkertons, plant protection and organized vigilantes. It will be one big slaughter unless we distract

them from that area and give ourselves time to barricade the plant.”

Plant 4 employed 4,000 workers, 2,000 on each shift. And if you’ve ever been inside one of those plants, you’ll know the doorways are as big as the side of a house. They’re huge, long structures. It would take some time to barricade the doors and to weld the openings shut to prevent an attack by the police. So they needed to create a distraction to buy time.

When Kermit took his plan to the Socialist Party to get support, Walter Reuther and his group in Detroit were opposed to it. They were afraid that we hadn’t had enough experience to carry through a plan like that. So our Socialist Party was split and the plan was voted down. But that was only after Walter Reuther came in and talked against it. Walter had a little more experience in Detroit and he’d been over in Russia, so some of the Socialist Party members deferred to him. What did we know in a little backwater town like Flint? Reuther came in and hammered against it, real hard, and they voted it down.

After that, I didn’t know what to do. I went home and wrote a two-page, single-spaced letter appealing to Norman Thomas to help us. Norman Thomas was a great speaker for socialism and a wonderful writer, but he didn’t know anything about the day-to-day problems that went on in the Socialist Party. He sent the letter to Frank Trager, the Socialist Party Labor Secretary.

Trager came to Flint on January 21 and I got all of the militants that I could get to talk to him to convince him that we should adopt Kermit’s plan. Trager saw the workers trudging up to the big auditorium on the third floor where they were being shown movies like Charlie Chaplin’s *Modern Times*, with everybody laughing. Other workers would come up and say, “What the hell is this? What are our orders for today? Where are our plans? What are we going to do?” Trager talked to these people as they trudged up and down that big stairway.

When we had our meeting, Trager decided that Kermit had a valid plan and there was a valid reason why we should carry it out. Walter Reuther was still opposed but he had to defer to the Labor Secretary. But he told Kermit that if the strike was lost it would be his fault. The vote was taken again and this time, it carried.

Kermit and Roy Reuther were assigned to take the plan into the

general strike committee to be approved and developed there. The rest is written up in history.

We've tried so hard to trace that letter I wrote to Norman Thomas, but after the strike Frank Trager went to work for the United States government, I've forgotten in what capacity. I think he may have mislaid it or destroyed it. I was always very sorry about that because if it hadn't been for that letter I don't know which route the strike would have taken. I do know we wouldn't have had that dramatic, decisive victory in the General Motors strike.

Kermit's plan was adopted by the strike committee. We knew there were some informers in the union meetings so a "secret" meeting was held with people who were going to shut Plant 9 and a couple of the suspected informers. That's how we let the company think that Plant 9 was going to be struck. We wanted GM to put all its guards on Plant 9 and leave Plant 4 free to be taken.

Kermit's plan was scheduled to be put into action on February 1 during the afternoon shift change. I had the Brigade out there, marching up and down in front of Plant 9. When the police saw the Brigade, they came and formed a line.

At one point, the police pulled their revolvers and threatened the union men on the outside because they knew the plant police were taking care of the men inside. There was a newsreel truck that happened to be there at the time, and I told the women, "Raise your clubs." They got a picture of the women with their clubs raised in back of the police and the police with their guns pulled at the union men. I think General Motors got hold of those pictures some way. I never knew what happened to them.

When Plant 9 started shutting off some of the machines, the police began to tear-gas and beat the men. Then we heard a glass break, and we saw the head of Tom Klasey look out. Blood was streaming down his face and he was yelling, "They're gassing us in here! For God's sake, they're gassing us!" That's all we had to hear. We used our clubs to smash the windows out so the men inside could get some air. Those men took an awful beating and by the time the ambulances came to carry them out, General Motors thought that they had squashed that one.

But I knew what was happening at Plant 4 half a mile down the

street, so I dismissed the Brigade and sent them back to headquarters. Then my five lieutenants and I sauntered down to Plant 4 gate to see what the hell was going on. We didn't make it obvious in any way.

When we got there we saw some big fights. Union men were throwing out the scabs and some of the foremen, and they said, "Hold that gate. Hold it, don't let the police come through here!" We strung ourselves across that gate, and it was only a matter of a telephone call before the police were sent down. They wanted to push us aside. We said, "Over our dead bodies." We talked to them - remember in Flint the policemen had uncles or fathers or brothers who were factory workers, too. We asked them, "What would you think if your wife was out here with us and you were in that damn plant? What would you think? Wouldn't you expect your wife to defend you and fight for better conditions for you?" They would start to tell us, "Well, you know, if we didn't have General Motors, what would we do in Flint? This is what feeds the people of Flint." We got them to procrastinate in these discussions just long enough.

Just as it was beginning to look risky for us, we saw the Emergency Brigade marching towards us, singing "Solidarity Forever" and "Hold the Fort." When they arrived, I climbed into the sound car that came from the other direction and instructed the women to lock arms and set up an oval picket line to prevent the police from entering the plant until it could be secured.

The successful occupation of Plant 4, which joined the occupations at Fisher 1 and 2, broke the resistance of General Motors and negotiations began in Detroit. We still maintained the picket lines and the security of the plants. The areas that weren't controlled by the union were controlled by the National Guard.

