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A SECOND INDUSTRIAL REVOLUTION: THE TRANSFORMATION OF
CLASS, CULTURE, AND SOCIETY IN TWENTIETH-CENTURY FLINT,
MICHIGAN

Michigan State University

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A SECOND INDUSTRIAL REVOLUTION:
THE TRANSFORMATION OF CLASS, CULTURE, AND
SOCIETY IN TWENTIETH-CENTURY FLINT, MICHIGAN

By
Ronald William Edsforth

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ABSTRACT

A SECOND INDUSTRIAL REVOLUTION: THE TRANSFORMATION OF CLASS, CULTURE, AND SOCIETY IN TWENTIETH-CENTURY FLINT, MICHIGAN

By

Ronald William Edsforth

This dissertation explores the ways that the transformation of industry from a producer-goods to a consumer-goods orientation changed the character of twentieth-century American capitalism. In it, the distinctive economic and social changes that made the United States the world's first true consumer-oriented society are described as "a second industrial revolution" which accounts for what is usually (and mistakenly) termed the 'classlessness' of modern American politics and industrial relations. This thesis is first presented in a review of contemporary social criticism, and in a general overview of America's extraordinary automobile boom. Then its relevance is explored in a detailed case study of the political character of economic and social development in Flint, Michigan, the country's second largest automobile production center. This case study covers fifty years of Flint's history from the first automotive experiments of its wagon-making entrepreneurs to the institutionalization of collective bargaining between the General Motors Corporation and the United Automobile Workers after World War II. As such, it traces the creation of General Motors in Flint; the swift rise and decline of municipal socialism; the organization of a 'progressive' business class which monopolized economic, social, and political power until the 1930s;

the impact of the automobile boom on everyday life and culture; the brief appearance of an influential Ku Klux Klan; the devastating impact of the Great Depression; and the emergence of a militant, but non-radical, working class committed to industrial unionism and the New Deal. The dissertation closes with an examination of the quality of working class-consciousness in mid-twentieth-century Flint; a brief digression which compares class values in Coventry, England (another major automotive production center) with those in Flint; and finally, an attempt to generalize about the place of class in modern American society and politics.

This dissertation is based on comprehensive study of local records in Flint, and archives materials in Detroit, Lansing, Ann Arbor, and Washington, D.C. (as well as similar resources in Coventry, Oxford, and London). This traditional research was supplemented by use of the transcripts of nearly two hundred oral history interviews.

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1982

Dedicated to
the memory of Herbert Kisch,
teacher and friend.

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The research for this project could not have been finished without the financial aid of the Alvin M. Bentley Foundation of Owosso, Michigan. I am very grateful to them. In addition, I want to extend my appreciation to the staffs of the Walter P. Reuther Library of Labor and Urban Affairs, the Michigan Historical Collections (University of Michigan), the Flint Public Library, the National Archives, the National Records Center, the State of Michigan Archives, the State of Michigan Library, the Michigan State University Library, the Harlan Hatcher Graduate Library (University of Michigan), and the Catholic University Library.

Finally, I want to thank my wife, Joanne Devine. Without her

loving support and her editorial assistance, I would never have completed this project.

PREFACE

It seemed obvious to me that the historian's prime duty was to answer my childish question: "What happened next?" It seems almost as obvious to me now.

--A.J.P. Taylor

Despite its ponderous title, this study of the transformation of industrial society in twentieth century Flint, Michigan, is a very traditional history, not an exercise in historical social science. By reconstructing the experiences of the men and women who made Flint into a national center for the mass-production of cars and trucks, I have tried to create a new perspective on the distinctive ways in which Americans have organized their economic activities, social relationships, and politics. Inevitably, then, my attention has been drawn to the old, but persistent, question: 'why does the United States lack the kind of class-conscious culture which is characteristic of industrial capitalist countries in Europe?' Yet, while suggesting a new solution to this perennial historical problem, my work offers no original models or methods for doing social history. Nor is it based on the rather absurd proposition, so distressingly popular in professional academic circles today, that "we cannot predict the future concretely, but we can predict the past."¹ Instead, since its inception, this social history has been

¹ Immanuel Wallerstein, "The Rise and Future Demise of the World Capitalist System: Concepts for Comparative Analysis," Comparative Studies in Society and History, XVI, September 1974, p. 389.

firmly grounded in the traditional humanistic methodology which has always distinguished the best historical literature from deterministic presentations of the past.

Most importantly, the methods and reasoning employed here rest on the traditional assumption that human beings are more than mere creatures of circumstance; in fact, they are the agents of historical change, the ones who consciously make things happen in the present as well as the past. To the untutored reader of popular military, diplomatic, and political history, this statement may appear as a truism. However, given the predilection of so many professional economic and social historians for deterministic interpretations of the past, the assumption bears repeating. People make history. Changes in economic institutions, society, culture, and politics occur when people act, not as the result of some combination of abstract 'pressures', 'forces', and 'factors'.

Of course, it may be objected that human beings are not truly free agents, that their actions are shaped by the natural and social environments in which they find themselves. Undoubtedly this criticism has merit. The past is full of examples of the ways that nature has defined the material possibilities of existence, either enriching or destroying human societies and lives. Likewise, the historian cannot ignore the evidence, repeated in every society in generation after generation, that inherited experience imbedded in language and culture, as well as social customs and institutions, weighs heavily on each human being, informing personal values and behavior. Nor is it possible for historians to present individuals as if they could have escaped the psychological implications of their own early experiences with life. Though modern advertisers have done their best to convince us otherwise, surely people cannot

simply choose their personalities or their 'lifestyles.' Human freedom is clearly limited.

But does acknowledging these obvious environmental, social, and psychological conditions of human existence force us to rule out totally a place for human freedom in history? Given the undeniable influence of nature and the social-psychological circumstances over which each new generation has no control, must explanations of mankind's past ultimately be abandoned to sheer necessity and determinism? I think not. For history is about change, not static conditions. And though the past reveals that men and women cannot control the situations into which they are thrust by nature and society, history provides plenty of evidence which indicates individuals and groups are capable of overcoming the constraints of nature and society by consciously choosing a new course for events. From the irrigation projects of ancient China and Mesopotamia to the recent eradication of smallpox and flights to the moon, people have demonstrated their ability to transcend natural obstacles through consciously planned activity. Moreover, throughout history, in episodes as varied in moral content as the rise of Christianity within the Roman Empire or the triumph of National Socialism in Weimar Germany, human beings have been able to shatter the social restraints and personal inhibitions which tie them to the status quo. Careful examination of the past shows that human efforts have determined the direction of events, even though individual humans cannot determine the circumstances that make their efforts possible. Or, to put it even more simply, while no one can choose his (or her) past, people can and do make their future, and thus, their history.

This philosophical perspective is not always clear in histories

of economic and social change. When looking back on vast changes in an economy or society, occurrences that have the impact of an "Industrial Revolution" or a "Great Depression," even the most dedicated humanists are drawn to the notion of inevitability which is inherent in hindsight. Today, when so many professional historians are using the past as a testing ground for theories drawn from other present-oriented disciplines, the influential decisions and human actions which were (and are) the real models for historical change have begun to disappear from view. Yet, if economic and social history is to remain "true" to events as they happened, historians in these fields must recognize that hindsight does not make the past "predictable." Tracing an event back to some antecedent set of conditions obscures the fact that the people who made the event happen could not foresee when, where, how, and why those conditions would converge. Therefore describing the necessary circumstances of historical activity (causes) never fully explains history because such descriptions fail to illuminate the motivations (reasons) of the specific people who made change occur.

The methods of traditional history--its focus on power and the powerful, use of archival research, and presentation in narrative form--are time-honored ways to insure that scholars consider the perceptions and thinking of history's actors when they examine events which appear inevitable. For this reason alone, these methods should not be dismissed lightly by economic and social historians. Unfortunately, in recent years, as many historians of society adopted social science methods, the unique harmony between the traditional philosophical ground of history and the actual production of historical knowledge has been degraded and obscured. In a few extreme cases, the desire to

create 'scientifically verifiable' history has led to the rejection of the kinds of written and oral evidence historians have always used to preserve the identity and autonomy of individuals in the past. More generally, by stressing theoretical analysis and mathematical reasoning, economic and social historians have begun to reduce people in the past to mere objects, pushing them into a realm of understanding where, as James Henretta has noted, "consciousness and meaning have been usurped by data and diagrams."²

This study, a history of what appears to be the 'inevitable' development of the automotive manufacturing center at Flint, Michigan, is designed to avoid the deterministic pitfalls inherent in reasoning from hindsight. Specifically, I have tried to fuse the questions and methods of traditional political history with the so-called "new" economic and social history's emphasis on interpreting the mundane activities of those plain people who usually remain anonymous parts of the 'structure' or 'background' of historical analysis. In this history, economic and social changes are not assumed to have been inevitable. Rather to borrow the words of George Dangerfield, one of America's finest traditional historians, the events which lend economic and social changes

the appearance of inevitability are of the first importance, if only because they compel us to ask what sort of people wished to bring them about and why they did so. Conversely, we are prompted to ask through the lack of what qualities--wisdom, compassion, foresight, and so forth--people to whose disadvantage they happened were unable to prevent them from happening.³

Put differently, it would be fair to describe what follows as a

² "The Study of Social Mobility: Ideological Assumptions and Conceptual Bias," Labor History, XVIII, 2, Spring 1977, p. 167.

³ The Damnable Question: A Study in Anglo-Irish Relations (Boston, 1976), p. xix.

political history of economic and social development. Here, we focus on the people who attained and used power to create a modern industrial society in Flint in the first half of our own century. As it is used below, the word "power" means the ability to make and implement decisions. As such, power may be exercised by individuals and groups in all realms of history, though it has commonly been the centerpiece of traditional studies of past politics, diplomacy, insurrections, and war.

Power remains a central organizing concept of traditional history. The ways in which it is acquired and used defines both the existence and practical limits of human freedom in any given historical situation. When students of the past choose to ignore questions about power (who had it?, how did they get it?, how was it legitimized?, how was it exercised?, with what results?), the real connections between events in conscious human activity are lost, opening the way for fatalistic interpretations of historical change. In the late twentieth century, an era when the individual exercise of power has become increasingly obscured by the giant organizations which administer decisions, the willingness of historians to explain the past in terms of historical abstractions like 'forces' and 'models' is understandable. But fate, whether it is labeled the invisible hand of God, the invisible hand of the market, or an irresistible social trend, will never serve as history.

At the outset of this project, the temptation to squeeze events in twentieth-century Flint into a popular model of social development, either Marxist or modernization theory, was very strong because my knowledge of the city's past was so limited. However, as I began to uncover more and more evidence from a great variety of sources including official reports, newspapers and pamphlets, collections of private papers and diaries,

contemporary economic and sociological studies, the files of businesses and unions, and the oral history record that is the twentieth-century historian's unique resource, my need to impose theory on events vanished. In a very real sense, I discovered for myself what E.P. Thompson once described as Darwin's greatest insight: "that a respect for fact is not only a techniques, it can also be an intellectual force in its own right."⁴ Thus, while gathering details about economic and social change in Flint, I saw that the most prominent theories of capitalist development, with their focus on change in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Europe, were not adequate explanations of the complex, new kinds of events which have shaped American society since 1900. To put it more bluntly, as I now see it, neither Marxist nor modernization theory can 'predict' the creation of an automobile-centered, consumer-goods-oriented economy or the enormous and varied way in which that development changed the lives and consciousness of modern America. Yet history done in the traditional manner can tell us what happened.

