

CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Society for Comparative Studies in Society and History

The Occupation of the Factories: Paris 1936, Flint 1937

Author(s): Michael Torigian

Reviewed work(s):

Source: *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, Vol. 41, No. 2 (Apr., 1999), pp. 324-347

Published by: [Cambridge University Press](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/179449>

Accessed: 26/03/2012 12:19

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



Cambridge University Press and Society for Comparative Studies in Society and History are collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Comparative Studies in Society and History*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

The Occupation of the Factories: Paris 1936, Flint 1937

MICHAEL TORIGIAN

The highest stage in the history of the labor movement came with the unionization of the Fordist-Taylorist factory system.¹ Neither before nor since has labor achieved a comparable influence. In the United States and France, this stage was reached in the same period and through roughly similar means. In June 1936, a massive wave of factory occupations swept across the Paris metal industry, forcing employers to introduce one of the world's most progressive systems of industrial relations. Six months later, sit-in strikes in Flint, Michigan, defeated the open shop at the General Motors Corporation, opening the way to the subsequent unionization of America's mass-production sector. These two events, the dominant peaks in the history of the modern labor movement, have rarely been viewed in the same light, yet they were part of a unique set of circumstances affecting not merely the fate of unionism, but that of industrial society.²

PARIS, FLINT, AND RADICAL LABOR ACTION

Central to strikes both in Paris and Flint was an environment favoring radical labor action. Because the Paris occupations came first and then set the standard for the resulting occupations, let us begin with them. The World Depression created the crucial backdrop to "labor's giant step." Although it did not reach France until 1931 and was qualitatively less severe than the U.S. economic crisis, the French depression nonetheless shut down factories, sharpened social

¹ The concept of the "Fordist-Taylorist factory system," first developed in Antonio Gramsci, "Americanism and Fordism," in *Selections from the Prison Notebooks* (New York: International Publishers, 1971), 277–318, was popularized in the 1970s by France's "regulation economists" (Boyer, Aglietta, Lipietz, Coriat). It refers to those mass-production metal-fabrication plants based on the assembly-line techniques devised by Henry Ford and managed according to the "scientific" principles worked out by Frederick Winslow Taylor. The U.S. auto industry of the 1920s and 1930s best exemplifies this form of production.

² Most accounts of the French and American occupations make reference to the other national case, but the only actual attempt to compare them is to be found in Sidney Fine, *Sit-Down: The General Motors Strike of 1936–1937* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1969), 125–8. Notwithstanding his definitive study of the Flint occupations, Fine's treatment of the Paris strikes, based on a few English language sources, examines only their general contours, not the structural and contingent factors linking them with the Flint movement. Cf. Val R. Lorwin, "Reflections on the History of the French and American Labor Movements," *The Journal of Economic History*, 17 (March 1957).

conflict, and disrupted the nation's political life. The Depression's destabilizing effects were especially prominent after February 1934, when a series of violent right-wing demonstrations, fueled by the declining economy, threatened the existence of the French republic. In response to these threats, the Confédération Générale du Travail (CGT) called a general strike to defend republican institutions and the Parti Communiste Français (PCF) rallied the left parties in an anti-fascist alliance to ward off further attacks. The successful work stoppage of February 12 and the left alliance emerging from it had an immediate and electrifying effect on French workers, rousing them as no other movement or this century. In their eyes, the "republican union" linking the unions and the progressive parties represented not merely a barrier to "fascism" but a possible panacea to the various economic ills affecting the depressed factory system.³ Then, as the Radical, Socialist, and Communist parties affiliated with the republican union scored a sweeping victory in the legislative elections of April and May in 1936 and won the right to form a Popular Front government, working-class France began to anticipate a new deal in the shops.⁴ On May 11, shortly before the installation of the new government, this anticipation took active form as aviation workers in the port city of Le Havre staged the first overnight occupation in the French metal industry. After two days and nights encamped in their plant, these workers succeeded in forcing their employer to rehire several recently fired unionists and, without precedent, to pay wages lost during the work stoppage. On the 13th in Toulouse and on the 14th in the Paris Region, similar strikes led to similar results. At least two, perhaps all three, of these occupations were instigated by Communist unionists, supported by the left parties, who provided logistical supports, set up negotiations, and went unopposed by the caretaker government in Paris.⁵ Unbeknownst to their organizers and participants, these strikes were to serve as a dress rehearsal for the massive wave of factory occupations that was about to reshape the social contours of French industry.⁶

³ For example, Henri Vieilledent, *Souvenirs d'un Travailleur Manuel Syndicaliste* (Paris: La Pensée Universelle, 1978), 218; *L'Union des Métaux* (CGT), October 1935.

⁴ "Les Conflits de Juin dans la Région Parisienne," *Etudes: Revue Catholique d'Intérêt Générale*, December 5, 1936; *Le Populaire* (SFIO), May 28, 1936; *L'Aube Nouvelle* (PCF), May 23, 1936.

⁵ The Communist-controlled Metal Union was firmly entrenched at the Bréquet plant in Le Havre and at the Bloch plant in the Paris Region. See Louis Eudier, "Bréquet-Le Havre: Première Occupation en 1936," *Cahiers d'Histoire de l'Institut Maurice Thorez*, 1 (NS) (November–September 1972), and *La Voix Populaire* (PCF), March 6, 1936. The situation in Toulouse is somewhat more opaque, but Daniel Brower in *The New Jacobins: The French Communist Party and the Popular Front* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1968) suggests that metal workers there had been agitated by local Communists in the days leading up to the occupation.

⁶ The occupations are one of the few chapters in French labor history that has attracted more than a modicum of scholarly attention. Among the many works devoted to them, I would recommend Saloman Schwarz, "Les Occupations d'Usines en France de Mai et Juin 1936," *International Review for Social History*, 2 (1937); Jacques Danos and Marcel Gibelin, *Juin 36*, Nouvelle Edition (Paris: La Découverte, 1986); Georges Lefranc, *Juin 36: "L'Explosion Sociale" du Front*

On May 24, in the lull following the initial occupations, one of the largest and most imposing working-class demonstrations in French history took place, as 600,000 Parisians made the annual commemorative march to the Mur des Fédérés, where in 1871 the last of the Communards had taken their final stand. This massive labor turnout, following in the wake of the electoral triumph and the evolving psychology in the plants, did not pass without consequence.⁷ Two days later, while the shops and courtyards of the Paris metal industry bustled with agitation, 4,000 *métallos* seized and occupied 6 factories. Each of these occupations was instigated by militants from the CGT's Paris Metal Union, who sought to capitalize on the favorable political climate fostered by the election and the march.⁸ Supported by the red municipalities of the Paris suburbs, which fed and aided the strikers, the occupations quickly spread and on the 28th reached Renault, the largest auto maker outside North America.⁹ Again, under Communist instigation, the Renault workers occupied their plant, elected a strike committee, and drew up a list of demands, foremost of which was for union recognition. At this point, as the occupations assumed an imposing magnitude, employers agreed to go to the bargaining tables—on the condition that the strikers evacuate the factories. Against the reluctance of many in the struck plants, the Metal Union acceded to these conditions in the hope of winning a contract that would institutionalize its bargaining rights. In the ensuing negotiations, employers were prepared to bow to every union demand except the most important, for a contract. Then on June 2, after confronting the stymied talks,

Populaire (Paris: Julliard, 1966); and Antoine Prost, "Les Grèves de Juin 1936, Essai d'Interpretation," in *Léon Blum: Chef de Gouvernement 1936–1937* (Paris: PFNSP, 1967), P. Renouvin and R. Rémond, eds. Despite these and numerous other studies, there is still a paucity of works on specific industrial sectors. This is especially the case with the Paris metal industry, which constituted both the axis of the strike movement and the axle upon which the future labor movement would turn. I have tried to right this imbalance somewhat in *Every Factory A Fortress: The French Labor Movement in the Age of Ford and Hitler* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1999).

⁷ Pierre Monatte, *La Lutte Syndicale* (Paris: Maspero, 1976), 226; Saloman Schwarz, "Die Okkupationsstreik in Frankreich im Sommer 1936" (Typescript MS, Hoover Institution Archives, n.d.), 28.

⁸ This point is bound to be challenged, for the reigning orthodoxy holds that the strikes were purely spontaneous. Given the paucity of French labor studies and the scant knowledge of specific federations, most historians have examined the June occupations without reference to earlier sit-downs and without recognition of the real forces involved. For a corrective to this view, see my "From Guinea Pig to Prototype: Communist Labour Policy in the Paris Metal Industry, 1922–35," *Journal of Contemporary History*, 34 (October 1997). Cf. Bertrand Badie, "Les Grèves du Front Populaire aux Usines Renault," *Le Mouvement Sociale*, 81 (October–December 1972); Herrick Chapman, *State Capitalism and Working-Class Radicalism in the French Aircraft Industry* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991); and Michael Seidman, *Workers Against Work: Labor in Paris and Barcelona during the Popular Fronts* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991).