The National Guard kept everyone away from the Chevrolet embankment. If you came down Chevrolet Avenue and you looked up at the buildings there, you'd see guardsmen with their machine guns pointed right down the street.

The Brigade went to help the women from the kitchen get food into Plant 4 the first night, but we couldn't get by those guards. I started talking to one of these young boys and his finger was actually trembling on that trigger. We didn't fool around with them because they were all excited. They thought this was a big adven-

ture - what the hell, shooting a couple of people. It was war. But the governor declared that the strikers were to be fed.

However, General Motors had turned off the heat in Plant 4 and they had no cushions. Fisher Body plants have cushions and materials for seating and so they were much easier to hold. Not only that, the huge motorized picket lines at Fisher Body 1 meant we were strong enough so that the picketers and sit-downers could get out if they wanted to and go across to the union restaurant to contact people. They could even have their families come into the plant for a little while and get them back out again through the big front windows, because they were guarded by the union.

At Chevrolet you couldn't get out. GM used all kinds of tactics to break that sit-down. They sent in notes that some members of the strikers' families were very sick. One man was told his father was dying, and so he left. They had doctors come in saying that some little cough was very dangerous-a contagious disease. But Kermit was a very strong leader and he managed to keep the men together.

This time it was General Motors that was stymied. On February 11 they signed a peace agreement recognizing the UAW as representative for the auto workers. And on March 12 the first labor contract was signed.

A Blow Against Racism

“An injury to one is an injury to all”

Black workers did not generally participate in organizing the union. They used to say at our Socialist Party headquarters, “It’s bad enough being Black without being Red, too.” You had to understand that they had nobody, not even any White union people, that would fight for them if they were fired. Racial prejudice was so pervasive. Many workers had come up recently from the deep south thinking that Blacks should get off the sidewalk when they passed by. We couldn’t eat in the same restaurants. Blacks just wouldn’t be served in any restaurant in Flint.

Out of 12,000 workers employed by Chevrolet, only 400 were Black. Fisher 1, Fisher 2, Chevrolet, all ten plants of Chevrolet, hired only White men on production. Black men were allowed to work only in the foundry of Buick and as sanitation workers, cleaning up the men’s toilets in the other plants. Black men had no hope of ever getting a raise or getting a job promotion.

The only Black sit-downer in the Flint strikes was Roscoe Van Zandt in Plant 4. At first, the southern white workers didn’t know what to make of it. All they could say to him was, “What the hell are you doing here? You haven’t got any job to protect”. When the food came in, he took his share and went around the corner because Blacks and Whites never ate together. This embarrassed the rest of the sit-downers.

The first night, when it came time to sleep, there was only one clear table and one blanket. Who was going to have the blanket and sleep up off the cold cement plant floor? The strikers voted that because Roscoe Van Zandt was an older man, he should have the blanket and sleep on the table. Then they began to talk to him. Before that, Black and White workers never got to know each other because it was a period of intense discrimination. Being a socialist, Kermit helped those workers get a good, anti-racist education in those 14 days before the strike was settled.

When it came time for the victory parade, the strikers voted for Roscoe Van Zandt to carry the flag out of the plant.

After the strike was over, there were some honorary meetings for Roscoe Van Zandt in the Black community, and I was a featured speaker. That was a different experience. You say a few sentences and then you have to wait for “Amen, Amen, you said it sister!” At first when I was interrupted, I didn’t know what to make of it. Believe me, before that speech was over I knew how to say something and pause to let them express their feelings. These were the older generation that felt we had won a victory for them, even though they couldn’t actively participate.

Conditions for Black workers improved greatly after the strike. Oh, yes! They were now in the union, of course, and they could begin to afford to own their own homes, buying them at so much a month. They took great pride in what had been accomplished by the strikers. Their sympathies were with us all of the time.

The Sweet Fruit of Victory

“Faintly, in the distance a mass of men was moving. A wisp of song caught all of us waiting there and it grew as the strikers marched forward. That song of victory drew everyone together as the Fisher 1 men marched through downtown and across to Chevrolet Avenue where they descended the hill and met the triumphant shouts of the Fisher 2 and Plant 4 men.”

– Shirley Olmsted Foster, *“Open Letter from Sit-downer’s Widow”*,
The U.A.W. Searchlight, February 3, 1995.

Following the strike, the auto worker became a different human being. The women that had participated actively became a different type of woman, a different type from any we had ever known anywhere in the labor movement and certainly not in the city of Flint. They carried themselves with a different walk, their heads were high, and they had confidence in themselves. They were not only mentally different, but physically different. If you saw one of those women in the beginning and then saw her just a short period after going through this experience, learning and feeling that she had things she could fit together in her life, it would be an entirely different woman.

Not only that, but relationships within the family became much stronger. The kids understood why their parents were leaving them so often and why they had to go through a period of deprivation. It was not easy on them. The teachers in the schools were not in favor of the strike, and they showed it in many ways. Of course, in that period of great upheaval, the union couldn’t do anything about what the teachers were saying in the schools. You couldn’t take care of all the problems that cropped up at the time. But after their parents had this great victory, the children knew that their dads had won. It was mainly dads because it was mainly men in the plants, but their mothers had helped. Among the working class, it was a lot better.