Accordingly, I have chosen narrative exposition as the only proper way to present the history of Flint in the twentieth century. Though I suspect the Thompson's accomplishments in The Making of the English Working Class undermine this position, it can be argued that theory is necessary to bridge the gaps in the historical record prior to World War I. Nevertheless, when discussing events of more recent times, scholars who fail to consider individual perceptions and thinking cannot use the excuse that most people in the past were 'inarticulate'. For twentieth-century American historians, documents, photographs, statistics, as well as official and unofficial inquiries into the condition of the people abound;

⁴ "The Peculiarities of the English," The Socialist Register, 1965, p. 335.

and as a popular writer like Studs Terkel has shown, oral history interviews can make even the most underprivileged members of society articulate about their lives and experiences. Certainly the weight of all this evidence places a heavy burden on the historian of twentieth-century society, but it should be one that is shouldered happily. Unlike students of an earlier past who have to struggle with shreds of evidence to reconstruct the character of everyday life, twentieth-century historians are able to draw on a reservoir of material which makes it possible to write reliable history from the perspective of both the celebrated and the plain people.

It is time for students of recent American economic and social history to reassert the traditional values of their discipline, avoiding wherever possible the kinds of deterministic analysis now so prevalent in the literature on the first two centuries of the 'industrial revolution'. As David F. Noble has recently reminded us,

it is the primary task of the historian to demystify history, to render it intelligible in human rather than in super-human or non-human terms, to show that history is a realm of human freedom as well as necessity. By describing how people have shaped history in the past, the historian reminds us that people continue to shape history in the present.⁵

To achieve this traditional purpose, twentieth-century historians must not treat men and women in the past as mere numbers. Difficult as it may sometimes be, scholars have to take into account all the evidence which conveys the thoughts and perceptions of the makers of history. Moreover, to dispel the illusion of inevitability that arises whenever we peer back into the past, twentieth-century history should be presented in the

⁵ America by Design: Science, Technology, and the Rise of Corporate Capitalism (Oxford, 1977), p. xix.

traditional literary form which best preserves our view of the past as a place of consciousness and purposeful activity. Even economic and social historians can work in this way if they ask the right questions, and look in the right places for answers. At least that is the traditional conviction which lies at the heart of this history of the transformation of class, culture, and society in twentieth-century Flint, Michigan.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

I. The Concept of a Second Industrial Revolution

Economic historians have long agreed that the industrial systems of the world's most advanced capitalist nations underwent a series of dramatic, closely connected changes in the period stretching roughly from 1890 to 1940. Though the pace and extent of these changes varied widely from country to country, the innovations which actually transformed the industrial economies of the United States, the United Kingdom, Germany, and Japan during this era were very similar. As early as 1939, the eminent Austrian economist, Joseph Schumpeter, identified a "New Industrial Revolution" that he claimed had formed the basis for global economic expansion in the twenty years preceding World War I.¹ In our own day, the terms 'scientific-technical revolution', or even more commonly, 'second industrial revolution' have been used to distinguish these modern developments from the initial emergence of industry in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Of course, there is something quite arbitrary about this distinction. The second industrial revolution did not begin with a specific event on a specific

¹ Business Cycles: A Theoretical, Historical, and Statistical Analysis of the Capitalist Process (New York, 1964 abridged edition), pp. 246ff.

date which clearly marks a break with the past. Instead, to use the words of the British economic historian, Eric Hobsbawm, "Since the [first] Industrial Revolution the transformation of industry has become continuous."² Nonetheless, the concept of a second industrial revolution persists because it summarizes the observations of a multitude of scholars so well.

The first, and probably most significant aspect of this second industrial revolution involved a change in the place of science in the economy. In the late nineteenth century, new scientific discoveries and technology were appropriated by businessmen who created new, extremely influential industries around them. The electrical, chemical, and automotive industries that have done so much to shape modern society were the offspring of this marriage of science and technology to business. However, the impact of scientific-technical change went far beyond the boundaries of these new science-based industries. In older industries like textiles and steel, existing products and processes were improved, while new ones were developed by scientists who worked directly for specific firms. Ultimately, this kind of in-house scientific-technical change affected most industries. "In the place of spontaneous innovation indirectly evoked by the social process of production," explains Harry Braverman, "came the planned progress of technology and product design." As a result, Braverman continues,

The scientific-technical revolution... cannot be understood in terms of specific innovations--as in the case of the [first] Industrial Revolution, which may be adequately characterized by a handful of key inventions--but must be understood rather in its totality as a mode of production into which science and exhaustive engineering investigations have been integrated as a

² Industry and Empire: The Pelican Economic History of Britain Volume 3, From 1750 to the Present Day (London, 1969). p. 172.

part of ordinary functioning. The key innovation is not to be found in chemistry, electronics, automatic machinery... or any of the products of these science-technologies, but rather in the transformation of science itself into capital.³

For most scholars, it was this unprecedented "transformation of science itself into capital" which defines the basic nature of the second industrial revolution.

A systematic expansion and rationalization of factory production was another primary characteristic of the second industrial revolution. Here, the break with previous practice seems far less striking than contemporary changes in the relationship between science and industry (to which it was closely related). Yet, in the long run, the development of machines that made other machines, and the reorganization of work according to the principles of scientific-management first enumerated by the American 'efficiency expert', Frederick Taylor, had far-reaching economic and social implications.

Most importantly, the when early twentieth-century industrialists combined automatic machinery with Taylorized labor, they attained the kind of productivity increases and economies of scale which made the true mass-production of complex durable goods possible. Though usually celebrated as unqualified progress because it led to significant improvements in material living standards, mass-production also had its negative side. Mechanization and the minute subdivisions of the work process involved in mass-production greatly intensified the alienation of factory labor by reducing skill requirements and the need to think on the job. This result was not unintended. Frederick Taylor himself

³ Labor and Monopoly Capital: The Degradation of Work in the Twentieth Century (New York, 1974). pp. 166-67. For a perceptive discussion of this development in the United States see Noble, America by Design, pp. 3-19.

stressed the idea that "all possible brainwork should be removed from the shop" as one of the cornerstones of scientific-management.⁴ Where the rationalization of factory labor along these lines could be accomplished without confronting the organized resistance of an already established, relatively skilled workforce (as in the creation of the American automobile industry), the potential benefits of mass-production were realized very rapidly.⁵ However, wherever class-conscious, unionized workers were able to fight for traditional skills and control over production decisions (as occurred in Britain's motor industry), the transition to true mass-production was long and difficult.⁶

The third generally recognized attribute of the second industrial revolution was an enormous increase in the scale of economic activity. Wherever scientific-technical change and the rationalization of production happened, the size of firms increased while the number of firms in a given industry decreased markedly. This concentration of production and ownership proceeded in all the advanced industrial nations around the turn of the century, but it was most pronounced in the United States

⁴ From Shop Management (1903), quoted in Braverman, Labor and Monopoly Capital, p. 113.

⁵ This American pattern of development is discussed at length in Chapter Two below.

⁶ Another negative aspect of the development of mass-production, often overlooked by economists and economic historians, should be noted in passing. Although it generally stimulated economic growth by increasing the availability and lowering the cost of producer goods like machine tools and consumer goods like the motor car, science-based mass-production also contributed to great destructiveness of twentieth-century warfare. The implements of modern combat--machine guns, poison gas, tanks, rockets, bombers, and all the rest-- are as much the product of science-based mass-production as the automatic lathe and the automobile. This sobering fact should be kept in mind whenever one is tempted to sing the praises of the second industrial revolution.

(where it became the focus of sustained political protest) and Germany (where it facilitated the nation's swift rise as a world military power).

Big integrated firms were best equipped to meet the sustained high costs of science-based mass production.⁷ Consequently, oligopoly and monopoly tended to become the dominant forms of market organization in the new industries and those older industries which were able to modernize quickly. Typically, the emergence of oligopolies and monopolies was expedited by government actions designed to promote concentration, protect giant companies from price competition, and/or insulate big business from potentially hostile public regulation. The precise forms of state intervention in the industrial economy differed in each country, but its main effects were quite similar. Big business and the state became partners in national development.⁸ The second industrial revolution thus changed the role of the state in the advanced capitalist nations. After 1890, the old liberal ideal of a state which deliberately refrained from direct intervention in the economy (*laissez faire*) was abandoned in favor of a more active government role in economic affairs. At the same time, those

⁷ Of course, at the time, most economists argued differently, especially in Britain and the United States. However, as Professor Hobsbawm has pointed out, "there is every reason to believe that 'big business' was in fact better than little business, at least in the long run: more dynamic, more efficient, better able to undertake the increasingly complex and expensive tasks of development. The real case against was not that it was big, but that it was anti-social." (Industry and Empire, p. 117).

⁸ In Germany, state-approved cartels speeded up concentration. Similar 'rationalization' schemes were promoted by the Conservative British governments of the interwar period. In the United States, regulatory laws and commissions were used to block anti-trust action, and in Japan, the government actually invested in new industries before selling off its holdings cheaply to encourage concentration. In France, governmental intervention in the economy was minimal prior to 1945. For details see Robert A. Brady, Business as a System of Power (New York, 1943), especially pp. 23-9 and 83-97; Charles P. Kindleberger, Economic Growth in France and Britain (Cambridge, 1964), especially 185-90; and

big businesses which received governmental assistance were expected to assist the state in its attempts to expand national power both at home and abroad.⁹

The final major economic change which is usually considered an essential part of the second industrial revolution was the creation of mass markets for technologically complex consumer goods. The United States was far and away the world leader in this type of development. Indeed, for reasons that will be explained at length in the next chapter, America was the only nation in the world to develop a real consumer-oriented industrial economy in the years 1890-1940. It suffices to say here that the unique transformation of the American economy from a producer-goods to a consumer-goods orientation was not solely the result of America's 'natural' economic advantages such as the potential size of its national market and the relatively high average earnings of its workers (which stemmed from chronic labor shortages). Wars, and the preparation for war, absorbed (and destroyed) much of the creative energies and productive capacity of the other advanced industrial nations, and where this happened, technologically complex consumer goods simply could not reach the 'average' blue collar worker. In this sense, the second industrial revolution remained incomplete in Western Europe and Japan until the post-World War II era when the relative de-militarization imposed by the destruction of the war and the terms of peace (including American reconstruction aid) permitted the development of truly modern, mass-consumer-oriented industrial economies.

William W. Lockwood, The Economic Development of Japan: Growth and Structural Change (Princeton, 1968), especially pp. 503-9.

⁹ This point is explained at length in Ralph Miliband's The State in Capitalist Society (New York, 1969), especially Chapter 4, "The Purpose and Role of Governments."