⁹ Maurice Moissonnier, "1936: Les Grèves d'Occupation des Usines," *Les Cahiers de l'Institut CGT d'Histoire Sociale*, 19 (September 1986), 13–14. If the Paris metal industry was the storm center of the subsequent occupations, the Renault auto works formed its eye. A key work on Renault and one of the best treatments of French Communist unionism is Jean-Paul Depretto and Sylvie V. Schweitzer, *Le Communisme à l'Usine: Vie Ouvrière et Mouvement Ouvrier chez Renault 1920–1939* (Paris: EDIRES, 1984).

metal workers spontaneously resumed the battle positions abandoned just days before. By nightfall, 150,000 *métallos*, half the industry's workforce, had occupied their factories. Carried out in a calm and disciplined manner by workers who took a festive view of the novel work stoppage, the strikes at this stage began to affect other trades and regions, taking on the dynamic of a mass movement. Significantly, the movement's extension was neither initiated nor authorized by the CGT leadership but proliferated through contagion, as workers sensed the propitiousness for remedying deep-rooted grievances.

By the time Léon Blum's Popular Front government was installed on June 5, more than a half million French workers were on strike, most ensconced in their factories and work sites. From the first, the new premier resisted rightist demands for force and committed himself to a peaceful resolution of the conflict. This left employers, who were beginning to fear that the strikes were assuming a revolutionary dimension with little choice but to settle. On the evening of the 7th, government, CGT, and employer representatives drew up what was to be known as the Matignon Agreement, granting union recognition, a hefty wage hike, a system of shop stewards, as well as the principle of the forty-hour week and the two-week paid vacation, both of which the Chamber of Deputies was about to enact. The unprecedented agreement, according French workers rights and benefits enjoyed by no other working class, failed, however, to halt the burgeoning movement. The strike wave in fact continued to swell. By the 9th, the work stoppage embraced two million workers, a quarter of the French working class. While the strikes at this date had extended well beyond the Paris metal industry, its auto, aircraft, and mechanical-engineering workers remained the vanguard of the movement. Every attempt by the CGT Metal Union to persuade these workers to accept a compromise failed, spurring strikers in other sectors. Finally, as the government foundered and the crisis deepened, the top PCF leadership, worried that the strikes were starting to undermine the Popular Front, the centerpiece of its concerns, decided to intervene against them. On the evening of the 11th, party chief Maurice Thorez ordered Communists, the only ones with any authority in the occupied plants, to push for a cessation of the conflict.¹⁰ The next day, in direct response to Thorez's appeal, delegates from the occupied metal plants agreed to evacuate the factories on the basis of the employers' latest concessions. While the settlement in the Paris metal industry did not immediately halt the movement in other sectors, it signaled the beginning of the end. By the time the remaining conflicts were resolved, well over half the French working class had flocked to the CGT; its unions had been for-

¹⁰ *L'Humanite* (PCF), June 12 and 13, 1936. Thorez's order scandalized the far left. As one Socialist lamented, "The Revolution, which was there within arm's reach, has just been betrayed." See Maurice Jacquier, *Simple Militant* (Paris: Denoel, 1974), 98. The PCF's left wing felt a similar sense of betrayal. See *Oue Faire?*, July 1936. Also Pierre Broué and Nicole Dorey, "Critiques de Gauche et Opposition Révolutionnaire au Front Populaire," *Le Mouvement Sociale*, 4 (January-March 1966).

mally recognized by the employers; and the labor confederation, transformed from a pariah group into a power structure, was henceforth acknowledged as a major player in the nation's affairs.

The Flint occupations (or sit-down strikes) were somewhat different in character but had an analogous effect on labor relations. Prior to the formation of John L. Lewis's Committee of Industrial Organization (CIO) in November 1935, U.S. industrial workers had lacked a true champion and organized labor remained an "arrested movement."¹¹ Lewis' CIO changed all this, releasing an energy unknown in U.S. labor history.¹² In the summer of 1936, the CIO's United Automobile Workers (UAW) hired fifteen organizers and mobilized several hundred rank-and-file activists in a concerted effort to unionize the auto industry.¹³ The principal target of the union's organizing campaign was General Motors (GM), the largest and most important of the auto makers. Like CIO efforts in other industries, the effort in auto focused on the upcoming election.¹⁴ The presidential and state-wide races of 1936 assumed, as a result, a significance similar to the great political mobilizations of the Popular Front. Following the November election, in which Roosevelt won a landslide victory and a pro-labor Democrat, Frank Murphy, captured Michigan's governor's mansion, the organizing campaign began to pay dividends. Buoyed up by the triumph at the polls and the feeling that labor had friends in Washington and Lansing, auto workers began making their way to the UAW.¹⁵ Although still only a fraction of the industry's 500,000 production workers, the union's expanding membership reflected the evolving power relations on the shop floor that came with the CIO's participation in the New Deal. With recruitment on the rise, one movement after another started to convulse the industry.¹⁶ In late November, the first overnight auto occupation occurred at the Bendix Corporation in South Bend, where, after a seven-day struggle, the UAW forced the company union from the plant and won exclusive bargaining rights. This was followed by sit-down strikes at Midland and Kelsey-Hayes in Detroit and at Fisher Body plants in Atlanta and Kansas City. These occupations imbued unionists with the sudden confidence that they had discovered the ultimate organizing weapon. At this point, as "the situation heated up," the UAW asked GM for a "general conference" to discuss a national contract. Unwilling to abandon the open shop, GM

¹¹ David Brady, *Workers in Industrial America: Essays on the 20th Century Struggle* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), 82.

¹² Benjamin Stoberg, "The CIO Moves On," *The Nation*, February 20, 1937.

¹³ The UAW was formally constituted by the AFL in August 1935, but only in May 1936 did the membership gain control of the union's executive offices. On the formation of the UAW, see Walter Galenson, *The CIO Challenge to the AFL: A History of the American Labor Movement* (Ithaca: Institute of International Industrial and Labor Relations, Cornell University, 1961), 31.

¹⁴ Edward Levinson, *Labor on the March* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1938), 143.

¹⁵ William Weinstone, *The Great Sit-Down Strike* (New York: Workers Library, 1937), 25; *Daily Worker*, December 26, 1936.

¹⁶ Union News Service (CIO), December 21, 1936, February 15, 1937.

referred union officials to local plant managers, refusing to negotiate at the national level. It did not, however, realize that larger forces had shifted against it: By late 1936 the fledgling UAW was buttressed by the considerable resources of the CIO, supported by the ruling party, and equipped with a novel strike weapon against which the corporation had not yet devised a strategy.

Then, on December 28, 1936 at the Cleveland Fisher Body plant, on the 30th at Flint Fisher Body Plant 1, and on the 31st at Flint Fisher Body Plant 2, sit-down strikes were launched in the hope of making the UAW the workers' national bargaining agent.¹⁷ In seizing these factories, unionists claimed they were embarking on a struggle that would pit "the CIO against downtown New York," working-class America against the Eastern financial oligarchy.¹⁸ But unlike Paris strikers, who also challenged the monied interests in the name of "the people," the sit-downers represented a mere fraction of the workforce. At Fisher Body Plant 1, the heart of the conflict, less than 1,000 of its 7,000 workers participated in the occupation, and of Flint's 43,000 auto workers, barely a tenth belonged to the UAW. In addition to their identification with the New Deal and the union's ascending prospects, these unrepresentative strikers were encouraged and emboldened by their power to cripple the highly integrated circuit of auto production.¹⁹ Because the Cleveland and Flint factories were "mother plants," upon which three-quarters of GM's 69 American plants depended for body parts, a small number of strikers was able to exert a force out of all proportion to their actual strength. The ensuing parts shortage consequently forced GM to halt production elsewhere, idling 135,000 of its 150,000 production workers.²⁰ Given that the Cleveland local was strong enough to keep its plant closed without occupying it, the occupation there lasted but a few

¹⁷ There is some controversy over whether the Flint workers spontaneously initiated the strike, forcing the UAW to accept their *fait accompli*, or whether the strike was the result of a premeditated union plan. Two Communist participants have left the impression that it was a product of their strategic intervention. See Henry Kraus, *The Many and the Few: A Chronicle of the Dynamic Auto Workers*, 2nd ed. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1985), and Wyndham Mortimer, *Organize! My Life as a Union Man* (Boston: Beacon, 1971). Against this view, two Trotskyist (or former Trotskyist) historians have argued that the turbulent character of the UAW ruled out the possibility of any long-term plan and that union leaders were forced to march to the step of the ranks. See Art Preis, *Labor's Giant Step: Twenty Years of the CIO* (New York: Pathfinder, 1972), 53–54, and Bert Cochran, *Labor and Communism: The Conflict that Shaped American Unions* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977), 115–19. Fine's view is closest to the spontaneity thesis. See *Sit-Down*, 142–7. Certain press accounts also favor this thesis, such as *The Chicago Daily Tribune*, January 2, 1937. I tend to favor the argument of the pro-Communist historian, Roger Keeran, who contends that even if the sit-downs broke out spontaneously, it hardly negates "the existence of a strategy, preparation, and a general deadline." See *The Communist Party and the Auto Workers Union* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1980), 19.