Conditions also changed inside the plants. The foremen were tiptoeing around, being very careful. Every time something came up that couldn’t be settled, or the workers got a tough foreman who

told them, "Go to hell," they'd shut down the line. The men were so cocky, they'd say to the foremen, "You don't like it?" They'd push the button and shut down the line. It was very pleasurable to think that these men were not afraid of the boss anymore. They got a raise in their wages, and they weren't always followed to the can where somebody would step in to check how many cigarette butts were in the toilet. They became human beings to a degree even though they were still under the jurisdiction of a big corporation which controlled their lives. There was still the speed-up and other problems like that.

But in the family itself, which interested me most, it used to be that when a young man or a young woman got to the age where they were to graduate from high school the whole family celebrated because that was the glorious end of their education.

As conditions and wages improved in the plants, workers were able to have a more settled home life and raise families. The children did better in school, and they got to the point where they could go to college. After a few years of saving, the parents had the money to send them to colleges and universities. That's the period, in the 40s and 50s, when the college system began to proliferate across the country because of workers being able to send their kids. There was so much pride in the family: "My son is studying to become a doctor or a lawyer." Or "My daughter is studying to become a librarian." They had hopes that were outside the factory. And so the whole family was changed.

I think that was the biggest change of all. For the first time the children became very proud of their fathers and their mothers. They had gone through this big struggle to make it better for everybody, to put enough food on the table, to have enough clothes, and to have pride in school and the possibility of going on to colleges and universities.

There is something else that has to be emphasized: the fringe benefits that workers got from winning the strike, hospitalization and medical care, and in some contracts, dental and eye care. I have neighbors across the street who are Black retired auto workers and they get all that. All of these fringe benefits were something the workers never dreamed they could have when they first got recognition. Little by little, the strength of the union was able to get these

benefits, and as a result, many other employers had to give them. Unionists set the standard.

The victory of GM workers set off a wave of union organization across the country. This wave grew to encompass the entire auto industry, including Chrysler and Ford. Then steel workers organized, then rubber workers, glass workers, and finally even professional, commercial, and service workers. They gained confidence after our victory because if we could force the largest industrial giant in the whole world to its knees, then they could win, too. This was the realization of John L. Lewis' dream, the Congress of Industrial Unions (CIO). By the way, the CIO was formed in 1935 as the Committee for Industrial Organization, but after the GM strike, after Plant 4 was taken, its name changed to the Congress of Industrial Organizations.

The initials CIO stood for power. You'd see posters in homes and posters on cars proudly proclaiming, "I am the CIO." Those letters became almost like "I am the deity down from heaven." Those three letters, CIO, had great significance. I've never known of anything else as powerful, even government agencies that were set up to help people. The government's Works Progress Administration (WPA) program helped a lot of poor people, and those letters were well known. But the CIO was an especially magical set of letters.

What else changed? Workers felt that they had the right to run for political office if they wanted to and they did. Many of the later legislative people in the state of Michigan and other political posts were either strikers themselves, if they were young enough, or the sons of former strikers. The whole nature of the city changed.

The rich, of course, never forgave and never forgot. They blacklisted those that they could get away with blacklisting, and it was especially easy when it was a woman like me, a political organizer who was right at the center of things. And I was right in the middle of it, there's no question about that. After the strike was over, everybody in Flint knew who I was.

Fighting Racism

For White workers from the recent south, racism was something that was very strong. They had nasty attitudes like “You wouldn’t want to get too close to them. Your daughter might marry one.” You heard it all the time. We socialists kept on educating and writing articles in the union paper and doing everything that we could to argue against racism. Certainly, all the socialist auto workers had the right understanding. The success of the union eased things for Blacks but racism was still there. That was the hardest struggle of all.

The only viable anti-racist organization in Flint at the time was the The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), and that was not a militant organization nationally-ever. But we formed a NAACP chapter in Flint that became very militant.

We threw out the president, the one they called “the downtown man” because he would go and report everything downtown. We threw him out and elected Edgar Holt, a Black Buick worker who was a graduate of Wilberforce University, to be president. He was a good orator with a wonderful personality—a very inspiring man.

When the city council voted down the Fair Employment Practices Commission, we organized a mock funeral with a casket in a hearse. A black minister in his robe marched with casket bearers wearing white gloves. This funeral procession wound through the city of Flint to stop at the bridge of the Flint River. We took the casket out, proclaimed “The burial of FEPC”, and tossed the casket over the bridge into the river. Then the minister gave a long sermon using a loudspeaker.

It was something for people downtown shopping and going through the city to see a demonstration like that. When you throw a casket over the bridge into the river, people stop to see what is happening.

I became very active as a leader of the NAACP following the

strike. We always dramatized the actions we organized so we'd get a lot of publicity. Otherwise, it was the policy of a company town like Flint to keep everything quiet. There was no news coverage of working class people's lives, of what they were doing or thinking, and so you had to be dramatic to get attention.

Organizing the Unemployed

The people on the bottom of the economic ladder who had become so completely demoralized, the people who felt they had no hopes, no help, no one who gave a damn about them—you could see that person stand up straight. “We can fight, too. We’ve got fight in us.”