II. A New Kind of Capitalism: Social and Political Implications of the Second Industrial Revolution

The second industrial revolution transformed far more than industry; it changed the fundamental character of society and politics in the advanced capitalist nations (as well as the relationship between those nations and the lesser developed parts of the globe). To date, the deeper significance of the second industrial revolution has been recognized by numerous social critics and philosophers, but it has not been thoroughly examined by historians. As Geoffrey Barraclough pointed out in his Introduction to Contemporary History some fifteen years ago, the historical profession's neglect of this subject is due, at least in part, "to the fact that many historians are still emotionally involved in the death-pangs of the old world, which they feel more deeply than the birth-pangs of the new." It is also due, to complete Professor Barraclough's observation, "to the fact that, until very recently, we were unable to stand outside the period of transition and look back over it as a whole."¹⁰ Today's historians cannot use this excuse. Yet, there still is no widespread historical interest in the second industrial revolution as an epoch-making event comparable to the first industrial revolution of the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

Perhaps the problem lies in the difficulty of identifying exactly what it is that distinguishes the advanced industrial capitalism of our own time from the industrial capitalism of a hundred years ago. The terms 'technological', 'affluent', 'consumer-oriented', 'leisure-oriented', and even the slightly absurd 'post-industrial' come immediately to mind when

¹⁰ An Introduction to Contemporary History (London, 1967), p. 35. The author dates the transition period as 1890 to 1960.

searching for a description of contemporary society in the United States, Western Europe, and Japan. Each of these terms certainly has its relevance, but whether they are taken together or separately, they only reinforce a common compartmentalized view of the second industrial revolution which leaves that event confined to the rather narrow realm of economic history.¹¹ This is unfortunate. The second industrial revolution described above was not a self-contained economic event. Rather, to quote Geoffrey Barraclough once again,

Scientific, technological, and economic changes . . . are the starting point for the study of contemporary history. They acted both as a solvent of the old order and as a catalyst of the new.¹²

Clearly then what needs to be developed is an understanding of the second industrial revolution as a historical process which connects the rise of science-based mass-production in large corporate units to obvious changes in society and politics (the subject matter of twentieth-century social and political history). How can this be accomplished?

To start, we must focus our attention on what E.P. Thompson recently described as the most "misunderstood, tormented, transfixed, and de-historicized" of all historical categories: social class.¹³ Given the explosive ideological overtones of the word "class", especially in the United States, this task becomes a tricky undertaking. Nevertheless, it cannot be avoided because changes in the nature of class-consciousness and class relations are at the heart of the historical process which links the

¹¹ The relevance and limitations of the first four terms are discussed by Henri LeFevbre in Everyday Life in the Modern World, translated by Sarah Rabinovitch (London, 1971), pp. 45-66. The idea of a 'post-industrial' society receives an even-handed treatment from Robert Heilbroner in Business Civilization in Decline (New York, 1976), pp. 63-78.

¹² An Introduction to Contemporary History, p. 50.

¹³ "The Poverty of Theory," in The Poverty of Theory and Other Essays (New York, 1978), p. 46.

second industrial revolution to twentieth-century social and political events.

In all its historical forms, capitalism has been characterized by a hierarchic social order in which special economic and political privileges accrue to those people who own and control the means of production. The basis of privilege in a capitalist society is, to use Robert Heilbroner's description,

the continuous creation and allocation of a highly disproportionate share of income to . . . those who own substantial quantities of property and those who man the command posts within the business world.¹⁴

During the first industrial revolution, when this privilege-producing system was being perfected, tensions between the beneficiaries of the system (the business classes) and the relatively impoverished multitudes who were employed by the privileged minority (the working classes) rose to the point where many commentators, including the German radicals Marx and Engels, felt revolution was inevitable. As late as the early twentieth century, when syndicalist unions and radical socialists challenged the business classes on both sides of the Atlantic, the revolutionary potential of the working classes in the advanced industrial nations seemed undiminished. Of course, as we all know, for a variety of reasons which differ substantially from nation to nation, revolutionary confrontations between the working class and the business class never happened in the way Marx and Engels predicted. And now, three-quarters of a century later, the idea of such a revolution appears inconceivable, like something out of dream. Why is this so? The answer is really quite easy. In the truly advanced industrial nations,

¹⁴ Business Civilization in Decline, p. 27.

capitalism no longer generates potentially revolutionary class tensions.

The primary social and political differences between contemporary advanced industrial capitalism and the industrial capitalism of the nineteenth century stem from a distinct lessening of tensions between the business classes and what are now organized working classes. All observers, except the most orthodox Marxists, recognize this point. Today it seems clear that countries which have experienced a complete second industrial revolution, including the vitally important transformation of industry from a producer-goods to a consumer-goods-orientation, have also experienced a general decline in revolutionary political activity and violent strikes. This decline is not a simple coincidence. Indeed, it is my contention that changes in the nature of 'the system' brought on by the second industrial revolution are the root cause of the longterm decline in class tensions which marks advanced industrial capitalism.¹⁵

The second industrial revolution lessened fundamental class tensions in at least two ways. On one hand, by creating an economic system which both produced and fulfilled the material wants of the working classes, it subtly, but enormously, strengthened the position of the business classes in society and politics. On the other hand, by permitting the working classes to enjoy unprecedented quantitative and qualitative improvements in their standards of living, the second industrial revolution greatly reduced the pervasive sense of exploitation which had enveloped the everyday lives of working people during the first industrial revolution. As a result, the real revolutionary potential of the working classes (whatever that might have been at an earlier stage of industrialization)

¹⁵ For a concise example of dissent on this point see Ernest Mandel and George Novack. The Revolutionary Potential of the Working Class (New York, 1974).

has clearly diminished, if not dissipated altogether. Thus, as T.B. Bottomore wrote in his short, but extremely perceptive book, Classes in Modern Society,

It seems no longer possible in the second half of the twentieth century to regard the working class in the advanced industrial countries as being totally alienated from society, or, in Marx's phrase, as "a class in civil society which is not a class of civil society."¹⁶

The growth of the so-called "new middle classes", which is another offshoot of the second industrial revolution, has also reduced tensions between the business and working classes of the advanced industrial countries. These groups (defined by Bottomore as "office workers, supervisors, managers, technicians, scientists, and many of those who are employed in providing services") obscure the gulf between the two primary classes because they themselves are not class-conscious.¹⁷ Instead of a social hierarchy of fixed classes, people in what Harry Braverman describes as the "middle layers of employment" believe society to be a finely graded meritocracy in which individuals rise and fall to their appropriate levels of income and status according to their own abilities.¹⁸ The sustained growth of the "middle layers" and their ability to exercise a considerable degree of influence over popular social thought through the mass media and the educational system (where they are entrenched) has undoubtedly eased class tensions. Nevertheless, the perceptions of these middle groups do not define the totality of social reality. Indeed, as

¹⁶ (New York, 1966), p. 23.

¹⁷ Classes in Modern Society, p. 24.

¹⁸ Labor and Monopoly Capital, pp. 403ff. Braverman describes the position of the "new middle class" as possessing the attributes of both capital and labor. "Not only does it receive its petty share of the prerogatives and rewards of capital," he says, "but it also bears the mark of its proletarian condition."

the recent expansion of white-collar unions and strikes by white-collar workers in all the advanced industrial countries seems to indicate, the power of the individualistic, status-based view of society may be on the wane among the very groups who have, in the past, done the most to promote it.

To assert that modern industrial capitalism inhibits the growth of revolutionary class tensions is not to say that any of the advanced industrial nations have become 'classless' societies. Neither the business class nor the working class has disappeared as a result of the second industrial revolution. In fact, in organizational terms, both classes are more clearly defined now than ever before. What has changed is not the existence of these two basic classes, but the character of their relationship and of class-consciousness itself. This is particularly true of the working classes which have established a legitimate, powerful place for themselves within 'the system' during the twentieth century. As the prominent Marxist economist Paul Sweezy asserted in a recent review of contemporary capitalism, contrary to Marx's predictions, modern society has "turned a potentially revolutionary proleteriat into an actual reformist force."¹⁹

It is the purpose of this study to investigate in detail how and why this widely recognized, fundamental change in class relations, and thus political culture, occurred in the first nation to experience a complete second industrial revolution. Such an investigation seems long overdue. In 1966, T.B. Bottomore wrote,

The principle fault in many recent studies of social classes has been that they lack an historical sense. Like the economists of whom Marx said that they believed there had been history, because feudalism

¹⁹ Modern Capitalism (New York, 1972), p. 142.

disappeared, but there was no longer any history, because capitalism was a natural and eternal social order, some sociologists [and historians] have accepted that there was an historical development of classes and of class conflicts in the early period of industrial capitalism, but that this has ceased in the fully evolved industrial societies in which the working class has escaped from poverty and has attained industrial and political citizenship.²⁰

Unfortunately, Professor Bottomore's observation remains true today.

Though the second industrial revolution in the United States can hardly be called representative (because it was the first and because of the way America escaped the destruction of industry in both World Wars), studying it does reveal the continuing importance of class in twentieth-century social and political history.

III. Class: A Historical Definition

Before proceeding any further, let the reader be clear about the definition of the word "class" which is used throughout this work. It is, above all else, a historical definition. As Arthur Marwick explains in his new comparative study of class in three advanced capitalist nations, "Class is not fixed and unchanging . . . The nature and significance of class changes as society changes."²¹ In other words, in history (as opposed to sociology), class is an event, not a static category or structure. E.P. Thompson, the most eloquent spokesman for this historical definition of class, elucidated the controversial concept this way in The Making of the English Working Class:

Class happens when some men as a result of common experiences (inherited or shared), feel and articulate

²⁰ Classes in Modern Society, pp. 99-100.

²¹ Class: Image and Reality (In Britain, France, and the United States Since 1930), (New York, 1980), p. 18.

the identity of their interests as between themselves, and as against other men whose interests are different from (and usually opposed to) theirs. ²²

In this sense, but not the crude deterministic was of theory-bound Marxists and anti-Marxists alike, class is one important expression of human freedom in history. Class-consciousness, a living awareness of a shared identity and interests, is not a 'law' of history, and this has always troubled those who would like to make it one.²³ However, class-consciousness and class conflict are not radical pipedreams either. Both have existed (and can be shown to have existed) in the past; both can, and most likely will, exist again in the future.

There are certain important corollaries of the historical definition of class which should also be clarified here. The first is that, in history, the logic of class development arises out of the specific circumstances in which class-consciousness and class conflict occur, not according to some abstract theory or 'model'. Professor Marwick draws this very conclusion from his examination of the images and reality of class in twentieth-century Britain, France, and America. "The exact forms of class," he declares, "which differ significantly from country to country, are determined by the historical evolution of the particular country."²⁴ In practical terms, the fact that class is specific in character means we must not approach the historical investigation

²² (New York, 1963), p. 9.

²³ As Professor Thompson has commented, "That historical investigation cannot deal in absolutes and cannot adduce sufficient causes greatly irritates some simple and impatient souls. They suppose that, since historical explanation cannot be All, it is therefore Nothing . . . This is a silly mistake. For historical explanation discloses not how history must have eventuated but why it eventuated in this way and not other ways." ("The Poverty of Theory," p. 50).

²⁴ Class: Image and Reality, p. 361.

of class with preconceived notions about what is and is not 'true' class-consciousness. "Consciousness of class arises in the same way in different times and places," E.P. Thompson informs us, "but never in just the same way."²⁵ Thus, to expect twentieth-century American workers to think and act just like the workers Marx and Engels observed in mid-nineteenth century Western Europe is to expect the impossible.