¹⁸ Cited in Frank Cormier and William J. Eaton, *Reuther* (Engelwood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1970), 79.

¹⁹ *The New York Times*, January 15, 1937.

²⁰ UAW members in seventeen other GM plants, anxious to join the fray, staged walkout or sit-down strikes of their own, but given the nature of the Cleveland and Flint operations, these additional strikes were almost superfluous. See Levinson, *Labor on the March*, 153.

days. The sit-down strike at Fisher Body Plants 1 and 2, in the capital of the GM empire, henceforth constituted the frontline in what was to be a 44-day struggle between the forces of organized labor and those of the open shop—a struggle whose outcome was destined to shape the fate of the CIO and industrial labor.²¹ While Flint strikers bottlenecked the GM system and Detroit's Catholic bishop denounced the "illegal sit-downs borrowed from the Communists of France," violence broke out in several auto centers, a massive back-to-work movement was set in motion; court injunctions were served on the strikers; and vigilantes threatened mayhem against union organizers.²² The violence marring the strike and the various forces mounted against it contrast sharply with the peaceful French occupations, which were enthusiastically supported by the worker inhabitants of Paris' red suburbs. The contention surrounding the Flint occupation stemmed from several sources but was mainly derived from the fact that the GM strike was a minority movement, led by a mere handful of militants and carried out against the wishes of a sizeable number of workers.²³ In France there was no back-to-work movement; conservative workers, such as those associated with the Catholic CFTC, participated in the occupations; and far-right groups, unlike their American counterparts (such as the Flint Alliance or the Black Legion), rallied to what was considered a justifiable rebellion against the anomic and exploitative conditions of the liberal order. Moreover, the French occupations were led by strike committees made up of skilled workers and rank-and-file militants, while the Flint occupation was left solely in union hands. The Paris and Flint struggles differed in other ways as well. Most notably, the Paris metal strike provoked a massive class upheaval that quickly escaped union control and assumed national dimensions, while the Flint occupation, despite its industry-wide implications, remained essentially a localized contest between the UAW and GM. Yet in this confrontation between the fledgling labor organization and the giant auto corporation, which considered the occupations a revolutionary form of trespass and refused to negotiate, the UAW held most of the trumps, for it succeeded in attacking the auto maker at one of its most strategically situated salients, while the corporation lacked the legal and extralegal means of forcing the strikers from its plants.²⁴ The Flint strikers also captured most of the favorable headlines and influenced the public's image of the conflict.²⁵ But above all they enjoyed the support of elected officials

²¹ *Workers Age*, February 20, 1937.

²² *New York Times*, January 23, 1937; Claude E. Hoffman, *Sit-Down in Anderson: UAW Local 663* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1968), 38–59.

²³ *New York Times*, January 27, 1937; Fine, *Sit-Down*, 117–8, 142.

²⁴ If GM managers had had "the guts to be ruthless and piratical like the old timers thirty or forty years ago or the brains to recognize changing conditions and meet them," as did Henry Ford, these things might not have mattered as much—or so Paul Gallico claims in his novella "Sit-Down Strike," *Cosmopolitan* (April 1938), 163.

²⁵ Frederick H. Harbison and Robert Dubin, *Patterns of Union-Management Relations: UAW—GM—Studebaker* (Chicago: Science Research Associates, 1947), 3.

in Washington and Lansing, who declined to use their police powers and sought a pro-labor resolution of the conflict.

On February 11, after a prolonged test of wills in which the union was the last to blink, the UAW finally emerged with an agreement, the first ever negotiated between an American union and a major auto producer. Yet however significant, this was not a categorical victory. GM stopped short of granting exclusive recognition to the UAW; the contract covered only seventeen of GM's sixty-nine production facilities; and no significant concessions were made on wages or conditions. The Flint settlement nonetheless prepared the way for both the closed shop at GM and the unionization of other mass-production industries, for the retreat of the world's largest manufacturing concern could not but signal the inevitable decline of managerial hegemony in other sectors. Following the strike, U.S. Steel, without any struggle at all, signed an agreement with the CIO's Steel Workers Organizing Committee, just as other auto makers (notably Chrysler) and other mass producers prepared to negotiate union agreements of their own.²⁶ The CIO surge at this point became a wave, sweeping the most important branches of American industry into its nets.²⁷ It is thus no exaggeration to claim, as Matthew Josephson has, that the Flint strike constituted "the greatest, and by all means, the most strategic victory ever won by American labor and, in effect, opened all of America's heavy industry to unionization."²⁸

PREVIOUS LABOR OCCUPATIONS

While the factory occupations in Paris and Flint represented the most successful application of the sit-down tactic, they were neither the first nor the last example of this form of labor struggle. In 1936 and 1937, as the occupation made headlines around the world, journalists and scholars probed its history. Some were able to trace the occupation back to the work stoppages of medieval cathedral builders, and others went as far back as the ancient Egyptian pyramid builders. Less-hyperbolic roots were located in several prewar work stoppages carried out by Wobblies and syndicalists employing the "folded-arm strike."²⁹

Despite these antecedents, most commentators agreed that the World Depression had popularized radical ideas and methods, such as the sit-down, and

²⁶ Some rather classic works (such as Irving Bernstein, *Turbulent Years: A History of the American Worker 1933-1941* [Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1970] and Galenson, *The CIO Challenge to the AFL*) attribute the CIO breakthrough to the U.S. steel agreement, which in fact came after the Flint settlement and was very much influenced by it. A key corrective to this view is Melvyn Dubofsky and Warren Van Tine, *John L. Lewis: A Biography* (New York: Quadrangle, 1977), 273-6.

²⁷ Cochran, *Labor and Communism*, 127.

²⁸ Matthew Josephson, *Sidney Hill. Statesman of American Labor* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1952), 412. In *Labor's Giant Step* (p.50), Art Preis called the Flint strike the "Gettysburg of the labor movement."

²⁹ For example, Joel Seidman, "Sit-Down" (New York: League for Industrial Democracy, 1937); Georges Saloman, *Les Occupations d'Usines devant la Loi à les Tribunaux* (Paris: Librairie technique et économique, 1938).

was thus attributable to no single source.³⁰ In 1934 and 1935, there were, for example, mine occupations in Yugoslavia, Hungary, Poland, Spain, and Wales, and in Minnesota in 1933 a three-day stay-in strike at the Hormel Packing Corporation. These occupations, though, bore little direct resemblance to the imposing movements associated with Paris and Flint. The Hormel strike, like the prewar sit-downs by Wobblies and syndicalists, was a relatively isolated action without subsequent repercussion. The European mine occupations, somewhat more dramatic in character, were waged under desperate conditions by workers who sought nothing other than a subsistence wage. The only earlier case that stands comparison with the French and American occupations, at least in its amplitude and formidable extension, was the strike wave that swept through the North Italian metal industry in September 1920, begun after the Federation of Italian Metal Workers (FIOM), in a wage dispute with intransigent employers, ordered its members to occupy their factories.

Because the Italian occupations transpired in a period of political and social upheaval, they quickly transcended corporate issues, engulfing nearly a half-million metal workers in a struggle that took on the character of a violent revolutionary standoff. Against a backdrop of bloody clashes and some deaths, factory councils attempted to resume production under worker control and pro-Communist militants agitated for a sovietization of industry, while the ranks armed themselves, formed Red Guard units, and turned their factories into barricaded fortresses.³¹ Given the stakes involved, the Italian occupations more closely resembled the St. Petersburg metal strikes of 1917, which helped prepare the way for the Bolshevik coup of that year, than the conflicts of 1936 and 1937. By contrast, the American and French occupations posed no challenge to the existing order, respected private property (which was violated only in the name of a higher propriety right to one's jobs), avoided violence, and focused on social-economic demands entirely compatible with a market economy.³²

More than the above examples, the inspiration for the Paris and Flint strikes is perhaps better sought in the prehistory of earlier auto and metal conflicts. While the first overnight occupation in the Paris metal industry occurred only in May 1936, the Metal Union had a history of sit-down strikes (*grèves sur les tas*), for its Communist leadership began calling such strikes shortly after the World Depression reached France.³³ In March 1931, at the Chenard-et-Walker

³⁰ Keeran, *The Communist Party and the Auto Workers*, 155.