– Genora (Johnson) Dollinger

After the strike, the unemployed workers were also having great difficulties. We petitioned the International Union to give us the right to organize a WPA and Unemployed Local 12, UAW – CIO, under the International’s name and their protection. They didn’t give us any money. I guess they didn’t know what we were going to do and if they couldn’t control it all the way down, they didn’t want to fund it. We did organize a very militant union.

Many WPA projects were street repairs. They used to call it “digging holes” and ridicule the workers. These projects kept men and their families barely eating, just barely eating, because the wages were so little.

I was the secretary of Local 12 because at that time a woman wasn’t supposed to be president, even though she may have all the ideas. We used the big name and the big, bright lights of the UAW – CIO, and because of the success of the strike, we got an awful lot of WPA workers to join our union. The main organizers were the men who were digging in the streets and the women who worked on the canning projects. We had regular meetings and we had all kinds of projects. We had library projects.

There wasn’t office space in the main building for the library project I was working on at the time, so we were put in the building that housed the water department facilities of the city.

The city officials were very worried about what we were doing. One day we picked up the local paper to read that a leading communist of Flint was in a position to poison the city’s water supply. It was a big story about me! Once again we were facing that big Red scare.

Fortunately I knew the head of the WPA. She was a feminist from Britain from the Labor Party. She knew who I was and she knew my record, so she immediately got the whole project transferred to another building. The other officials in the WPA wanted me off the job and out of their hair. They wanted to fire me. But she held firm and transferred the whole project.

Local 12 brought in the unemployed people that had almost lost hope. The politicians were taking away milk from the children, instead of giving them more milk which they should have been doing. And they wouldn't give any surplus food to the hungry people. Homes were being repossessed and they were taking the women and children and putting them into one big shelter with the men in another. They were actually splitting up families. They would set furniture out in the street, but we had crews that would set the furniture back in and try to protect it. That became a lot of hard labor without any results so we started organizing big demonstrations. We would burn an effigy of the relief manager, the head of the welfare department, and we'd give out statements.

We finally decided to let the whole city of Flint know what was happening. We had a demonstration and announced that we would hold a "Death Watch." If they were going to do these things to the poor people in Flint, then let everybody see it.

Across from the welfare building there was a big park with a lot of beautiful trees. This park also happened to be across from one end of Buick Motor Car Company, which was rehiring workers to go into automobile production after the 1937 recession.

We put big signs up on each corner of the park inviting the public to come out to see poor people with hungry, starving children-to watch people die. We had whole families down there in great big army tents that we had procured. And we tapped into the street wires so that they had electricity at night in their tents.

Mothers were down there washing out diapers in tubs and hanging them up on ropes we strung between the trees. They built fires in large oil drums to keep warm and to heat water. They would cook their meals out there and heat their water to wash clothes and bathe their babies. They were really living out in public.

People came down to see what was happening. Great big signs on each corner of the park said, "This is the Death Watch" and "If

you want to see people in the city of Flint die, here they are.” That shook up a lot of people. You’d see cars driving around slowly to view what was happening. This was very bad publicity for the city. It hit the state capital and finally it hit Washington. Washington opened up surplus food to the people in Flint who were on the relief rolls. And they stopped separating families when they repossessed their homes.

The police did threaten us. But many union people came to hang around the periphery of the park. We also had union men in the park putting up clothes-lines and doing whatever they could to help. On top of that, in the Buick plant we had a lot of UAW members that had just gone back to work. They knew the power of the union. The windows of this plant came down fairly low so the men could look right out into the park. Pat Murray, the chief steward in there, issued a statement: “If any cops come up anywhere within the district, we’re going to come out with our pipes and our hammers and our wrenches, and we’ll take care of them.” We settled the grievance before that happened.

It was an exciting period. It took a lot of work and a lot of time and a lot of militancy, but it achieved results. The people on the bottom of the economic ladder who had become so completely demoralized, the people who felt they had no hopes, no help, no one who gave a damn about them—you could see that person stand up straight. “We can fight, too. We’ve got fight in us.”

Unemployed people were inspired by factory workers who had won a union, and they came down to the union meetings which became quite exciting, quite dramatic. They would get up and speak for the first time. Unemployed people found their voice and their strength. It was a wonderful experience, not only for the people that helped, but for the people who were doing it- for everybody.

It is the hardest thing in the world to organize the unemployed. They need strong backing. The strongest backing comes from the established unions, especially those who’ve had success in a strike. They feel that they have power. Once you see that in a worker or a number of workers, it’s something you don’t forget. They’ve been changed from people who have been kept down constantly to people who feel they have strength. They have knowledge and the abil-

ity to make changes. Before that, they'd only see the overpowering bureaucracy of the union and the overpowering bureaucracy of the government over their heads constantly with police and badges all around them. But when they have a great victory in a labor struggle, then they begin to feel that they are just as powerful and strong as their opponents.

That's the way that socialism will come in this country-when workers realize that they do have the numbers and the strength and the talents and the abilities. All of the creative things that workers come up with in a strike are usually original, because it pertains to the situation you are in right at that moment. You'll have people offering one suggestion after another, and they will discuss it together. The organizing process is very inspirational.