The second basic corollary of the historical definition of class is closely related to the first. It may be stated like this: as a historical phenomenon, class exists only as a relationship over time. Historical classes cannot be found in isolation from other social groups (who themselves may also be class-conscious). Nor can they be located in moments artificially frozen for study (in the manner of the sociologist). Once again, Thompson's insights are invaluable. "If we stop history at a given point," he asserts,

then there are no classes but simply a multitude of individuals with a multitude of experiences. But if we watch these men over an adequate period of social change, we observe patterns in their relationships, their ideas, and their institutions. Class is defined by men as they live their own history, and, in the end, this is its only definition.²⁶

Describing patterns of social, ideological, and institutional change as they emerge from historical events is the historian's way of identifying class. Unless such patterns are uncovered and studied in detail, we can never hope to understand the specific historical logic of class development.

The second industrial revolution provides historians of capitalist society with "an adequate period of social change" in which to locate

²⁵ The Making, p. 10.

²⁶ The Making, p. 11.

and describe the patterns through which twentieth-century men and women have defined class. Let us now turn to that event as it unfolded in the United States, and using the historical definition of class outlined above, see how and why a specific society and political culture were transformed by the development of modern consumer-oriented capitalism.

CHAPTER TWO

THE TRANSFORMATION OF AMERICAN SOCIETY IN THE AUTOMOBILE AGE

"Why on earth do you need to study what's changing this country?" said a lifelong resident and shrewd observer of the Middle West. "I can tell you what's happening in just four letters: A-U-T-O!"

--Robert S. Lynd and Helen Merrell
Lynd, Middletown: A Study in
Modern American Culture

I. The Significance of America's Automobile Boom

The automobile was the driving force behind America's second industrial revolution. During the first part of this century, the United States became the world's first true consumer-oriented society because Americans were literally willing to reshape their land and their everyday lives to accommodate the gasoline-powered motor car. For this reason, America's first automobile boom should be viewed as an event of primary national significance. The general proliferation of motor vehicles in the United States between 1900 and 1950 was a unique occurrence not an inevitable 'stage' or 'level' or industrial development. While the world's other major industrial nations were ravaged by wars, revolution, and the economic disruption which attended both, Americans confidently built a new kind of consumer-oriented society around the production, sale,

and use of tens of millions of automobiles. Curiously, historians have rarely tried to present the creation of automobile-centered consumerism in this light. World War I remains a far more important event than the automobile boom in most American history textbooks. Yet, the implications of a comparative perspective seem clear. In the early twentieth century, America's automobile boom was a real historical alternative to the kind of international rivalries and militarism that shaped (and ultimately retarded) the second industrial revolution in Western Europe and Japan.

Pinpointing the exact reasons for the immediately enthusiastic response to the car in America remains a matter of considerable speculation. However, it is impossible to deny that Americans went "car-crazy" just after the turn of the century. As soon as the Ford Motor Company and the General Motors Corporation started to mass-produce and distribute automobiles at prices that eventually made them available to regularly employed working people, the car assumed its central place in the just emerging national consumer culture. "By the end of the first decade of the twentieth century," automotive historian John B. Rae has written,

the automobile could no longer be regarded as a novelty or a rich man's plaything [as it remained in Europe]; it was already potentially what it would become in fact--an item of incredible mass consumption.¹

The practical advantages of the motor car over alternative means of transportation can only account for part of its immediate success in the United States. The car also had enormous symbolic appeal. As a complex machine designed for individual use, the automobile seemed to hold out the promise of a better life through the power of industrial technology.

¹ American Automobile Manufacturers: The First Forty Years (Philadelphia, 1959), p. 103.

Indeed, the car quickly became the pre-eminent symbol of material progress in America. In addition, motor cars provided personal geographic mobility, something Americans had long valued as an aspect of freedom. As such the car was passionately embraced by a public still struggling to adjust to the kind of routine, urban-industrial life which frustrated expressions of personal freedom.

America's car-centered consumer-oriented culture, dubbed "automobility" by historian James J. Flink, strengthened popular faith in industrial capitalism at a moment when most Americans realized that the older social order dominated by family farmers and small businessmen was gone forever.² In the twentieth century, "automobility" pumped new life into the American Dream, helping to frustrate the growth of European-style class-consciousness among wage workers. By the late 1920s, when more than half the families in the United States owned at least one car, "automobility", not socialism, was already the way most Americans thought they would improve their lives. It may be stretching the term 'reform' a bit to agree with Professor Flink's provocative assertion that

Viewed as a solution to . . . major social problems, the general adoption of the automobile was the most important reform of the pre-World War I era.³

Yet, without going so far, it is possible to see how the socialist/working class critique of producer-goods-oriented capitalism could be undermined in a society where industry put automobiles and other technologically complex consumer goods into the hands of its workers.

² The term "automobility" is used extensively in The Car Culture (Cambridge, 1975), but with considerable imprecision. As employed here, "automobility" refers to the popular values (discussed below) of America's consumer-oriented culture which were encouraged by the mass-production, sale and operation of millions of cars in the early twentieth century.

³ The Car Culture, p. 40.

Certainly, it was more than coincidental that all of America's working class organizations, including the American Federation of Labor, the Industrial Workers of the World, and the various Socialist Parties, went into decline as the automobile boom accelerated in the 1920s. During that decade, "automobility", not further class struggle, seemed to hold real hope for a better life, and most American working people were eager to give it a try. As a result, class-conscious groups of working people which had begun to win significant support in the first two decades of the century, literally fell apart in the third decade. Both experienced workers and millions of people just entering the industrial economy set their sights on the individual material rewards promised by the propagandists of "automobility" and this choice left America's working class organizations and traditions in shambles by 1929.

The strengths of "automobility" in the years before the Great Depression were many and most obvious in the rapidly industrializing areas of the nation. First, the car culture promised greater personal geographic mobility than anyone had ever experienced; thus, in a sense, the machine acted as a kind of compensation for the limitations placed on social mobility by the expansion of the factory system. Unlike any other product of that system, the automobile offered individuals real escape from the regimen of industrial work.⁴ So even as they were drawn together in ever-larger factories and industrial cities, Americans found they could still lose themselves in the countryside by simply hopping into the family car. It may seem a small thing today, after living so many years with the automobile, but in those days, a Sunday outing or perhaps even a

⁴ In the years since World War II, television has provided a more passive means of escape. However, the way that cars enable individuals actively to control the speed and direction of their physical movement through time and space remains unique.

weekend on the road were special pleasures which could provide welcome psychological relief to families caught up in the routine tasks of city life. As the Lynds observed in Middletown, during the 1920s automobiles greatly expanded the recreational options of both businessmen and working people, "making leisure-time enjoyment a regularly expected part of every day and week rather than an occasional event" as it remained in Britain and Europe.⁵ The tremendous value individual Americans began to place on recreational activity as a consumer commodity cut across class lines, becoming one of the cornerstones of the new consumer-oriented car culture.

"Automobility" also reinforced the traditional American confidence in private property by elevating the continuous accumulation of personal possessions into a socially acceptable substitute for the acquisition of real productive property. In the automobile age, regularly employed working people could reasonably aspire to automobile-ownership, a new measure of personal success, and even home-ownership, the traditional mark of full citizenship in the American community of property-holders. Moreover, if (with the constant encouragement of mass-media advertisers) these same working people continued to formulate new material desires after making such basic acquisitions, they probably felt both successful and ambitious despite very limited opportunities to upgrade their job status.⁶ In the past, this kind of historical judgement has been poorly received by those who have wanted American workers to behave more like their British and European counterparts. However, as E.P. Thompson has

⁵ Middletown: A Study in Modern American Culture (New York, 1929), p. 260.

⁶ The Lynds' evidence for this view is presented in Middletown, pp. 80-4. Eli Chinoy's Automobile Workers and the American Dream (Garden City, 1955) shows how this pattern was strengthened after 1945, especially pp. 126ff. My own evidence for the working people of Flint is presented in Chapter Four below.

noted, we have no right to impose present-day standards on the lives and consciousness of prior generations. In Thompson's words, "their aspirations were valid in terms of their own experience," and they must be understood in this context.⁷ The purchase of a used car, a radio, or a kitchen appliance may no longer seem like a momentous achievement in a society glutted with consumer goods. Yet, for American working people of the 1920s, when so many products were really new, simple purchases could bring substantial advances in material comfort and social status. Thus, as Stephen Thernstrom has said of nineteenth-century working class home-ownership, "in their eyes, these accomplishments must have loomed large."⁸

Finally, as it took shape after 1908, America's car-centered mass consumer culture established a strong popular predilection for private, technological solutions to social and personal problems. In the age of "automobility", new machines and new technique, not new politics, were what offered the immediate promise of a brighter future to most working people. Henry Ford, the leading folk hero of the automobile boom, made his reputation larger than life precisely because he so clearly recognized and articulated this inclination of the American public. Unlike William C. Durant, the relatively obscure founder of the General Motors Corporation, Henry Ford won national attention and admiration by self-consciously making himself into the chief spokesman for "automobility". To millions of Americans, his Model T was much more than a cheap, reliable machine; it was the herald of a new and better life. In its day, Professor Flink reminds us,

⁷ The Making of the English Working Class, p.13

⁸ Poverty and Progress: Social Mobility in a Nineteenth-Century City (New York, 1972), p.165.

The Model T symbolized a victory of the people who looked upon automobility as a major social reform, over a short-sighted group of budding monopoly capitalists who put short-term higher unit profits ahead of the mass-automobility desired by the average person.⁹

By maximizing the potential of mechanization and continuous-flow production techniques, and by raising wages and lowering the price of his cars in order to reach a mass-market, Henry Ford seemed to prove his own contention that everyone could share in the material wealth of America without getting involved in collective political action.

It is, of course, difficult to conclusively prove a direct relationship between "automobility" and the failure of socialism in early twentieth-century America, but certain intriguing connections warrant further investigation. Since the 1920s, when the manufacture, sale, and enthusiastic use of forty million motor cars helped establish a new consumer-oriented American Dream, working people have usually been most willing to organize their collective political might in just two kinds of circumstances.¹⁰ Either the general failure of the economy to deliver the material promise of "automobility" (as occurred during the Great Depression), or the accumulated frustrations of ethnic and racial groups systematically excluded from the continuous acquisition of new consumer goods (like those experienced by many black Americans in the 1960s) have led working people to greater political awareness and direct participation in a collective struggle for political power. On the other hand, in places and circumstances where this new American Dream was generally realized in everyday life (in the booming industrial areas of the 1920s

⁹ The Car Culture, p. 55.