³¹ Paolo Spriano, *The Occupation of the Factories: Italy 1920*, Gwyn A. Williams, trans. (London: Pluto Press, 1975); Daniel L. Horowitz, *The Italian Labor Movement* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press), 142–53; Maurice F. Neufeld, *The Italian Labor Movement in Its Political, Social, and Economic Setting* (Ithaca, 1961), 371–9.

³² Danos and Gibelin, *Juin 36*, 145; Fine, *Sit-Down*, 174.

³³ The Communist International began calling for sit-down strikes as early as its Second World Congress (1920)—but with little success. After the Citroen strike of 1933, the greatest French labor upheaval since the “two red years” of 1919 and 1920, it formally renewed its call. See *Corre-*

auto works in the suburban industrial town of Gennevillier, 800 body-shop workers, in response to a union appeal, carried out the first organized sit-down in metal.³⁴ After police forcibly evacuated the plant, these strikers were forced back on employer terms. But this did not deter the union from resorting to sit-downs in subsequent conflicts. At least thirty such strikes were conducted in 1931, mainly in small shops or factories, where the union had gained the leadership of workers willing to defend their standards.³⁵ Then in November 1931 at Renault, in the spring of 1933 at Citroen, and in late 1935 at Fiat, the Paris Metal Union waged long, bitter strikes against major auto producers, all of which began with sit-downs. In none of these conflicts, however, did strikers remain in their shops overnight, for they were usually evicted by the police or locked out the next day. Nevertheless, prior to the great wave of occupations in June 1936, the sit-down had become a common feature of the union's organizing arsenal. The subsequent transformation of the sit-down into an overnight occupation, in its most elementary expression, was simply the development of an already established tactic.

If the genesis of the Paris occupations lay in the Metal Union's prehistory, the same is roughly true of the UAW. As noted above, the Flint strike had been preceded by occupations at Bendix, Midland, and Kelsey-Hayes, all of which validated the tactic for the leadership and sent worker confidence soaring. The sit-down tactic, however, originated neither with the UAW leadership nor its ranks but was borrowed from Akron rubber workers. Like their counterparts in auto, rubber workers were situated in a highly mechanized system of mass production, subject to gruelling speedup, deteriorating conditions, and high rates of unemployment. First in mid-1934, then more seriously in late 1935 and 1936 they began using "quickie sit-downs" to defend victimized unionists and resist eroding standards. Devised to circumvent company violence against picket lines, these strikes, whose effectiveness was almost immediately apparent, soon became a regular feature of labor-management disputes. Not coincidentally, they made a lasting impression on unionists in rubber, a sister industry, where the sit-down would achieve its most consequential application.³⁶

While the prehistory of the Paris and Flint strikes points up the origins of the factory occupations, there is a danger of losing sight of their extraordinary uniqueness if too much is made of their comparison with earlier sit-downs, for their vague exterior likeness conceals profound differences. The form of a

spondence Internationale (CI), August 26, 1933. The tactic, however, had become part of the union arsenal as early as 1931. See *L'Humanité*, August 21, 1931, January 26, 1932, September 15, 1932.

³⁴ The first spontaneous metal occupation occurred several weeks earlier at the Talbot auto works in Suresnes. See *L'Humanité*, January 16 and February 8, 1931. For the Chenard strike, see *L'Humanité*, March 7–12, 1931.

³⁵ *Cahiers du Bolchevisme* (PCF), July 15, 1932.

³⁶ Daniel Nelson, "Origin of the Sit-Down Era: Worker Militancy and Innovation in the Rubber Industry, 1934–38," *Labor History*, 32 (Winter 1982); also Louis Adamic, "Sit-down," *The Nation*, December 5, 1936.

strike, as I think most labor historians would agree, is ultimately less important than the nature of the organization that sponsors it or the ends to which it is applied.³⁷ The Paris and Flint strikes, representing an aspect of the evolving labor movement as it pursued union goals within the context of the Fordist-Taylorist factory system, fundamentally differed from the desperate mine occupations of the early 1930s, as well as from the insurgent Russian and Italian occupations of 1917 and 1920. In utilizing the occupation to facilitate industrial unionization, the Paris and Flint strikes took on a significance, a character, and an effect quite unlike anything that had previously occurred and thus deserve to be treated *sui generis*.

THE HISTORICAL SPECIFICITY OF THE PARIS AND FLINT OCCUPATIONS

Until the era of the sit-down, the mass-production sector, with its highly mechanized and integrated methods of large-scale manufacture and its Taylorist forms of parcelized labor, posed a nearly unsurmountable obstacle to unionization. Traditional craft workers, who still dominated the ranks of organized labor, occupied a secondary tier in the new factories, lacked the labor-market protection that formerly buffered them from employer threats, and had little influence over the production process. More consequentially, the numerous trades and occupations making up the industrial workforce, with their different jurisdictional and workshop concerns, made worker unity unfeasible and industry-wide organization nearly impossible. As a result, auto and metal-fabrication plants in the boom years of the 1920s were almost entirely free of union activity. Without the advantages afforded by the sit-down strike—and this gets to the core of my argument—it is doubtful if the labor movement, even after it shifted to an industrial model of unionism, would ever have established itself in the Fordist-Taylorist factory system.

Two reasons, I believe, lend credence to this argument. The first relates to the character of the workforce and the nature of the labor process. The Fordist system of production made it difficult for unionists not only to contact those they sought to organize, it tended to employ workers resistant to unionism. The semi-skilled machine-tending and assembly-line workers of the new factories, often of rural or immigrant backgrounds, lacked the trade associations and laboring traditions that had given craftsmen their solidarity and bargaining power; they were recruited from diverse and disparate elements without cultural fragmenting labor processes that nurtured individualistic sensibilities and were subject to social and managerial influences which unionists were powerless to counter.³⁸ In the face of these organizing obstacles, union efforts rarely tran-

³⁷ Arthur M. Ross, "The Natural History of the Strike" in *Industrial Conflict*, Arthur Kornhauser, Robert Dubin, and Arthur M. Ross, eds (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1954), 23.

³⁸ For France, see Gary S. Cross, *Immigrant Workers in Industrial France: The Making of a New*

scended factory-gate speeches or evening meetings, both of which were vulnerable to police raids and company intimidation. French and American unionists throughout the 1920s and the early years of the depression were thus effectively excluded from the mass-production sector, persecuted and blacklisted. The occupation, by contrast, would situate them in the heart of the manufacturing process, profile their visibility, and give workers a greater feeling of strength and security. Barricaded behind the high protective walls of their factory, inspired by a history-making experience, and thrown together in a novel form of collective action, previously diffident workers became primed for recruitment, while employers were powerless to counter union efforts and resume production.³⁹

The second reason the occupation was key to unionization was that industrialists in the mass-production sector, buttressed by richly endowed corporations and linked in various ways with the public powers, were always able to deflect union assaults, while craft organizations and newly founded industrial unions lacked leverage of any sort. There were thus no impediments to the employers' ability to equip their factories with internal systems of security, weed out and victimize potential "trouble-makers," and muster the state's police powers whenever it was necessary to disperse picket lines or introduce non-union labor. Even on those rare occasions when strikes spontaneously broke out—and it was always difficult to shut down the numerous departments of the Fordist factory—employers were able to disperse picket lines, recruit scabs, and continue production. Traditional work stoppages by skilled workers, no longer central to production, or mass walkouts by semi-skilled machine-tenders, who were easily replaceable, were, in these circumstances, without significant effect. Only the sit-down strike, which gave a minority of activists the means to bottleneck the highly integrated processes of Fordist manufacture and bring production to a definitive halt, offered the possibility of balancing the scales in labor's favor. As John L. Lewis put it, "the stay-in strike was beyond a doubt the only method by which the workers . . . could have forced the employers . . . into entering into real collective bargaining relations."⁴⁰

While the structural obstacles to unionization, specifically the disparity of

Laboring Class (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1983); Annie Fourcalt, *Femmes à l'Usine dans l'Entre-Deux-Guerres* (Paris: Maspero, 1982) and *Bobigny. Banlieu Rouge* (Paris: Eds. Ouvrières, 1986); Michel Colinet, *L'Ouvrier Français: Essai sur la Condition Ouvrière* (Paris: Eds. Ouvrières, 1951). For the United States, see Joyce Shaw Peterson, "Auto Workers and Their Work, 1900–1933," *Labor History*, 22 (Spring 1981); Fine, *Sit-Down*, 54–63; Stephen Meyers, "The Persistence of Fordism: Workers and Technology in the American Automobile Industry, 1900–1960," in *On the Line: Essays in the History of Auto Work*, N. Lichtenstein and S. Meyers, eds. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1989); and Robert Blaumer, *Alienation and Freedom: The Factory Worker and His Industry* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964), pp. 89–123.