Personally Speaking

“It’s not that I was born a heroine. It was a question of growing up in a company town where people were going without food and children were going without health services. These families were in dire need. That wasn’t the concern of General Motors. They just wanted to get their production out. If you were living in a company town, you would feel that, and you would do the same thing.”

– Genora (Johnson) Dollinger, 1994

During the strike, I had tuberculosis in my right lung and I had to have treatments to collapse that lung. I was fortunate that the doctor who treated me was a socialist, or else I would have had great difficulty finding a doctor in Flint to treat me during the strike. It was a very serious problem, but when you live through a period of revolt like that, then you understand a person saying, “I’ll give my life for this cause if I can make it easier on other people,” and mean it—really mean it. So I didn’t stop to be sick. I was willing to go through anything for the strike

After the strike, the labor movement raised enough money for me to go east on a speaking tour. I spoke before a number of unions and I spoke before their big May Day celebration.

Then I came home and collapsed with tuberculosis. The unions and two lawyers in Detroit and New York raised enough money to send me to a sanitarium for six months. By that time it was impossible to save my lung. The loss of that lung has caused me much difficulty over my life. But I never regretted it because I had so many wonderful experiences.

The strike was one of the best experiences of my life, but also the most painful. After the strike my younger son, Jarvis, was killed in a car accident. The older one, Dennis, died a few years later of multiple sclerosis. Kermit and I separated.

That part is painful. I think that’s why I never wanted to talk much about that time, and I never wanted to write about it.

You get enriching experiences in life, even if you struggle for

something and you lose. It's the people that you get to know-that you work with. It's the real strength and nourishment that you get from somebody working beside you that you can call brother or sister. So, if my life has been shortened, it also has been highly enriched.

Class Struggle During the War

I was blacklisted so completely I don't think I could have gotten a job anywhere in Flint. When General Motors blacklists you, the blacklist extends to other auto factories and other corporations. All of the automobile plants including Chrysler and Ford cooperated on that. If you're well known, the blacklist is really effective. The unemployed union got a lot of publicity from the "Death Watch," so I was well known from that, in addition to the strike.

I had to get out of Flint if I wanted to get a job. It was 1941 and they were hiring for the war effort. I had just married Sol and we both moved to Detroit.

During that time housing was so scarce, you had to take practically anything. We found a very small, depressing apartment that had black paint all over the floors and the wood-work. My husband, Sol, and his buddies in the movement stripped all the paint off, re-painted it and made it livable. At least we had a place to live.

We didn't have sit-down strikes during the war. We would have had a great deal of difficulty doing that. Many of the workers that came into the shops during the war were new, so we had to educate them to unionism. Secondly, there was so much patriotism that people would have endorsed any kind of military action to stop strikes in those plants.

During the war, the government had a national "cost plus" agreement with business which guaranteed them a fixed rate of profit in addition to their production costs. That was how the government got the corporations to convert their auto plants to war production. So you weren't hitting a corporation in the pocketbook during a strike but the United States government. In spite of that, we did shut plants down just by walking out and going home.

And there were lots of grievances! When they opened up the plants to war production, they left the same old foremen and management forces in there. You had the same old speed-up artists and

the ones who would harangue you.

First, I went to work at Budd Wheel Corporation in a plant that was producing shells for the war. In the beginning the men were really cruel. They resented women coming into the plants. Their attitude was, since women weren't the bread winners, "What the hell are they doing in those plants, anyway?" It didn't matter even if the woman's husband had been drafted and removed from the family. They didn't want any women in there. So they left all the toughest jobs in these plants to women. No matter how small you were, or how delicate you were, or how old you were, or anything else, these men took all the good jobs and left all the rough ones for the women. They would even side with the bosses when they razzed us and made sordid remarks to us.

I couldn't open my mouth until I got seniority after ninety days. I got seniority, but then they found out who I was, and I was fired, summarily, just like that. I had carried my name, Genora Johnson, to Detroit and the blacklist had caught up with me. I thought if I used my new married name, Genora Dollinger, I would have a chance. I came home and I said, "Sol, I'm going to start using your name now. I've worn mine out."

I decided to apply for a job at Briggs Corporation. It used to be a plant that produced auto bodies for Chrysler. During the war it had the largest press room in the world. They were producing complete B-27 airplanes. It was a huge plant.

The plant had a good union leadership and I think that's what I was looking for—a little protection. Local 212 had a reputation for being very, very militant. They were called the "dead-end kids" of the UAW. They had sent flying squads up to Flint to help us win our sit-down strike.

I practically had to beg the employment manager to give me a job in the plant instead of in the office at a higher salary. He said I didn't belong in a factory because I had good grammar and I wasn't a "shop girl." But I told him that I had gone through a WPA course and learned how to run lathes and milling machines and grinders, and I knew how to use vernier calipers and all the necessary tools. When you completed that course you could go into practically any department of an automobile plant and know how to handle the job. I had all the qualifications to be hired in the plant,

and I told him with a straight face that I had come out for the war effort, so he hired me.