¹⁰ Automobile industry output and sales estimates for 1919-29 based on a Brookings Institute study cited in J. Steindl, Maturity and Stagnation in American Capitalism (Oxford, 1952), p. 5.

and 1950s, for instance), new products and recreational activities, not class-conscious organization and politics, absorbed the attentions of most working people.¹¹

There is no reason to assume that this blunting of working class-consciousness was inevitable. It did not occur in Western Europe where the transformation of industrial capitalism from a producer-goods to a consumer-goods orientation was delayed until the mid-twentieth century. Nor was the triumph of individual materialism certain in America before the automobile age. Indeed, between 1900 and 1914, increasing union membership and strike activity, the rise of the Industrial Workers of the World, the success of the Socialist Party, and even the popularity of a literature which clearly portrayed an America divided into hostile classes, all seemed to point towards the institutionalization of nineteenth-century working class traditions in the United States. Yet, by the 1920s, an American working class had not emerged. Instead, a combination of vigorous repression (of the I.W.W. and the Socialist Party during World War I) and the prosperity of the new automobile-centered economy prevented the creation of a permanent, politically independent working class. As soon as leading businessmen like Henry Ford realized working people could become their best customers, many American industrial workers got the opportunity to improve their material living standards, extend their leisure-time, and finally, harness the power of modern technology to their everyday lives. As a result, working class values originally formulated in response to the degradation of skills and clear material exploitation of producer-goods-oriented

¹¹ For the 1920s, see Middletown, pp.73-80ff. Chinoy makes this point for the 1950s in Automobile Workers and the American Dream, especially pp. 112-26.

capitalism lost their appeal. During the automobile boom, even the most conservative unions in the American Federation of Labor suffered sharp declines in active membership.

Given the enormous size of the United States and the diversity possible within its continental borders, generalizations about the political culture of the automobile age must be tempered with a bit of skepticism. Capitalism developed unevenly in America, just as it has in the world as a whole; and because of this uneven development, regional distinctions have always played an important part in the nation's history. Before 1950, many Americans were not integrated into the car culture, although automobiles were by then widely used in every section of the country. In the North, black workers and some ethnic minorities who were generally excluded from higher paying industrial jobs, preserved their cultural independence from "automobility". In the South, outside the cities, cars slowly replaced horses without disrupting the cultural mix of bi-racial poverty and racial segregation that had its roots in the late nineteenth century. And, finally, in the Far West, vast areas remained virtually undeveloped until after World War II despite the growth of a few widely scattered industrial cities.

However, where "automobility" was firmly established prior to the Great Depression--in the Northeast, the Middle West, and California--it set vital precedents for the kind of sprawling urban-industrial development which has encompassed all of America since 1950. During the 1920s, the first four-lane highways, first suburbs, and yes, even the first shopping malls were built to serve a new auto-mobile consumer-citizen. Most historians have ignored these changes, or treated them as essentially prosaic developments. Yet, is it possible to look at the United States

today, with over 140 million cars on the road, and deny the fundamental significance of the automobile boom to twentieth-century American history? Between 1908 and 1930, the reorientation of national economic priorities to suit the needs of an automobile-driving public made American capitalism into a new kind of society unlike any other of the so-called 'advanced' industrial nations. While the costs of colonial and military rivalries and the terrible destruction of the Great War kept Britain, France, Germany, and Japan locked into the producer-goods-oriented stage of development, the United States transformed its economic and social order. Neither the Great Depression of the 1930s nor World War II reversed this fundamental transformation. After 1945, a booming, powerful America literally exported its car-centered, consumer-oriented version of high technology capitalism to war-torn Western Europe and Japan. As a result, American "automobility", not the patterns of turn of the century industrial society became the model for economic revival and the reconstruction of world capitalism.

Today, the United States is more of a social and cultural unity than ever before because of the success of mass-consumerism and "automobility". With its omnipresent strip of drive-in businesses, shopping centers, gas stations, and parking lots, the car culture dominates the American landscape, and continues to distinguish America from other nations. Even now, after the tremendous proliferation of cars around the globe, Americans still own well over half of the world's motor vehicles while making up just six percent of its population.¹² Surely, nowhere on earth have cars played such an intrinsic role in national economic and social development.

¹² Flink, Car Culture, pp. 230-1. Of course, prior to the 1970s, America's share of the world's motor vehicles was much higher.

As Americans are only painfully beginning to realize in this era of high oil prices, "automobility" is paradoxically both the strength of their peculiar social order and a threat to continued existence.

II. The Automobile Boom: A Second Industrial Revolution

When it first appeared in the United States shortly after 1900, the gasoline-powered motor car seemed remarkably well-suited to a country where great distances, a widely dispersed population, relatively high real wages, huge oil reserves, and a well-established petroleum industry provided the prerequisites for an automobile market far bigger than any in Europe or Asia. As Americans quickly discovered, motor cars were easier to control and cheaper to maintain than horses. Almost from the industry's beginnings, American automobiles were good products which promised and generally delivered inexpensive, reliable personal transportation not limited by the fixed tracks of railroads and trolleys. These attributes made the car particularly attractive in rural America. In fact, during the years of generally rising farm prices up to 1920, farmers and small town families formed the backbone of the first mass-market for motor vehicles. In addition, automobiles were considerably smaller and apparently much cleaner than horse-drawn vehicles, two characteristics which promised to eliminate the significant traffic and sanitation problems faced by the nation's largest cities.¹³ The urban market for cars grew rapidly once the pioneers of mass-production like Henry Ford and William C. Durant started to turn out low-priced vehicles. By 1914, when the industrial nations of Europe diverted their capital and

¹³ Professor Flink has estimated that the cost of cleaning up after the horse in New York City alone was more than one hundred million dollars in 1908 (Car Culture, p. 34).

labor into the production of mass-destruction, the mass-produced automobile was already becoming the cornerstone of a unique consumer-oriented economy in the United States.

In the first few years of this century, American motor cars had been built exclusively for the affluent, adventurous middle and upper classes, just as they were in Britain, France, and Germany. But unlike their European counterparts, American producers found that they could not keep up with orders. Then, in 1908 in Michigan, two important events opened up the possibility of automobile ownership to most American families. From his Highland Park factory, Henry Ford turned the first Model T loose on the nation. And in Flint, the self-proclaimed "Vehicle City", hometown celebrity Billy Durant began to put together the General Motors Corporation using the same philosophy that had already made him co-owner of the world's largest wagon-making business: find or build an inexpensive, dependable vehicle and it will be a "self-seller".¹⁴ Soon, Americans who had only dreamed of motoring found ways to afford their own Ford or Chevrolet (even if it was a used car). The public's passion for the automobile quickly made possession of the machine a critical symbol of personal success and respectability. By the mid-1920s, cars had become an essential part of everyday life in America. The desire to own a car created its own consumer logic. Millions of families plunged into debt to buy their automobile, including many who mortgaged their homes to finance the purchase. In Middletown, the Lynds discovered that it was common for families to buy a car before they completed the plumbing in

¹⁴ Flint's Chamber of Commerce gave the city its title in 1905 as part of the Golden Jubilee celebration. In this period, Flint factories were turning out more than 100,000 carriages, road carts, and wagons per year. See Lawrence Gustin, Billy Durant: Creator of General Motors (Grand Rapids, 1973), pp. 41-8.

in their bathrooms. One woman actually swore, "I'll go without food before I'll see us give up the car."¹⁵

The real lure of the car lay in the new experience of motoring, not its practicality. For a nation adjusting to the impact of total industrialization, the automobile provided a means of escape from workday routine which introduced a sense of adventure and personal power into individual lives. Out on the road, drivers felt that they could control technology and their own destiny. These feelings may have been misleading.¹⁶ Nevertheless, they were intense and enjoyable. As Sinclair Lewis wrote in 1922, the "motor car was poetry and tragedy, love and heroism" to all who owned one.¹⁷ Hence, the automobile had an enormous psychological appeal that augmented its practical advantages in the marketplace. It was a truly incredible machine.

For enterprising capitalists of the day, mass enthusiasm for motoring represented the greatest opportunity of their lifetime. Ultimately, the car would provide American businessmen with a product around which they could build a new consumer-oriented economy. Yet, investment leaders in the older Eastern cities did not immediately grasp the potential of the early automobile. In the Midwest, and especially Michigan, ambitious

¹⁵ The Lynds, Middletown, pp. 254-6. Also see Frederick Lewis Allen, Only Yesterday (New York, 1959 Bantam edition), pp. 70 and 114-16.

¹⁶ Indeed, given the fact that people depend on a machine to induce them, these feelings seem the epitome of "false-consciousness". Yet, in a limited sense, while driving, cars do enable people to control a technology, as well as their movement through time and space.

¹⁷ Babbitt (New York, 1961 Signet edition) p. 23. French cultural critic Henri Lefebvre makes the same point in his study, Everyday Life in the Modern World. The motor car is the epitome of 'objects', the Leading Object of modern industrial society," he declares, "The practical significance of the motor car . . . is only part of its social significance . . . The car is a status symbol. it stands for comfort, power, authority and speed, it is consumed as a sign in addition to its practical use." See especially, pp. 100-4.

combinations of entrepreneurs and engineers took full advantage of the situation. Pooling their resources and their skills, these men created the giant industrial corporations which made Michigan's lower peninsula into one of the world's leading manufacturing regions, and themselves into multi-millionaires. In 1904, Michigan's many small automobile shops turned out just over 9000 cars, already forty-two percent of the national total. A decade later, led by the Big Two, Ford and General Motors, the state's output had climbed to 437,000 automobiles, more than three-fourths of all the cars built in the United States that year.¹⁸ Clearly, as Americans began to commit themselves to "automobility", Michigan automakers were putting their state in the vanguard of the new developments.

Of course, the rapid growth of the automobile industry was not an isolated event. It both energized and epitomized the broader transformation of America's economy which occurred between the severe depressions of 1893-97 and 1929-33. In some of its essentials, this second industrial revolution resembled concurrent changes in the economies of Western Europe and Japan. However, the mass-consumer orientation of American developments had no parallel overseas.

The application of scientific methods and new technology to production and distribution problems, and a dramatic restructuring of the business system lay at the heart of America's second industrial revolution.¹⁹ First, in older industries like steelmaking, automatic machinery

¹⁸ George S. May, A Most Unique Machine: the Michigan Origins of the American Automobile Industry (Grand Rapids, 1975), pp. 333-5.

¹⁹ The most comprehensive and comprehensible study of these broader developments is Alfred D. Chandler's book, The Visible Hand: The Managerial Revolution in American Business (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1977).

and the mechanization of heavy labor were introduced to lower labor costs while dramatically increasing output.²⁰ Then, as other industrial leaders adopted the principles of scientific-management popularized by the efficiency expert Frederick Taylor, the production of a wide variety of commodities was streamlined according to time-motion studies and the stop-watch. The moving assembly line, inaugurated by Henry Ford in 1914, further advanced these techniques, but mass-production was already a reality before the advent of "mass-automobility".²¹

To complement this expansion of basic production capacities and to control the great numbers of workers and machines it required, the size, structure, and functions of industrial corporations underwent drastic renovation. Mergers were frequently used to speed up the creation of integrated companies that controlled all stages of production and distribution, and very often controlled entry into their markets as well. At the peak of the merger movement from 1898 to 1901, nearly 2300 firms were absorbed by bigger companies, but significant mergers continued right through the automobile boom.²² In some industries where profits were very high, vertical and horizontal integration could be pursued without outside financing and control by banking interests. This was especially true of the fast-growing automobile industry. Cash sales and consistently heavy turnover enabled Ford to build what is still the world's largest

²⁰ For example, see David Brody, Steelworkers in America: The Non-Union Era (New York, 1960), pp. 7-49.

²¹ Braverman presents an excellent examination of Taylorism in chapters 4-6 of Labor and Monopoly Capital. See Middletown, pp. 39-44. for a graphic description of the changes scientific management brought to a small glassmaking factory.