³⁹ John Barnard, *Walter Reuther and the Rise of the Auto Workers* (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1983), 41.

⁴⁰ David F. Selvin, *The Thundering Voice of John L. Lewis* (New York: Lothrop, Lee and Shepard, 1969), 120.

forces and the difficulties organizing workers, suggest why unionists readily embraced the stay-in strike, they do not explain why it was suddenly possible to carry out such demanding and illegal forms of action. Circumstances, it is important to stress, had to be favorable, for only in situations where the state had been neutralized, employer authority undermined, and workers motivated by rising expectations was the sit-down feasible. Not coincidentally, these contingencies were present in both Popular Front France and New Deal America.

STRUCTURAL IMPERATIVES

During the boom years of the 1920s, when Paris metal producers employed nearly a half-million workers, Catholic, reformist, anarchist, and especially Communist unionists made repeated attempts to organize the industry. Yet as late as 1934, after the depression had massively undermined worker acquiescence and managerial legitimacy, no more than 4 percent of the total workforce had been unionized and collective agreements touched a mere handful of firms, mainly in the artisanal sector.⁴¹ The industry, moreover, was rife with discontent. In addition to pervasive unemployment and job insecurity, Paris metal workers were plagued with speed-up, favoritism, deplorable conditions, company espionage, as well as a highly authoritarian system of supervision. Every union effort to exploit this discontent was quashed by autocratic employers who jealously guarded their prerogatives, resisted collective agreements, and carefully monitored their plants for the slightest sign of union affiliation.⁴² The union was also stymied by the "individualism" of Paris workers, who thought little of defending a revolutionary barricade but had not the slightest inclination for organizational activity. Long exhausting shifts and the need to keep on the good side of foremen, responsible for hiring and firing during the periodic lay-off, further discouraged union affiliation. But the most daunting obstacle to unionization was to be found in the character of the Fordist-Taylorist production. In the large-scale metal-fabrication plants of the Paris Region, workers were subject to high rates of turnover, divided by various ascriptive differences (especially related to ethnicity) and isolated by an awesome array of fragmenting and alienating technologies.⁴³ To complicate matters, these workers were impossible to reach, once they left work; for most commuted to distant, geo-

⁴¹ The best source on the quantitative aspect of French unionism in this period is Antoine Prost, *La CGT à l'Époque du Front Populaire 1934–39* (Paris: Armand Collin, 1964).

⁴² See Louis Bergeron, *Les Capitalistes en France* (Paris: Julliard, 1978); François Sellier, *La Confrontation Sociale en France 1936–1981* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1984); Ingo Kolboom, *Frankreich Unternehmer in der Periode der Volksfront 1936–1937* (Rheinfelden: Schäuble Verlag, 1983); Marc Maurice and François Sellier, "Societal Analysis of Industrial Relations: A Comparison between France and West Germany," *British Journal of Industrial Relations*, 17 (November 1979).

⁴³ In their study of French strikes, Edward Shorter and Charles Tilly found that large-scale firms with an average of 1,200 workers had 75 percent fewer conflicts than those with an average of 130 workers. See *Strikes in France 1830–1968* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1974), 219.

graphically dispersed communities, where the relations between work and residence had been severed. Unionists, as a result, had difficulty connecting with them either on the job or in their neighborhoods.⁴⁴

While union militants had little to show for their efforts before June 1936, the Communist-led Metal Union did manage to establish the skeleton of a clandestine factory organization in a number of strategically situated Paris plants. Then, when the political climate changed after the legislative elections and the state assumed a neutral, if not supportive stance, these implanted unionists were favorably situated to carry out an exemplary action.⁴⁵ A few daring occupations, instigated by a handful of militants in several key plants, was practically all it took to enflame the workforce. As these occupations spread in Paris' politically charged Red Belt, metal workers discovered what the elections had made possible and the rest followed almost as a matter of course.⁴⁶ Encamped in their barricaded factories, there were no picket lines to defend or police to worry about; it was impossible to introduce scab labor; and the "sit-down community" fostered forms of solidarity invulnerable to outside pressure. At this point, union organizers were able to enter the plants and recruit their workforces, which had quite literally become captive audiences. This is not to argue that the metal occupations suddenly instilled strikers with syndicalist principles and sentiments, but the novel experience did create a situation in which inaccessible workers—formally cowed by authoritarian social relations, isolated by fragmenting technologies, and divided by various ascriptive differences—became accessible and recruitable.⁴⁷

Although the Flint occupations lacked the massive, spontaneous character of the Paris strikes, the obstacles confronting UAW unionists and the means by which they overcame them were nearly identical. Management at GM and throughout the auto industry had long kept the unions out of the plants, even after Roosevelt's first Administration had set up a legal framework for collective bargaining and developed the bureaucratic machinery to adjudicate labor-management disputes. American auto workers were also subject to the same alienating technologies affecting Paris metal workers, divided by similar ascriptive differences, and equally difficult to reach.⁴⁸ Like the French case, it

⁴⁴ Antoine Audit, *Les Fédérations Confédérées et Unitaires des Métaux. Lieu d'émission d'Analyses SocioEconomiques 1922–1935* (Université de Paris I: Mémoire, 1986) 86; Collinet, *L'Ouvrier Français*, 109–16.

⁴⁵ Benoît Frachon, "Juin 1936 . . . Histoire et Enseignements," *Les Cahiers d'Institut CGT-d'Histoire Social*, 17 (March 1986).

⁴⁶ Jean Coutrot, *Les Leçons de Juin 1936: L'Humanisme Economique* (Paris: CPEE, 1936); Maurice C. Charvardes, *Été 1936: La Victoire du Front Populaire* (Paris: Calman-Lévy, 1966), 132.

⁴⁷ S. Galois [Simone Weil], "La Vie et la Grève des Ouvrières Métallos," *La Révolution Proletarienne*, 10 June 1936. For the analogous situation in the United States, see Weinstone, *The Great Sit-Down Strike*, 29–33; and *Daily Worker*, January 16, 1937.

⁴⁸ Steve Babson, *Working Detroit: The Making of a Union Town* (New York: Adama Books, 1984), 23–33, 41–50, 70–71; Irving Howe and B.J. Widick, *The UAW and Walter Reuther* (New York: Random House, 1949), 3–46.

was the election euphoria and Roosevelt's pro-labor neutrality that gave the UAW unionists the opportunity to launch the occupations. Without fear of state interference, they realized that the interdependent nature of Fordist production made GM prone to such strikes, that by tying up a few strategic departments, they could force the closing of an entire factory, and that if a shut-down occurred in a key plant, it would threaten the entire corporate system. In the words of one Detroit auto worker: "Put a crimp in the belt at one spot and the whole belt freezes."⁴⁹ As union-instigated strikes in Cleveland and Flint put a crimp in the GM system and forced the closing of other production facilities, unionists had only to mobilize a minority of strategically situated workers to freeze the entire system. This gave them a bargaining lever different from the mass upheaval in the Paris metal industry, but one that worked to similar effect. Moreover, as in the French case, the Flint occupation enabled unionists to turn the massive complexity of the Fordist factory system against management, preventing it from attacking strikers, recruiting scabs, or resuming operation.⁵⁰

CONTINGENT FACTORS

While the factory occupation had the potential to surmount the structural obstacles to organization, its employment nonetheless depended on a number of highly contingent factors. Normally, employers would have broken such strikes by appealing to the state; but in both national cases the state refused to employ its police powers and unionists were able to hold their factory fortresses without threat of forceful eviction. In France the CGT's affiliation with the Popular Front automatically neutralized the state. Following the election, one worker highlighted the significance of this affiliation by declaring, "L'Etat, c'est nous maintenant"⁵¹—and this made all the difference. The New Deal, a politically more complicated formation than the Popular Front, developed a somewhat similar relation to labor, even though this had not been the case under Roosevelt's first Administration. Only in 1936, after the failure of the National Recovery Administration (NRA) and the entrance of the CIO's Non-Partisan League (LNPL) into the Democratic coalition did Roosevelt embrace a decidedly leftist version of the "managerial revolution" and take up an explicitly pro-union agenda to offset employer advantage.⁵² Without state neutrality, the oc-

⁴⁹ *New Masses*, May 4, 1937.