Briggs Manufacturing Company had several plants in Detroit and they put me in the plant on Vernor Avenue. I was on the drill press and I'm telling you, those were the longest days of my life. All the workers were exhausted from the speed-up. We had a militant union, but so many people thought that if you struck during the war, you were striking against our boys on the front lines. Patriotism was running high.

The hiring manager had mentioned that he had a large inspection department in the main plant on Mack Avenue. That plant employed 7,000 workers. I left the Vernor plant one day and walked into his office. I said, "You promised me that you were going to transfer me to the inspection department." So he transferred me.

The inspection department was divided into "cribs" or sections. Chicken-wire walls divided the cribs from each other, keeping the Navy parts separate from the Army parts, because they were working on two different airplanes. Workers could see over into the Navy crib, and they could see over into the Army crib, but no one was supposed to ever go from one crib to another. The whole department was restricted. But the union covered all the grievances from both cribs, and the stewards and I had to go back and forth. We could always see if the foremen were doing something in one crib when we were over in the other crib. It was an interesting arrangement, all right.

The workers were primarily women with maybe a hundred or two hundred men who were injured veterans returned from the war. The women were treated in a disgraceful fashion by the foremen. They talked dirty to them, saying things like "Get the rag out of your ass" and "It's time to stop your screaming and your bleeding." Dirty, sick, awful stuff. They were resentful of women coming into the plants. They seemed to especially enjoy tormenting women fresh out of their homes or school classrooms.

The union was trying to organize the women there. They had an old man come up from an adjoining local, and he would take up a grievance here and there and pat the women on the back. But he didn't solve anything, really, because the foremen didn't change their ways and the male union rep was blind to the harassment.

For ninety days, women kept coming around saying, "We're going to have a meeting. We're going over to the Local hall, won't you come?" And I'd say, "No, I can't. No, I can't." I couldn't talk to anybody because I had to work ninety days to get seniority. Finally, I had about three or four days left. The women in our department were organizing a meeting to go over and talk to the people at the main union hall. They were taking their list of grievances to tell them that they weren't being resolved. So I went over and sat in the back of the hall.

Instead of having a committee man address this department meeting, they had Emil Mazey come in to give his last farewell speech. Emil was the organizer and president of Briggs Local 212, and he had been drafted because of his militancy. He wouldn't go along with the UAW's no-strike pledge during the war, so he was drafted by the United States government. (He later became the secretary-treasurer of the International Union).

When I saw Emil come in, I didn't know what the hell to do. I didn't want to get up and be noticed by walking out, so I just held my head down during his speech and tried to be as inconspicuous as possible. When they said they needed somebody to be their chief steward, which is the same as a committee man or committee woman in the General Motors plants, he recognized me. He told these women that I'd been working with for almost three months, "I don't know what you're coming over here and asking me for help for. You've got one of the original organizers of the union right there in your ranks." All the women looked back at me.

I was embarrassed and angry, because I knew I was going to get fired because of the blacklist. After the meeting, when Emil came down to greet me, I said, "Thanks, pal. You know what you did? You just blasted me out of being a member of your union." The women were all around me. Emil called over the man who was succeeding him as president, a young militant by the name of Jess Ferazza. He introduced me and said, "Jess, if that woman is fired, you pull every Briggs plant in the city of Detroit, all 18,000 workers, and you keep them down until she's put back in again."

A couple of days after the meeting, I was fired. Eighteen thousand workers walked out in Detroit and I got my job back immediately. I was elected chief steward of Department 15 and I organized

it very well. There were 500 workers in my department, mainly Hungarian, Italian, and Polish. There were all kinds of things they didn't have experience with and there were many problems that had never been resolved.

The workers had only half-an-hour to rush up to the cafeteria, eat their lunches, and get back down again, so they brought their lunches instead. They cleared off a few long tables so they could sit around them and eat. Every day I ate lunch with a different group and discussed unionism and solidarity.

One day, one of the women left crying and I chewed the foreman out. The foreman denied having anything to do with it. I didn't believe the foreman, naturally. But what had happened was that another women found out that she had an illegitimate child and said something nasty to her. So we had a big discussion on that and on a number of other similar topics, day after day.

We had three gay couples in there, too. One of them didn't like me. Her partner was very friendly, very warm. But this woman was not cooperative at all with things that I was trying to do to build the union. One day she said something about me being interested in her partner. So I took her outside the gates of the department and I said, "Look, I want to tell you something. I don't want you to think that there's anything between your partner and me. I've got a husband, and I'm not personally interested in your friend. I understand what the relationship is and I want you on my side." And she was on my side from that time on. She was a good one.

In the early days, you know, no one talked about those things. There was so much prejudice. But we got those women to the point where they accepted an awful lot of things that even the men with all their experience wouldn't accept.

And we organized all kinds of militant actions. There were more walk-outs at Briggs than anywhere else in the city of Detroit. Even though the UAW had agreed not to strike during the war, we kept organizing walk-outs because the company never stopped trying to smash Local 212. But every time we struck, somebody usually got fired.

At one point, there was a major grievance in the plant in some other department. The union stewards decided that we had to strike over this grievance. But one steward after another said,

“Don’t look at me. I led the last one, and I nearly got fired.” So finally they turned to me. “You haven’t led a strike out of here for the whole building.” I said, “No, I haven’t. But I’ve got it pretty well organized by now.” And so they said, “It’s up to Department 15 to lead this one.”