²² Gabriel Kolko, The Triumph of Conservatism: A Reinterpretation of American History, 1900-1916 (Chicago, 1967), p. 18. Also see Chandler. The Visible Hand, chapter 10.

single industrial complex on the Rouge River in Detroit, while Durant expanded General Motors' national operations through mergers and outright purchases of smaller companies.²³

After 1900, the managerial problems presented by the sheer size and diversity of the new fully integrated corporations were increasingly solved by professionally-paid staff, not owners. In these years management was studied, sub-divided, and rationalized like the production process itself. As a result, economic decision-making became more of a bureaucratic process, and less the sole priority of individual entrepreneurs. Henry Ford's longtime personal control of his giant company was an exception to this rule and it contributed to the decline of the Ford Motor Company in the automobile market during the mid-1920s. More typically, after World War I, the nation's biggest businesses like General Motors followed the lead of the DuPont Corporation by developing decentralized, multi-divisional operating structures.²⁴

About the same time industrial corporations also stepped up their efforts to reach individual consumers. Direct outlets, franchise arrangements, dealerships, chain stores, and department stores changed the distribution patterns of American business, flooding the country with brand name goods which have become major institutions of the consumer-oriented culture. By the 1920s, improvements in road transport and electronic communication (telephone, radio, and movies) began to tie even the smallest towns to the national marketplace. As Thorstein Veblen had predicted

²³ Kolko, pp. 42-5 and Chandler, pp. 358-9. In just two years from 1908 to 1910, Durant had General Motors buy up 30 separate companies; see Gustin, Billy Durant, p. 123.

²⁴ Adolf A. Berle and Gardiner C. Means, The Modern Corporation and Private Property (New York, 1932) remains the classic work on the managerial revolution. The leadership of the DuPonts is discussed at length

in 1899, a "vicarious consumption practiced by the households of the middle and lower classes" in pursuit of the appearance of "the leisure class scheme of life" was fast becoming a central feature of American daily life.²⁵

To create and sustain this new pattern of 'conspicuous consumption', major corporations made advertising into an important industry in its own right. Using the traditional newspaper and catalog, and more recent media like mass-circulation magazines, radio, and movies, advertisers provided a steady diet of new material desires which shaped the emerging consumer-oriented popular culture. Once a minor cost consideration, expenditures on advertising rose dramatically in the 1920s. Between 1918 and 1929, the cost of advertisements in general and farm magazines alone climbed from 58.5 million dollars to 193.3 million dollars, and by 1927 one estimate placed total annual expenditures on advertising at a then staggering one and a half billion dollars.²⁶

At the time, the rapid growth of advertising seemed to worry very few people, but even then, production for a mass-market of conspicuous consumers subtly undermined industrial standards. As industries matured (that is, reached the practical limits of first-time purchasers of their products), production was designed less to turn out goods of maximum quality and durability, and more to meet transitory standards of appearance

in Alfred D. Chandler and Stephen Salsbury, Pierre S. DuPont and the Making of the Modern Corporation (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1971).

²⁵ The Theory of the Leisure Class: An Economic Study of Institutions (New York, 1953 Mentor edition), pp. 69-70. For details on the emergence of mass-distribution see Chandler, The Visible Hand, chapters 7 and 11.

²⁶ Stuart Ewen, Captains of Consciousness: Advertising and the Social Roots of the Consumer Culture (New York, 1976), p. 32. and Allen, Only Yesterday, p. 11.

often set by their own advertising departments. As early as 1923, Veblen warned,

The distinction between workmanship and salesmanship had been blurred . . . it will doubtless hold true now that the shop-cost of many articles produced for the market is mainly chargeable to the production of salable appearances, ordinarily meretricious.²⁷

Though not true in every industry, this lowering of standards definitely marked the maturing automobile industry. In the late 1920s, Henry Ford's refusal to fall in line with General Motors' emphasis on annual model changes and style-conscious design permanently cost his company the leadership of the American car market. By the post-World War II era, approximately one-fourth of the total purchase price of American-made automobiles was going into annual styling modifications which made virtually no significant technological improvements in the basic machine.²⁸

As the leading growth industry of the period from 1899 to 1929, automobile manufacturing also embodied most of the other characteristics of the second industrial revolution. To its advantage, the automobile industry was new. Initially this meant automobile companies had no large fixed investments in older techniques and equipment to slow down the introduction and improvement of mass-production methods. Nor were there significant numbers of established vehicle workers reluctant to sacrifice valued skills and control over their work process for the simple

²⁷ From Absentee Ownership and Business Enterprise in Recent Times, quoted in Paul Baran and Paul Sweezy, Monopoly Capital: An Essay on the American Economic and Social Order (New York, 1968), pp. 132-3.

²⁸ Baran and Sweezy, Monopoly Capital, pp. 135-7. With the exception of automatic transmissions, which were introduced in the 1940s by most companies, American cars remained fundamentally unchanged for nearly a half century from the late 1920s to the early 1970s.

goal of higher output. Like so many of the new mass-production industries, car-making did not degrade the skills of a large existing workforce. Rather, with its promise of high wages and relatively short hours, it drew an entirely new group of working people into factories where a premium was placed on dexterity and speed, not a personal understanding of complex production methods. Thus, faced with what seemed to be a limitless demand for their product and few internal impediments to expansion, the most successful automobile companies were continuously able to rationalize production and enlarge capacity. American automakers raised the total annual output of vehicles from just over 65,000 in 1908 to 1.9 million in 1917, the first year of direct American participation in the Allied war effort; and still the public clamored for more cars.²⁹

The wartime performance of the automobile industry provides convincing evidence that "automobility" was already uniquely important in American life by the second decade of the twentieth century. Even before the outbreak of hostilities in Europe, only American automakers had begun to reach a mass-market. In 1913, for example, the British motor turned out just 35,000 vehicles of all types, while production in America topped the half million mark.³⁰ During the following year, European production of private automobiles ceased completely, but in the United States, tremendous increases in output and sales were registered right through 1917. Even in 1918, despite shortages of some raw materials and partial mobilization for war production, American automakers managed to build and sell

²⁹ Flink, Car Culture, p. 18; and John B. Rae, American Automobile Manufacturers, p. 119.

³⁰ William Plowden, The Motor Car Politics, 1896-1970 (London, 1971), p. 107.. It is interesting to note that even in 1913, approximately one-fourth of the cars built in Britain were turned out by the Ford Motor Company. At the time, Britain had the world's second largest automobile industry.

nearly one million passenger cars. Most of these vehicles were produced by Ford and General Motors, not the small car companies which were more fully committed to the government's munitions program. General Motors did manufacture Liberty aircraft engines at the Buick works in Flint and the Cadillac plant in Detroit, yet its other far-flung facilities continued to produce cars for the domestic market. Henry Ford used government contracts for naval patrol boats to begin development of the River Rouge site, but wartime profits from record sales of the Model T and Fordson tractors went to buy out all minority stockholders in his company, not to aid the Allies. Overall, in the two years of the United States' involvement in the Great War, government contracts assumed by the automobile industry topped 1.1 billion dollars. However, at the same time, regular sales of domestic private and commercial vehicles totaled 2.4 billion dollars.³¹ Thus, while the Great War destroyed the bases for an automobile boom in Western Europe, it actually stimulated the creation of an automobile-centered, consumer-oriented economy in America.

During the 1920s, as Britain, France, and Germany struggled to rebuild war-torn economies, the automobile boom reached its peak in the United States. Recovering quickly from a sharp, but brief postwar slump, American automakers seemed to insure indefinite expansion by gradually shifting away from technological and price competition towards a greater emphasis on styling, design, and marketing innovations. In the twenties,

³¹ "Automobile Progress Edition," The New York Times, special supplement, February 2, 1919. Also see Flink, Car Culture, pp. 93-4. Significantly, during the war years 1914-1919, personal expenditures on private transportation grew faster than at any other time during the automobile boom.

automaking took its place as the nation's leading manufacturing industry (based on the total value of its product), and it retained that position until the mid-1970s, making it a basic foundation of the modern American economy.³² However, near the end of the decade, the initial practical limits of "automobility" were approached. In 1927, the year Ford dropped the Model T and General Motors became the new industry leader, demand for replacement vehicles outstripped the number of people buying their first car, even though nearly half the families in the nation were still without an automobile.³³ To stimulate this weakening market, the Big Three automakers (as they are still known today) stepped up their advertising campaigns, pressed ahead with product differentiation schemes, and facilitated credit buying. These measures proved to be only temporary pallatives which could not alter the hard realities of American income distribution.³⁴ As a result, the automobile industry operated at less than eighty percent of practical capacity between 1926 and 1929, prompting Walter Chrysler to admit privately that he could "feel the winds of disaster blowing."³⁵ Of course, Chrysler's premonition proved accurate. Although a record 5.3 million cars were built in 1929, that figure was not topped again until

³² Rae, American Automobile Manufacturers, p. 153. During the late 1970s, fast rising petroleum prices pushed the oil industry ahead of automobiles as the leading manufacturing industry.

³³ C.E. Griffin, "The Life History of Automobiles," Michigan Business Studies, I, 1 (Ann Arbor, 1926), p. 2; and Flink, Car Culture, pp. 142-3.

³⁴ In 1910, the bottom two-fifths of all the income recipients in the United States received 19.8 percent of the total national personal income before taxes; by 1929, their share was just 15.5 percent. For the most part, these were the people who could not afford the costs involved in owning, operating, and maintaining an automobile. See Gabriel Kolko, Wealth and Power in America: An Analysis of Social Class and Income Distribution (New York, 1962), p. 14.

³⁵ Quoted in Flink, Car Culture, p. 167. Capacity figures may be found in Steindl, Maturity and Stagnation, p. 153.

after World War II.³⁶

By most standards, the industrial economy which collapsed between 1929 and 1933 was far different than it had been three decades earlier when the first automobiles appeared. In large part, though certainly not in all respects, the changes had been made possible by the dynamism of the automobile industry. Unlike other growing businesses of the era, automaking had a special kind of multiplier effect comparable to the impact of the railroads on nineteenth century America. From its origins, "automobility" stimulated basic extractive industries, steelmaking, and construction; and it also brought many new types of enterprises into existence. Moreover, like railroad building, the extension of motorized road transport amplified the dimensions of the national marketplace while it simultaneously quickened the rate at which goods and money circulated throughout the economy. Automotive transportation also paralleled the railroad experience with government subsidies, calling forth a massive commitment of local, state, and federal funds to road-building projects which transformed the national landscape. Finally, the mass-production and mass-distribution of cars, a heavy, complex industrial product, set a powerful example for the development of other consumer durable goods industries. All totaled, between 1899 and 1929, incalculable amounts of private and public capital and innumerable hours of human labor were spent preparing the United States for "automobility"; and though precise figures will never be available, some of the most important outlines of this great economic event are clear.

For example, once the mass-market for cars was tapped, demand for wood, iron, steel, rubber, glass, and other raw materials grew steadily.

³⁶ Rae, American Automobile Manufacturers, p. 153.

Factories especially built to mass-produce tires, bodies, axles, electrical components and the hundreds of other parts essential for the finished automobile soon appeared all over the Middle West, shifting the industrial heart of the nation away from the North Atlantic Coast.³⁷ All across the country, auto sales and service provided important new local business opportunities, while regional assembly plants opened up thousands of new factory jobs. In most areas, as the driving population increased, state and local governments responded by making road building and repair a major part of their responsibility to the public. This development provided a tremendous boost to the construction industry since the replacement of rough dirt roads with a network of paved streets and highways capable of handling ever increased traffic seemed to be an endless task.