⁵⁰ Melvin J. Vincent, "The Sit-Down Strike," *Sociology and Social Research*, 21 (July-August 1937), 27

⁵¹ Robert Mossé, *L'Expérience Blum: Un An de Front Populaire* (Paris: Sagittaire, 1937), 33.

⁵² All the great state-altering movements of the 1930s, in my view, represent some form of what James Burnham called *The Managerial Revolution* (New York: John Day, 1941), the New Deal and the Popular Front being left-liberal variants of what the Nazis did in Germany and the Bolsheviks in Russia. See also John A. Garanty, "The New Deal, National Socialism, and the Great Depression," *The American Historical Review*, 78 (October 1973). Not unrelatedly, both the New Deal and the Popular Front attempted to incorporate the new industrial unions into the meshings of the managerial state.

cupations in France and the United States would neither have been possible nor had such a favorable outcome for labor.

Political circumstances were no less responsible for fostering the necessary social-psychological conditions. In both countries, the election campaigns of 1936 galvanized the labor movement, leading workers to expect a new deal in the factories. In France, these political influences began affecting workers even before 1936. The general strike of February 12, 1934, inspiring the formation of the Popular Front, bridged many of the rifts dividing labor and the left.⁵³ Subsequent street mobilizations under the republican banner continued the process; in alliance with the unions, the Popular Front held over a thousand demonstrations and public meetings between February 1934 and the elections of 1936. These political mobilizations gave union organizers an access to workers they lacked in the factories, opening in effect a backdoor to shopfloor organization.⁵⁴ Finally, as workers began to feel powerful in the streets, they became more assertive in the factory. Union activity escalated in 1935; the strike rate doubled; and recruitment in the Paris metal industry climbed from a few thousand to 14,000. More than any other factor, the demonstrations and electoral agitations of the Popular Front roused the unorganized and generated in them a new vision of industrial relations.⁵⁵

While these activities helped nurture the demand for labor reform, the Popular Front's installation facilitated the use of the factory occupation.⁵⁶ When conservatives and employers demanded government action to suppress the strikes, Blum committed himself to a peaceful settlement and refused to muster the police. This automatically disarmed the *patronat*. Then, as the sit-downs spread and employers agreed to union recognition, Blum played a key role in setting up negotiations and finalizing the Matignon Agreement. At the same time, his government exploited the situation to introduce legislation codifying the forty-hour week, the annual two-week paid vacation, and a variety of social reforms. Finally, the PCF, representing "the ministry of the masses" in Blum's cabinet, was instrumental in channelling the strikes into institutionally amenable forms and consolidating the long-range gains of the movement.

The political context sustaining the French strikes was further buttressed by economic developments, another of the crucial contingent factors affecting the occupations. The World Depression had taken an extremely high toll on em-

⁵³ *Verité*, July 1934; *L'Union des Métaux*, October 1935.

⁵⁴ Danielle Tartakowsky, "Stratégies de la Rue: 1934–1936," in *La France en Mouvement 1934–1938* (Paris: Champ Vallon, 1986), Jean Bouvier, ed., *La Voix du Peuple de Paris* (CGTU), June 1935.

⁵⁵ *Le Prolétaire* (PCF), May 16, 1936; *Le Peuple* (CGT), May 5, 8, 14, and 22, 1936; *L'Ouvrier Metalluriste* (CFTC), September 1937.

⁵⁶ Tristan Remy, *La Grande Lutte* (Paris: Eds. Sociales Internationales, 1937), 108; Robert Durand, *La Lutte des Travailleurs de chez Renault: Raconté par Eux-Même 1912–1944* (Paris: Eds. Social, 1971), 63; Julien Jackson, *The Popular Front in France: Defending Democracy, 1934–1938* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 92.

ployment, wages, and conditions throughout the Paris metal industry. Nearly a third of the workforce was permanently eliminated between 1931 and 1935; and another third, reduced to short time. This heightened worker insecurity and increased the level of grievance. Paradoxically, though, the depression's impact on the labor movement was not entirely negative. The severe drop in employment closed off immigration (then the world's highest), discouraged rural migrants, limited the access of women and youth, curbed turnover, gave married men and skilled workers a preference in employment, and helped, for the first time in a generation, to homogenize the workforce. As metal workers became "more French, more skilled, more mature, more urban, and more stable," they not only began to see themselves as a collectivity in need of representation, they were better able to forge those ties necessary for collective struggle.⁵⁷ The depression, in a word, increased worker complaint, as well as the possibility for labor action. But there was another, equally consequential economic factor at work. In response to the rise of Hitler, the French state in mid-1934 began rearming. The Paris metal industry, particularly its auto, aviation, and mechanical-engineering sectors, constituted the principal beneficiary of the government's rearmament program. By 1935, the trough in unemployment had bottomed out, hours increased, and metal workers experienced a gradually improving job market. Combined with the on-going republican mobilizations in the streets, the economic upswing did much to heighten workers' confidence and stiffen their will to struggle.⁵⁸

In the United States, a comparable set of circumstances surrounded the GM strike. The genteel opportunist elected in 1932 was wont to portray himself as "the greatest friend that labor ever had," but as Francis Perkins' naively revealing account indicates, Roosevelt had no specific plan to empower the unions and remained oriented to alliances with powerful interest groups supportive of the Democratic party.⁵⁹ The famous Section 7a of the Mussolini-inspired National Industrial Recovery Act recognizing labor's right to bargain was a mere afterthought, and Roosevelt was content to allow company unions to act as the workers' designated representative, except in cases where already powerful unions, like the United Mine Workers or the Ladies Garment Workers, were able to impose their will.⁶⁰ While the surge in union recruitment and

⁵⁷ Gérard Noirel, *Les Ouvriers dans la Société Française: XIXe–XXe Siècle* (Paris: Seuil, 1986), 175.

⁵⁸ Evident on every page of the industry's two main union papers: *L'Union des Métaux* (COT) and *Le Métallo* (CGTU).

⁵⁹ Frances Perkins, *The Roosevelt I Knew* (New York: The Viking Press, 1946), 303. Also William E. Leuchtenberg, *Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal 1932–1940* (New York: Harper and Row, 1963), 184; Murray Edelman, "New Deal Sensitivity to Labor Interests," in *Labor and the New Deal*, M. Derber and E. Young, eds. (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1957).

⁶⁰ Fine, *Sit-Down*, 31; "Why Did the Auto Workers Strike?," *Social Action* 3 (February 15, 1937). In fact, collective bargaining had been legalized by the Norris-La Guardia Act of 1932—provided labor was able to force the employers to engage in it.

activity in 1933 and 1934, even among traditionally docile and anti-union migrants from the South and immigrants, testified to the widespread desire to unionize, a desire that continued to go unsatisfied, especially in auto.⁶¹ Then, with the failure of the NRA, the dawning bankruptcy of the first New Deal, and the January 1936 Gallup Poll indicating his sinking popularity, Roosevelt began turning leftward.⁶² In light of his concerns about his own numerous failures and his fears that business and the Republicans were favorably situated to wage a formidable campaign against him, Roosevelt entered the 1936 presidential race ready to adopt the language of radical reform, denounce “economic royalists,” and offer the common people a qualitative improvement in their material conditions (“a chicken in every pot”). Like the campaigns and demonstrations of the Popular Front, Roosevelt’s reelection efforts, along with Frank Murphy’s bid for the government’s mansion in the motor state, were carried out as if labor’s future was at stake. At the same time, conspicuous segments of the employer class, led by Alfred P. Sloan and the top GM management, associated themselves with the Republican ticket and its traditional defense of high finance and heavy industry.

Labor’s links with the Rooseveltian state were further enhanced by its participation in the election campaign. While the political conservative, John L. Lewis, distrusted the “country squire in the White House,” he was nonetheless convinced that the unionization of the mass-production industries required a supportive state. Unlike the leaders of the American Federation of Labor (AFL), Lewis not only endorsed Roosevelt but treated the election as labor’s foremost concern.⁶³ The LNLP’s intervention and its unprecedented donation of \$770,000 to the Democratic party war chest would represent the CIO’s major contribution to the campaign, but its organizing efforts in industry were no less steeped in electoral issues. When UAW organizers went into the field in the summer of 1936, they concentrated almost entirely on rallying workers to the Roosevelt coalition and getting them to the polls.⁶⁴ Not surprisingly, the campaign assumed a class character almost unique in American political history, with labor playing “a role more distinct, more important, and more decisive than in any previous election struggle.”⁶⁵ Significantly, it was only after the decisive victory of November that the UAW began augmenting its membership rolls and making headway on the shop floor.⁶⁶ When union organizers told workers “You voted New Deal at the polls and defeated the Auto Barrons—

⁶¹ Keeran, *The Communist Party and the Auto Workers Union*, 77.