First I told everybody, “Don’t clock out-to make sure you get your pay. It shows that you were consciously leaving the department on strike at that time.” That was how the company was able to identify the strike leaders: they were the first to clock out. But I didn’t know what the hell I was going to manufacture in my department to get all the workers out without recriminations.

Finally, I came up with a plan. Eddie, the Army foreman, had a nasty mouth on him. I went into the superintendent’s office and I started charging Eddie with all kinds of contract violations. The superintendent said, “Wait just a minute, Genora. We’ll get Eddie in here.” “All right, you get him in here.” Then I said, “Look, you and Frasier (the Navy foreman) both said this and you said this.” I charged them with a lot of grievances that didn’t really exist although they could have. The foremen were amazed and they were angry. I said, “You want me to prove it? You know where I got my information? Call the general foreman in.” I got them all in that office, off the work floor, all the foremen, Navy crib, Army crib, and Marine crib. I was yelling and hollering as hard as I could- like you had to do with those kind of foremen, charging them with all kinds of things.

Then the Army foreman looked out the window and said, “My God, the department is all gone!” They had walked off. I turned to the superintendent, and I said, “You didn’t believe me, did you. You see what you’ve done? What they’ve done?” Then I walked out. My line stewards had lead the women out without touching the time-clock. They had all gone, so I walked out, too. We won that strike and none of my stewards were fired, but there were casualties in other departments.

From my viewpoint now, I know that if they had organized women like that in every plant, we would have had a much stronger union. But that wasn’t the policy of the men in the unions then. They didn’t think too much about women. Most of them were resentful of “women working in factories and taking jobs away from

men.” But I was able to prove to all the rest of the men in the plant, some of whom had built the union from the beginning, what women could do and how much they could learn and how fast they could develop in a short time. I had a great deal of satisfaction out of that experience.

I was fired three times. The last time I went back, it was rough. If I went to the toilet, they had somebody follow me and very obviously watch the clock. Everything I did was watched. Every time a grievance was brought up or there was a discussion with one of the employees, the foreman would come up a little too close. I’d say, “Get the hell out of here. This is a private grievance and you have no business until we call you in on it.” In my department, the workers wouldn’t let the foremen come anywhere near anything that I was saying or doing, but I couldn’t stop it when I was out of my department.

During this time the Local needed an educational director because our director was drafted. The executive board voted that I take over the job. But some of our people in the Socialist Workers’ Party didn’t think it would be a wise thing because of my reputation as a socialist. They thought it would be better if I didn’t take it. But the union kept insisting. I heard that another very good educator from Ford Local was being released, so I asked the union if they would release me from their request if I could get him to come over to Briggs Local. They agreed and so I took over the public speaking classes instead.

Many of the committee men were very effective in the shop on grievances and in speaking to people one on one. But when a union meeting came up, they just didn’t know how to stand up and make a persuasive speech. A number of these committee men from different Briggs plants came to my classes regularly. We had a very effective method of encouraging them. We recorded what they said one time and played it back when they got much better.

When the contract came up for consideration, lo and behold, these committee men stood up and spoke in the meetings. They did a beautiful job persuading the workers to turn down this contract, because it didn’t meet any of the union demands. One meeting after another, the contract was turned down, primarily because of these popular committee men who had never before taken a position on

the floor. That was another reason why management didn't like me very much.

Then came the end of the war. All of the people on war production were laid off because the plants were going back into regular industrial production.

The Employers Strike Back

In 1945, when the plant closed down for re-tooling after the war, I was asked to help the UAW run its first candidate for the mayor of the city of Detroit, Richard Frankenstein. I worked one or two days when one night when I was sleeping in bed, I was beaten with a lead pipe.

Two men broke in through the back door of our apartment from the alley and put a flashlight in my face. I went up on my elbow to see who it was. That's when I got beaten pretty badly.

At that time, my husband, Sol, was organizing the Socialist Workers' Party chapter in Flint. He used to come home to Detroit every weekend at the same time. But this particular week, he called and said, "I can't make it on Saturday. Is it all right if I come home for Sunday and Monday instead?" So it was not the usual time he was home. Normally, I would have been alone on that night, but he was sleeping on the other side of the bed when I was attacked. If he hadn't put his arm over my head, I think I would have been injured permanently-beyond help. He tried to climb over me, and they clubbed him on the legs so bad that when he tried to stand up against them, he collapsed. The two thugs immediately rushed out into the back alley and sped away.

I was badly injured and had to stay in the hospital for several weeks. I had a brain concussion and was paralyzed on my right side. I had a broken collarbone and nerve damage to my face, and I was in a cast for six weeks.

There had previously been three other beatings in the local. The first beating was of a popular member of the Briggs Local, Roy Snowden, who was captain of the flying squad, a fighting military group, the most militant flying squad in the whole UAW. Roy was a most courageous union man and afraid of nothing. The assailants ambushed him in his rooming house. As Roy went to put his key in the door, he couldn't get it in. He bent over to find out why. They had deliberately broken off another piece of metal in there. When he was bent over, they came up and gave him a severe beating.