Public officials usually received wholehearted support for road projects from taxpayers, even though the net effect of local, state, and federal programs raised the average tax burden tremendously. Property tax increases provided basic funds at the local level. The states depended primarily on licenses and fees to pay for their road construction and maintenance efforts in the early years of the boom, but these monies proved to be inadequate to meet the demands of drivers. In 1919, Oregon imposed the first gasoline tax, and by 1930, every state had adopted this method of augmenting its highway funds. Congress voted the the first national road improvement program into law in 1916, and then strengthened

³⁷ The combined number of establishments in the motor vehicle, parts, and bodies industries rose from just 57 in 1904 to 2515 in 1919. In the following decade, consolidation of operations and the elimination of marginal firms left only 1154 establishments in the field; however, the average number of wage earners in each establishment was multiplied nearly fourfold, from 53 to 192 workers. See William Ellison Chalmers, "Labor in the Automobile Industry: A Study of Personnel Policies, Workers' Attitudes and Attempts at Unionism" (Unpublished PhD. dissertation, University of Wisconsin, 1932), pp. 12-3.

its financial commitment in the Federal Highway Act of 1921. In 1929, the last year of the automobile boom, all governments spent two and a quarter billion dollars on road projects with nearly forty percent of that amount coming from special motor vehicle taxes. During the 1930s, these figures climbed steadily despite the Great Depression because road work was so often incorporated into the overall relief effort.³⁸ Neither war nor depression, it seems, could stop the expansion of "automobility".

Among the other direct beneficiaries of the automobile boom, the petroleum business deserves special mention. Like the carmakers themselves, America's oil companies became one of the principal foundations of the nation's economy before 1929. Fortuitously placed to supply the essential fuel and lubricants for the machine nearly every American desired, the oil industry was also blessed by the enormous potential of American petroleum reserves. At the turn of the century, the business was practically a Rockefeller monopoly. However, as the use of motor cars increased, soaring demand for new petroleum products undermined the old empire. In 1911, when a Supreme Court decision ratified this fact by splitting Rockefeller's Standard Oil into twenty-nine separate units, eight other large independent companies including the Gulf, Texas, Shell, Sun, and Union oil companies had already grabbed substantial shares of the booming market. By the 1920s, a tightly-knit oligopoly of twenty fully integrated corporations emerged, and it has dominated the domestic petroleum business ever since. At the end of the automobile boom, this

³⁸ For more details see John B. Rae, The Road and Car in American Life (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1971), especially pp. 49-50. Flink concentrates his statistical evidence on this subject on pages 140-1 and 160 of The Car Culture.

oil oligopoly had accumulated total assets of nearly eight billion dollars, more than four times the holdings of the four biggest car companies.³⁹ Profiting daily from the American public's passion for driving, the petroleum industry had been able to turn itself into an economic colossus; and because they controlled the flow of oil, the lifeblood of the car culture, the oil companies ultimately wielded enormous political power as well.

III. A Transformation of Class, Culture, and Society

The social transformation which accompanied the automobile boom was as striking as the changes wrought in the economy. In fact, it is no exaggeration to claim that the automobile boom produced a new kind of capitalism in the United States, setting patterns for social relationships, values, and institutions which still dominate American life today. Before the car, America was not a 'mature' industrial society as so many historians assume.⁴⁰ Of course, by 1900 industrialization had advanced far enough to make the United States one of the world's leading industrial nations. However, in terms of its own potentials, the historical alternatives open to it, and the everyday life and culture of its citizens, America was still a relatively underdeveloped country at the turn

³⁹ Assets are listed in Berle and Means, The Modern Corporation, pp. 20-2. Also see Chandler, The Visible Hand, pp. 360-3.

⁴⁰ For example, in "Work, Culture, and Society in Industrializing America, 1815-1919," Herbert Gutman asserts that "After 1893 the United States ranked as a mature industrial society." (in the American Historical Review, 78, 3, June 1973, p. 540. Like other commentators, Gutman seems to base his judgement on a comparison of international industrial outputs, rather than a comparison between late nineteenth-century and mid-twentieth-century social and cultural institutions. As the Lynds pointed out, "peering back" at the nation in the 1890s, it is easy to mistake "the dust and clatter of the new industrialism" for a fully developed industrial culture that simply did not exist. See Middletown, pp. 16-7.

of the century.

The rural character of American society before "automobility" is the strongest indicator of relative underdevelopment. In 1900 only one-third of America's people lived in towns with more than eight thousand inhabitants, while fully three-fifths of the population were officially classified "rural" by Census-takers. (By comparison, in 1901, nearly four-fifths of Britain's population resided in urban places.)⁴¹ Though New York and Philadelphia each claimed more than a million residents by this time, and thirty-two other places topped the 100,000 population mark, most Americans still lived on farms or in small towns where older agrarian patterns of work, leisure, and family remained strong.⁴² Even in cities and mining towns where the rhythms and rationalized discipline of industrial capitalism had penetrated everyday life, working people often held onto preindustrial customs and values in order to buffer themselves from the relentless grind of long hours, low wages, dangerous working conditions, and lack of job security that was their common lot.⁴³ Many families

⁴¹ The United States Bureau of the Census considered places with fewer than 2500 residents "rural" and everything else "urban". Traditionally it also listed towns with populations over 8000, but unfortunately the category was dropped after 1930.

⁴² This statement is meant to place American farm life into perspective as a historical alternative to urban, industrial existence, not to romanticize agrarianism. Agricultural work was hard, and rural poverty was common. In fact, as I demonstrate in Chapter Four below, many young workers who moved to Flint during the automobile boom definitely preferred both the conditions and rewards of work in the automobile factories to the difficulties of making a living in the country.

⁴³ Gutman makes this point clearly in "Work, Culture, and Society," pp. 39-49. Tamara Hareven's "The Laborers of Manchester, New Hampshire 1912-1922: The Role of Family and Ethnicity in Adjustment to Industrial Life," Labor History, XVI, 2, (Spring, 1975) is a fine case study of this phenomenon. Gerald Rosenblum has argued that this separation of work life and ethnic culture explains the strength of "business unionism" among immigrant workers; see Immigrant Workers: Their Impact on American Labor Radicalism (New York, 1973), especially pp. 167 and 177.

were able to include some agricultural undertaking (a vegetable garden, raising poultry or livestock) in their total effort to maintain an acceptable standard of living. This apparently widespread practice was made possible by the relative abundance of cheap land in America, and it provided American people one way of easing the transition from rural to urban society which was not generally available in Europe and Japan. Thus, as late as the 1890s, in New York City, the nation's most cosmopolitan city, small farms dotted Brooklyn and Queens, while visitors observed goats and pigs as far south as Forty-Second Street on Manhattan Island. And in smaller cities where tenement housing was less typical, a majority of families probably produced at least a part of their annual food supply.⁴⁴

By 1930, the size, number, and geographic distribution of American cities had expanded enormously, dramatically intensifying the urban character of national life. Rapid industrialization and the concurrent emergence of "automobility" combined to create the recognizably modern American city where cars, not animals and gardens, crowded the streets and open spaces. Before 1900 urban centers were still primarily concentrated along the traditional commercial routes on the ocean coasts, Great Lakes shoreline, and the banks of the Mississippi River system. The automobile boom decisively broke this pattern, encouraging the growth of cities that were totally dependent on overland transportation. By the start of the Great Depression, ninety-three widely scattered

⁴⁴ Braverman discusses the significance of the decline in urban agriculture in Labor and Monopoly Capital, pp. 272-7. In addition to the points he makes about the strengthening of social relationships based on the marketplace, it should also be noted that this decline probably contributed to the human misery of the Great Depression. Certainly, even a small vegetable garden would have provided a welcome addition to the meager handouts that passed for relief between 1930 and 1933.

cities boasted of populations exceeding 100,000 persons, and fully one-half of all Americans lived in towns with more than eight thousand residents. During the long boom, New York, Chicago, and Philadelphia became true metropolitan centers linked to surrounding suburban cities by a complex system of paved roads. At the same time, the two places which best represented the popular triumph of the car culture, Detroit and Los Angeles, grew at phenomenal rates, allowing them to join the select group of cities that provided for more than a million people.⁴⁵

Of course, the new urban population did more than simply reproduce the nineteenth century city on a bigger scale. "There is no such thing as economic growth which is not, at the same time, growth or change of a culture," writes E.P. Thompson.⁴⁶ Certainly this was true of the United States during the automobile boom. By establishing a national economy truly based on the mass-production and mass-distribution of durable goods like the car, Americans simultaneously created a new kind of social order. Clearly there were continuities with the past, but in the booming cities and their surrounding suburbs, older values, relationships, and institutions gave way to a society more dependent on national corporations, mass-consumerism, and "automobility". Some traditional communities survived virtually intact, especially in depressed rural areas and industrial cities with tightly-knit ethnic neighborhoods. Nevertheless, at the time, students of social change like the authors of Middletown were

⁴⁵ Between 1900 and 1930, Detroit's population increased fivefold (from 300,000 to 1.6 million residents) while Los Angeles' population multiplied by a factor of ten (from 102,000 to 1.2 million persons). In the same period, Cleveland tripled in size, and New York, Chicago, Milwaukee, and Toledo doubled their populations. Smaller boom towns like Flint, Michigan grew at even faster rates.

⁴⁶ "Time, Work-Discipline, and Industrial Capitalism," Past and Present, 38, December 1967, p. 97.

more consistently impressed by the fundamental differences between 'the good old days' before the turn of the century and America in the automobile age.⁴⁷

Viewed from the perspective of contemporaries, through the eyes of Americans born in the late nineteenth century and maturing during the automobile boom, the totality of change experienced by local communities amounted to a virtual restructuring of the fundamental relationships and institutions that shaped everyday life. In economic terms, the establishment of big, integrated industrial corporations geared to the mass-production and distribution of cars and other durable consumer items broke down all the barriers between local business activity and the influence of the national marketplace. Increasingly, the livelihood and the workday routines of urban America became dependent on big business organizations. More and more people went to work for bigger companies in both 'blue' and 'white' collar positions.⁴⁸ In real automotive boom towns like Detroit and Flint in Michigan, or even Muncie, Indiana (the Lynds' Middletown), diversified local economies were quickly displaced by a single industry orientation and greater dependence on large, nationally owned firms. These firms or their subsidiaries rapidly became the largest employers and property owners in such cities. Though nominally

⁴⁷ "The horse culture of Middletown has almost disappeared," the Lynds reported, "nor was the horse culture in all its years of undisputed sway ever as pervasive a part of the life of Middletown as is the cluster of habits that have grown up overnight around the automobile." (Middletown, p. 251).

⁴⁸ Between 1900 and 1930, the number of 'blue-collar' workers soared from 14.7 to 30.3 million persons (from half to near two-thirds the total labor force). In the same period, the number of 'white-collar' (professional, technical, and managerial) workers rose from less than three million to six and a half million people (from ten to nearly fifteen per cent of the total labor force). See Braverman, Labor and Monopoly Capital, pp. 357-80.

independent, local business institutions (banks, stores, builders, secondary manufacturers, and even professionals), as well as local government itself, were eventually forced to rely on the business cycle of the dominant industry for their own economic well-being.⁴⁹ In many cases, local businessmen and executives also invested heavily in the national corporations represented in their hometown, thus tying both their professional and personal fortunes to the fate of America's business giants.