⁶² John T. Flynn, *The Decline of the American Republic* (New York: Devin-Adair, 1955), 50.

⁶² Dubofsky and Van Tine, *John L. Lewis*, 248–52; Robert H. Zieger, *John L. Lewis, Labor Leader* (Boston: Twayne, 1988), 88–90.

⁶⁴ Cochran, *Labor and Communism*, 107.

⁶⁵ *Workers Age*, January 23, 1937; Nelson Lichtenstein, *The Most Dangerous Man in Detroit: Walter Reuther and the Fate of American Labor* (New York: Basic Books, 1995), 61–63.

⁶⁶ Fine, *Sit-Down*, 111.

Now get a New Deal in the shops," they simply played on the pro-Roosevelt sentiment they had done so much to nurture.⁶⁷

If the 1936 election affected workers in ways analogous to the various mobilizations of the Popular Front, the reelected president also mimicked Blum in his response to the sit-down strikes. Following the occupation of the Fisher Body plants, Roosevelt refused to intervene against the strikers, acted behind the scenes to set up negotiations, and got Labor Department officials involved in establishing the framework for a settlement. He also leaned on the GM management, already "in Dutch with Washington over the last election;" kept the National Labor Relations Board, which would have verified the UAW's minority status, out of the strike; and at several stages in the conflict threatened the corporation with new federal statutes that would have imposed additional limitations on it and other businesses.⁶⁸ At the same time, his labor secretary declined to characterize the strikes as illegal and did everything possible to coerce the reluctant GM management into negotiating.⁶⁹ The Administration's stance led William Green, the AFL chief, to complain that Roosevelt was "doing everything for [the CIO strikers] but call out the Marines."⁷⁰ Michigan's newly elected governor, Frank Murphy, played an equally significant role in resolving the strike in the union's favor. When he sent the National Guard into Flint on January 12, following a bloody confrontation between strikers and the local police, he did so not to crush the strike but to maintain the peace, a strategy that prevented GM and local authorities from forcibly evicting the sit-downers. Later, he refused to apply a court injunction that would have emptied the plants. Murphy also allowed strikers to collect state relief and helped negotiate the agreement that terminated the dispute.⁷¹ In the end, these governmental efforts in Washington and Lansing compelled GM to retreat from its hard-line opposition and recognize the union. As one Republican politician quoted by *The Chicago Daily Tribune* claimed, the state's pivotal role was glaringly evident in the fact "that a single word from Roosevelt to his fellow New Dealer in Michigan would have been sufficient to break up the sit-down strike—but no such word was forthcoming from the White House."⁷² It is in fact highly unlikely, given the UAW's minority status, that the union would have defeated GM without this assistance. As one writer for *The New Masses*

⁶⁷ John L. Lewis, "The Next Four Years," *The New Republic*, December 23, 1936; *Workers Age*, March 13, 1937; Robert H. Zieger, *The CIO 1935–1955* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995), 39–41.

⁶⁸ *New York Times*, February 5, 1937; *Chicago Daily Tribune*, January 27 and February 13, 1937; Alfred P. Sloan, Jr., *My Years with General Motors* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1963), 393.

⁶⁹ *New York Times*, January 28, 1937; *Chicago Daily Tribune*, January 28, 1937; George Martin, *Madam Secretary: Francis Perkins* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1976), 401–2.

⁷⁰ Cited in Kraus, *The Many and the Few*, 270.

⁷¹ J. Woodford Howard, Jr., "Frank Murphy and the Sit-Down Strikes of 1937," *Labor History*, 1 (Spring 1960).

⁷² *Chicago Daily Tribune*, January 18, 1937.

put it: "If [Republican presidential candidate] Landon was in the White House and a Republican in Lansing, GM would be feeling a lot more confident."⁷³

The American situation also resembled the French one economically. Massive auto unemployment (falling 75 percent between 1929 and 1932), deteriorated conditions (mainly in the form of speed-up), low annual earnings, and job insecurity accompanied the initial onset of the depression, removing those "reefs of roast beef and apple pie" that Werner Sombart thought responsible for worker acquiescence. Then, in 1935, after Roosevelt poured 22 billion dollars into the economy as part of his groping effort to counter the crisis, the market revived. Unemployment dropped 50 percent; the GNP grew at a similar rate; and GM had its best year since 1929. While the recovery would be short-lived (ending in late 1937), it nevertheless erased memories of earlier New Deal failures and encouraged workers to contemplate a struggle against the auto giants.⁷⁴

The final contingent factor that needs mentioning is the labor movement, which led and sustained the great struggles of 1936 and 1937. Again, though the American and French situations are not perfectly analogous, they were comparable enough to produce similar effects. In France, the principal obstacle to unionization had been the ideological fissures dividing the labor movement. The two largest French confederations, the reformist CGT and the Communist CGT-Unitaire, had split in 1921 and remained bitterly divided until the advent of the Popular Front. Then, with the birth of the left coalition in 1934 and 1935, there arose a unity mystique in the organized and unorganized wings of the working class that fostered a powerful sentiment for reunification.⁷⁵ Once the rival confederations succumbed to this mystique, it had little initial impact on the objective conditions of labor; but its subjective repercussions were immense, for in mirroring the unity of the left parties in the Popular Front, the CGT-CGTU merger made it easier for workers to believe the tide of history had turned in their favor. This inevitably enhanced their confidence, strengthened their sense of common purpose, and made them rethink their relationship to unionism.⁷⁶ But perhaps the most significant aspect of the trade-union unity was that the Communist-dominated Metal Union—made up of militants steeped in a culture of anti-capitalist struggle, accustomed to radical forms of collective action, and infused with a conception of unionism that made few distinctions between corporate and political realms—gained an unprecedented legitimacy for its various organizing methods.

⁷³ *New Masses*, January 19, 1937.

⁷⁴ Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *The Politics of Upheaval* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1960), 571.
⁷⁵ Benoît Frachon and Gaston Monmousseau, *Pour une CGT Unique! Pour l'Action de Masse!* (Paris: Les Publications Révolutionnaire, 1934); *L'Étincelle de Boulogne-Billancourt* (PCF), June 1935; *L'Ouvrier Métallurgiste*, September 1937.

⁷⁶ *Le Travailleur Parisien* (CGT), October 1936; Pierre Monatte, "La Class Ouvrière Reprend Confiance en elle," *La Révolution Proletarienne*, July 10, 1936; Raoul Dubois, *Au Soleil de 36* (Paris: Messidor, 1986), 80–88.

In the United States, it was not the unification but the division of the labor movement that helped set workers in motion. Contrary to what is often argued, the conflict between craft and industrial forms of unionism, however significant, was, as David Brady contends, not the sole nor probably even the greatest obstacle to mass-production organization. Rather, the major impediment was the AFL's inertia, its reluctance to seize the moment and act decisively. When the AFL modified its craft principles in 1934 by establishing federal unions in the basic industries, it failed to invest the money and energy that would have made these unions viable, even though they attracted large numbers of recruits and broadened union prospects.⁷⁷ For the AFL, it was thus less a matter of being opposed to the principle of industrial organization per se than being simply too conservative and too entrenched in the old ways to take advantage of the organizing opportunities opened by the New Deal. The federation's craft unionists would later change their tune, but it was John L. Lewis's willingness to break with the AFL, adopt an adventurous—even an “evangelist”—approach to organization, and form the CIO that fired the imagination of industrial workers and spurred the insurgence of mass-production unionism. “Firmly within the structures and traditions of the mainstream American Labor movement,” the formation of the CIO enthused and emboldened auto workers in a way analogous to the CGT–CGTU unification.⁷⁸ From the first, the newly founded CIO distinguished itself by addressing the burning questions of the moment, championing the cause of industrial unionism, and attracting a broad layer of rank-and-file militants.⁷⁹ Moreover, through its alliance with the New Deal, the CIO embraced the “progressive” politics that then infatuated American workers, identifying itself with political principles that mirrored popular aspirations (and illusions).⁸⁰ At the same time, it expected to collect a substantial return for its electoral support. During the Flint occupation, when Lewis announced that the CIO had “helped Roosevelt lick industry [in the elections]; now let Roosevelt help us lick industry [in the GM strike],” he was roundly rebuked in the established press for urging the Administration to repay its political debts; but his remark put the New Deal on notice that labor would hold the Democrats to their promises.⁸¹ In this way also, the CIO's alliance with the Roosevelt coalition resembled the COT's affiliation with the Popular Front and led to rather similar results.