The next time they got another militant man of the squadron by the name of Art Vega. He had also been in an awful lot of scraps to build the union. Art Vega and his wife were out walking when thugs rushed out and started beating him. His wife took off her high-heeled shoe and hit one of them in the back of the head. She started screaming and they ran away. But it was a real, genuine threat.

Then Roy Snowden was beaten a second time when he was walking up the street with Frank Silver, president of the motor products Local. Somebody he knew beckoned to him from the sideline and he went over. His companion got a little ahead of him, and when Roy went to catch up, thugs dashed out from the back of an apartment building and gave him another severe beating.

We decided to form an investigating committee to find out where these beatings were coming from because we did not want them to spread further in the Local. In the meeting only a couple of people volunteered because it was a real intimidation for the rest of the membership to think that the great captain of the flying squad, this physically and mentally powerful man, had been beaten up twice. So I volunteered. Dumb-bell me!

We began investigating and interrogating people, holding meetings and going over the information we had collected. We learned that Briggs had given out an important scrap contract to a man by the name of Carl Renda. Carl Renda was the son-in-law of Santo Perrone, the head of the Mafia in the city of Detroit. Briggs had given the Mafia this highly lucrative scrap contract in exchange for attacking the militants in the union.

When our committee went to the International Union, they just pooh-poohed it. "These guys get into beer garden fights. They break up the place, and they can be stepping out with somebody else, and some husband can come in..." and so on. They gave us a lot of silly talk. When I asked Walter Reuther to set up a reward that would deter any further action, he said, "Come on, Genora. Let's not get dramatic." That was before I was attacked.

I told Walter that if he didn't put up a reward at the Local level, the violence would come up to the International. Then he could be facing it. By the way, my warning is published in an issue of the American Socialist magazine. Sadly, my prediction came true. They shot both Reuther brothers. Walter Reuther was shot and Victor

Reuther was shot and lost his eye. Then the International Union became very, very interested. They put up a very big reward and brought in a man from Washington, who used to be on the LaFollette investigating committee. This man, Ralph Winstead, was a real detective. He followed every lead, every rumor. He was paid twenty-four hours a day for doing this.

We had to investigate some very suspicious characters, and the detective had to inform his wife every hour where he was. Later on the police found his body in Lake Ste. Claire. We think it was foul play and so did the International Union. But there was nothing we could do about it.

Back to the Future

“Nothing is ever handed to the working people on a silver platter. Improved living conditions and greater freedom are won through organized struggles. This is how the common people in America got the right to vote, the right to send their children to public schools, and the right to form their own independent organizations.”

– UAW, Local 212, Educational Committee March 18, 1945.

I think our duty today is to educate all of those who do not understand that they got their present benefits and their present standard of living from organized labor. We have to tell the story of people who suffered and died for the cause of labor. We have to teach people the history of the labor movement, and we have to tell the story that women played, so that women can be encouraged to play more of a role today.

We have won some wonderful economic advantages for working people in this country. But they are slowly being legislated away from us. Now, we've got to fight on the political level. We have to organize politically with the same intensity that we had when we began to organize the unions.

Today, most unions have a bureaucratic leadership that does little for working people and keeps them in a state of apathy. As soon as Walter Reuther found the back door to the White House so he could go in and talk to the President, he was more concerned about what the big politicals and the corporation owners said than his own members—his own members!

Right after the strike, they did away with the stewards collecting union dues on the job. Walter Reuther wanted to have money coming in regularly through an automatic dues check-off system. It was supposed to be more efficient and guarantee that in case of a strike the International Union had the funds available to help in any part of the country. But as soon as they got the regular dues coming in, you know what the bureaucrats did? They were secure, so they made all the decisions and that made the union less democratic.

We fought against this change because we thought it was better to keep the union leadership accountable to the members. Under the old system workers had some power over their leaders. They could say, "I want this done and I want that done and here's my dues." So the leadership had to deliver if they wanted the dues to come in regularly.

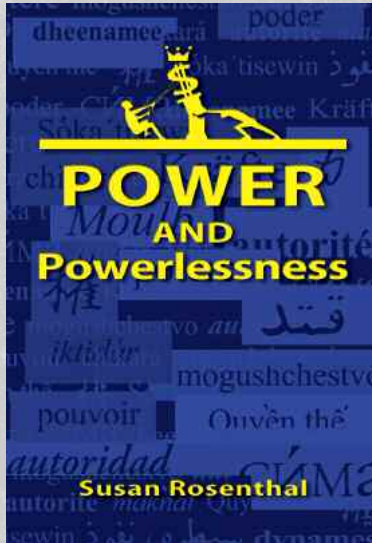
At the beginning of the strike, Walter Reuther said no labor leader should get paid more than the highest paid worker in the industry. But he soon forgot those words. He started living a very comfortable life, and he spent a lot of the union's money without talking to the members about it. He built a very beautiful camp at Black Lake with some of that money.

That camp is supposed to be an educational facility, but they don't want radicals in there giving workers the real solution to the problems of people in general and working class people especially. That is socialism, social ownership of the means of production. That is the way to stop the ruling class from dominating humanity, and for working people to achieve their liberation. ●

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