Finally, the CIO was willing to rely on Communist and militant workers to carry out its essential organizing tasks.⁸² Like the CGT Metal Union, the UAW was made up of Communist, radical, and rank-and-file activists receptive to

⁷⁷ Brody, *Workers in Industrial America*, 93, 130; Fine, *Sit-Down*, 66–69.

⁷⁸ Ziegler, *John L. Lewis*, 85. ⁷⁹ *Daily Worker*, May 11, 1936.

⁸⁰ Melvyn Dubofsky, “Not So ‘Turbulent Years’: Another Look at the American 1930s,” *Amerikastudien*, 24 (January 1979); Ziegler, *The CIO*, 44–45.

⁸¹ *Chicago Daily Tribune*, January 22, 1937; *New Masses*, February 9, 1937.

⁸² David J. Sapos, *Communism in American Unionism* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1959), 119.

new techniques, willing to utilize the sit-down strike and take the big chances to overcome the odds stacked against them.⁸³ As Wyndham Mortimer, the most prominent of the Communist UAW leaders, put it: "We had a confidence and a spirit of sacrifice that . . . enabled us to accomplish what many had thought impossible."⁸⁴ By 1936 these unionists had come to realize that only an audacious and intransigent action, like a factory occupation, held the key to breaking the open shop and forcing uncommitted or intimidated workers to take notice of the union. They, not the top CIO leadership, were in fact the ones responsible for occupying the Flint plants and seeing the struggle through to the end.⁸⁵

CONCLUSION

The Paris and Flint occupations took place in different contexts and assumed somewhat different forms. Originating in the auto and metal-fabricating works of the Paris Region, the French strikes were largely spontaneous in character and national in dimension; they were entirely peaceful; they encompassed a majority of workers in the new mass-production industries; and they pursued diffused, often unspecified goals, although union recognition was foremost among them. The GM strike, by contrast, was almost entirely union-controlled and local in dimension, even if it ultimately affected a greater number of workers in different parts of the country; it also involved a minority of the workforce and limited itself to specific union demands. Despite these admittedly significant differences, the Paris and Flint occupations appealed to similar types of workers, who had been without representation and burdened by similar grievances; they were supported by a comparable array of economic and political forces that allowed the strikers to engage in what were normally illegal forms of action; and these workers were instigated by small groups of militants willing to use radical methods but limit themselves to goals wholly compatible with existing institutional arrangements.

These similarities, in my view, suggest that the two occupations were essentially a response to organizational challenges which conventional union practices had failed to meet. The extreme concentration of employer power, the inauspicious nature of Fordist-Taylorist production, the weakness of the labor movement, and the ineffectiveness of traditional actions meant that the only way unionists could possibly organize the mass-production sector and win collective bargaining rights was by employing radical and innovative methods.

⁸³ Earl Browder, "The American Communist Party in the Thirties," in *As We Saw the Thirties*, Rita James Simon, ed. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1967), 230. Henry Kraus, who played a key role in the Flint strike, claims UAW leaders were deeply impressed with the French sit-downs and drew the proper lessons from them. See *Heroes of Unwritten Story: The UAW, 1934-39* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993), 205-6. This view, however, was not shared by all observers. For example, Levinson, *Labor on the March*, 169-71.

⁸⁴ Mortimer, *Organize!*, 103.

⁸⁵ Dubofsky and Van Tine, *John L. Lewis*, 259; Galenson, *The CIO Challenge to the AFL*, 124.

And this is what made the Paris and Flint movements distinct from earlier occupations and imbued them with such historical significance. Unlike the revolutionary occupations in Italy and Russia, the French and American strikes avoided political objectives and focused on union issues, even though Communists played a leading role in each of them; in fact, in both Paris and Flint, Communists viewed the strikes solely as a means of building the union movement and doing so within the parameters of capitalist society.⁸⁶ And unlike the desperate mine occupations of the early 1930s, the Paris and Flint strikes transcended immediate grievances and attempted to alter power relations throughout the production process. In a word, the French and U.S. occupations were essentially social rather revolutionary or bread-and-butter movements.⁸⁷

That the occupations were preeminently a matter of socially institutionalizing unionism in the new factory system and achieving rather traditional union goals is further borne out by the subsequent history of the sit-down strike. Following the breakthroughs in Paris and Flint, a rash of occupations erupted in auto and other industries. The Communist leaders of the Paris Metal Union, as well as the radically disposed UAW leaders, both of whom had risen to power on the basis of the sit-down strike, generally frowned on these occupations—because they left undue power in rank-and-file hands, alienated the public, fumed the state against the unions, and, most importantly, jeopardized their new bargaining role.⁸⁸ Communist and radical unionists in both countries were more than ready “to play by the rules” once their bargaining role had been recognized.

But even if these unionists had not decided to play by the rules, the various contingent factors that made the occupations possible began to give way in late 1937 to conditions that ruled out their continued use. After the Supreme Court accepted the constitutionality of the Wagner Act in March 1937, which protected unions from employer interference and enabled the National Labor

⁸⁶ Virtually every public statement by the Paris Metal Union, as well as the UAW leadership, emphasized the social and corporate nature of the strikers' demands. See Depretto and Schweitzer, *Le Communisme à l'Usine*, 192–7; Kraus, *Heroes of Unwritten Story*, 205.

⁸⁷ On labor's propensity to act as a social movement, see Alain Touraine, *The Voice and the Eye: An Analysis of Social Movements* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), and Alain Touraine, Michel Wieviorka, and François Dubet, *Le Mouvement Ouvrier* (Paris: Fayard, 1984).

⁸⁸ Kraus, *The Many and the Few*, 46; J. Barrue, “Le Syndicalisme au Tournant,” *La Révolution Prolétarienne*, January 10, 1937; Benoît Frachon, *Le Rôle Sociale des Syndicats* (Paris: CCEO, 1937). Unlike the union hierarchy, the ranks continued to resort to the sit-down—highlighting the difference between the problems of institutionalization and those of routine conflict resolution. There were also differences between the Weinstone leadership of the Michigan state CP, which played a major role in the UAW, and the CP national office under Earl Browder, with the former prone to engage in actions, such as disruptive sit-downs, frowned on by the more “conservative” national leadership, which was reluctant to rock the boat, especially after October 1937, when FDR in his “quarantine the aggressors” speech signed on to the Soviets' collective-security policy. See Harvey Klehr and John Earl Haynes, *The American Communist Movement: Storming Heaven Itself* (New York: Twayne, 1992), 81–84. Also Benjamin Stolberg, *The Story of the CIO* (New York: Arno, 1971), 160.

Board to conduct certifying elections, U.S. sit-downs drastically dropped off, as unions pursued their goals through procedural means.⁸⁹ Then, in 1939, the Supreme Court ruled the sit-down strike an “illegal seizure.” More importantly, the criminalization of the sit-down was preceded by the “Roosevelt Recession,” which caused employers to trim their workforces and unions to focus on defense and consolidation, rather than aggressive organizing campaigns.⁹⁰ In France, sporadic rank-and-file sit-downs persisted after June 1936, usually in cases where employers attempted to circumvent or sabotage the new bargaining machinery. But except for the Paris metal strike of March and April 1938, which Communists carried out against a government that had turned on them, the occupation ceased to be an acceptable form of union action.⁹¹ The looming threat of especially after the Austrian *Anschluss* of March 1938, waning public tolerance, as well as an increasingly conservative state, further diminished the possibility of such strikes. In both countries then, it was as if the historical rationale, as well as the opportunity for the factory occupation had ceased to be viable by late 1937. After serving as the midwife to mass-production unionism, the sit-down almost immediately yielded to institutional procedures,⁹² suggesting that the Paris and Flint occupations were historically significant less for popularizing radical forms of collective action, as some contemporary observers feared,⁹³ than for introducing a novel means of pursuing traditional union goals within the framework of the Fordist-Taylorist factory system.

⁸⁹ *The Monthly Labor Review*, 18 (August 1938), 360–2.

⁹⁰ The UAW claimed that of the industry’s 517,000 production workers, 320,000 were unemployed by late 1937 and 196,000 on short time. See Bernstein, *Turbulent Years*, 562–3.

⁹¹ See Michael Torigian, “The Defeat of the Popular Front: The Paris Metal Strike of March–April 1938” (forthcoming).

⁹² P.K. Edwards, *Strikes in the United States 1881–1974* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1981), 142–3; Lefranc, *luin* 36, 267, 294.

⁹³ For example, Henri Prouteau, *Les Occupations d’Usines en Italie et en France* (Paris: Librairie Technique et Economique, 1938), 243; Henri du Passage, “L’Occupation des Usines,” *Etudes* (September 5, 1936), 595.