Linked by this common economic dependence, and augmented by the presence of new corporate managers, local business communities emerged from the automobile boom more unified and better organized than ever before. Within the Chambers of Commerce, citywide employers' organizations, trade associations, and the exclusive businessmen's clubs which flourished during the 1920s, entrepreneurs and company officials mixed traditional anti-unionism, local pride, and patriotism with new-found corporate loyalties and admiration for technological achievement. The resulting ideology, often parodied as mindless 'boosterism', actually expressed the terms of a vital reconciliation between small business and national corporate power. Although ultimately founded on the prosperity generated by the large corporation, expressions of a community of interest between big and small businessmen were more than empty rhetoric. In concrete situations like the implementation of welfare capitalist programs, the organization of sports and civic activities, the funding of charities, and political drives for municipal reform, local entrepreneurs and officials from national corporations worked together to build new community institutions and a common consciousness of business's dominant

⁴⁹ Melvin Holli's "The Impact of Automobile Manufacturing upon Detroit" (Detroit in Perspective: A Journal of Regional History, II, 3, Spring 1976) is a succinct description of how the Motor City's economy was transformed by the car.

role in the industrial city. And, in prospering cities all across the United States, these goals were achieved. By the mid-1920s, confident in their ability to control economic development and its social consequences, as a class, businessmen looked forward to the second quarter of the twentieth century with great hopes and tremendous enthusiasm. "United we stick, divided we're stuck. United we boost; divided we bust" may sound like just another bit of Babbittry today, but in its own time, the ritualistic repetition of such slogans heralded the making of a kind of class-consciousness that left a permanent impression on the American business community.⁵⁰

In striking contrast to the growing unity and power of the business class, and partly as a result of it, genuine working class-consciousness and organizations disintegrated during the 1920s. Drastic declines in union membership, the number of strikes, and support for anti-union politicians, as well as the increasing conservatism of labor leaders like the A.F. of L.'s William Green were the most visible signs of the nationwide collapse of working class-consciousness, but at the local level, things usually looked even worse for the labor movement. In reality, labor unions had almost no power at the peak of the automobile boom. As an Australian observer who was astounded by the weakness of American trade unions remarked in 1928, "Labour organization exists only by the tolerance of employers . . . It has no real part in determining industrial conditions."⁵¹

Unions were particularly powerless in those industries which formed

⁵⁰ The slogan was Muncie, Indiana's, but the sentiment was national in the 1920s. See Middletown, pp. 487ff.

⁵¹ Hugh Grant Adams, quoted in Bernstein, The Lean Years, p. 83.

the backbone of the emerging consumer-goods economy. Almost all manufacturing firms including those in the automobile, steel, electrical equipment, rubber, cement, textile, chemical, and food processing industries conducted their employee relations on a strictly open shop basis in the 1920s. Non-ferrous metals, petroleum, road transport, utilities, banking, insurance, retail and wholesale trade, services, and the professions were also essentially union-free sectors of the booming economy. Only construction, railroads, printing, water transport, music, and a handful of 'sick' industries retained significant union membership, but even in these unionized industries, organized labor's actual power could be sharply limited by local circumstances. Thus, in the years following World War I, it seemed as if the "labor movement stood still as the main stream of American society swept by."⁵²

Unfortunately, traditional historical judgments about the failure of the labor movement during the 1920s usually have been focused on labor leadership, management strategies, and government policy, not the basic changes occurring in the swift moving currents of everyday life. Both the radical and more established 'Wisconsin' schools of American labor history have generally grounded their interpretations of the fragility of working class-consciousness and organizations after World War I in assumptions derived from the nature of industrial capitalism as it existed before the automobile boom. As a result, neither group of labor scholars has systematically explored the possibility that the experiential bases for working class-consciousness might have been dramatically reshaped by the extremely rapid creation of an industrial economy truly geared to

⁵² Bernstein, Lean Years, p. 84. Bernstein's list of 'sick' industries includes coal, New England textiles, clothing, and shoe and boot making.

the mass-production and mass-distribution of durable consumer goods. In fact, even the most recent revisionists, the so-called 'new' labor historians, have almost exclusively focused on events preceding the automobile boom. Twentieth-century American labor history continues to be written almost as if mass-consumerism and "automobility" never happened, or at best, as if these things could have developed without simultaneously transforming the traditional values that informed working class protest and organization.⁵³

There are enormous difficulties inherent in making an accurate assessment of the social, cultural, and political impact of mass-consumerism and "automobility" on America's industrial working people, but certain vital points can be established unequivocally. First, the automobile boom created huge numbers of new industrial workers who had little or no industrial experience. As already noted, the size of America's blue-collar workforce doubled in the first three decades of this century. At the same time, immigration peaked and then was abruptly cut off by war and restrictive legislation. As a result, in the 1920s, the nation's working population was 'Americanized'. In part, this extremely important cultural change stemmed from the the ever-increasing migration of rural Americans (both white and black) to the industrial cities, as well as the entrance of American-born sons and daughters of immigrants into the workforce. Yet, Americanization represented more than a simple sum of demographic trends. In its time, Americanization was also embodied in concrete

⁵³ This problem is discussed (though not resolved) in David Brody, "The Old Labor History and the New: In Search of an American Working Class," *Labor History*, XX, 1, Winter 1979. David Montgomery's review essay, "To Study the People: The American Working Class," (*Labor History*, XXI, 4, Fall 1980), reveals the actual dearth of studies of post-World War I developments in everyday life and their effect on the organized labor movement.

public efforts to integrate foreign-born families into the language, beliefs, and habits of the native-born white community.⁵⁴ Of course, when culturally distinct groups of white Americans mixed with each other and foreign-born citizens for the first time in the 1920s, many people reacted defensively, retreating to prejudices and forms of ethnic group solidarity that temporarily frustrated all proponents of working class unity. Nevertheless, these barriers were not impervious to the automobile boom. As time passed, the standardization of daily work and life inherent in the mass-consumer-oriented car culture reduced the significance of ethnicity. By the 1930s, workers of diverse ethnic backgrounds would be able to work together to establish permanent industrial unions.

At the end of the automobile boom, the everyday life of American workers had been transformed. This was especially true in prosperous new mass-production industries like automobile manufacturing. Certainly, the drawbacks usually associated with mass-production jobs like low skill requirements, incessant routine, and individual anonymity obliterated the traditional rewards of work.⁵⁵ Nevertheless, most workers did not feel the loss of craft status. Whether rural migrants or the new generation of city-dwellers, they entered industry in positions where skills were already degraded. Moreover, by the 1920s, the material and psychological

⁵⁴ These efforts ranged from wartime propaganda and the political pressures of the Ku Klux Klan to adult education classes in English and citizenship administered by local YMCAs and boards of education. For a detailed account of how Americanization changed one community, see Chapter Five below.

⁵⁵ This does not mean there were no psychological rewards to modern factory labor. As psychologist Robert Reiff, a former Chrysler welder, has recently pointed out, the popular academic stereotype of the alienated worker ignores the fact that workers "show a great deal of initiative in developing ways to get satisfaction out of the work situation rather than the product itself." For a discussion of this point see "Alienation and Dehumanization?", in Auto Work and Its Discontents, edited by B.J. Widick (Baltimore, 1976), pp. 46ff.

rewards of consumer-oriented capitalism had begun to compensate for the demands of work. There can be no doubt that working people's real wages and leisure time increased significantly during the automobile boom. Between 1922 and 1929, the average real wages of American factory workers rose nearly fifteen percent, while the average factory work week dropped below forty-four hours (as compared with fifty-one hours in 1909).⁵⁶ In addition, during the 1920s, for the first time in American history, credit was extended to industrial workers to finance major purchases of consumer durables. As a result, there was a qualitative improvement in workers' living standards which cannot be measured by wage increases alone. By 1929, most industrial working people lived in electrified homes or flats with central heating and indoor toilets. Many workers also began to own and use cars, home appliances, radios, and phonographs. Thus, unlike their nineteenth century predecessors or their contemporary counterparts in other industrial countries, American workers no longer struggled for subsistence; they labored to become part of the world's first true consumer-oriented society.

The negative effects of mass-consumerism and "automobility" on working class-consciousness and labor organization in the 1920s have generally been downplayed because the real wages of most blue-collar workers remained relatively low (compared to wages in the post-C.I.O., post-World War II era).⁵⁷ Yet working people did not have to buy lots of new

⁵⁶ David Brody, Workers in Industrial America: Essays on the Twentieth-Century Struggle (New York, 1980), pp. 62ff.; and Albert W. Niemi, U.S. Economic History (Chicago, 1980), p. 274.

⁵⁷ A more meaningful comparison can be made with workers overseas. According to an International Labour Office study conducted in July 1928, real wages (indexed at 100 in London) were just 66 in Berlin, 55 in Brussels, 48 in Vienna, and 179 in New York. These figures reveal why only American working people could become consumers in the 1920s. See Charles Loch Mowat, Britain Between the Wars 1918-1940 (Boston, 1971), pp. 268-9.

products to become consumers. While real wages slowly improved (as they did throughout the automobile boom), mass-advertising and the growing mass-media industries shaped the material expectations of American workers. There should no longer be any dispute about such a common sense observation. As the eminent business historian Thomas Cochran has commented,

Unquestionably some of the 'saturation' campaigns produced new consumer wants and in this way readjusted markets for goods bought with discretionary income. But even markets for basic necessities could be altered. Advertising could lead to a life sustained more by meat and Coca Cola than by unadvertised farm products.⁵⁸

In brief, working people internalized consumer values long before they could actually afford to satisfy all their new consumer wants.

The popularity of the new, commercialized mass media during the automobile boom greatly facilitated the making of America's national consumer culture. "It is impossible to overestimate the role of motion pictures, advertising, and other forms of publicity in this rise in subjective standards," the Lynds concluded in 1929,

In the place of relatively mild, scattered, something-for-nothing, sample-free, I-teel-you-this-is-a-good article seen in Middletown a generation ago, advertising is concentrating increasingly on a type of copy aiming to make the reader uneasy, to bludgeon him with the fact that decent people don't live the way he does; decent people ride balloon tires, have a second bathroom, and so on.⁵⁹

As more and more people became avid magazine readers, movie-goers, and radio listeners, they could not help but be influenced by the commercial messages and images of affluence that were designed to change their behavior. In the later 1920s, even workers began to display the peculiar

⁵⁸ 200 Years of American Business (New York, 1977), p. 126.

⁵⁹ Middletown, p. 82n.

self-consciousness of the mass media's ideal modern consumer. In other words, they started to "need" brand-name products to allay the self-doubts inculcated by mass-advertising.⁶⁰

By its very nature, the growth of the new consumer-oriented car culture in the 1920s blurred traditional class distinctions. Advertising and the mass media encouraged working people to mimic the affluent lifestyle of the business class. At the same time, workers were also encouraged to compete among themselves for the material symbols of success and respectability. Again, the Lynds' observations are invaluable. "A Rip Van Winkle who fell asleep today would marvel at the change as did the French economist Say when he revisited England at the close of the Napoleonic War," they commented in the late 1920s. And why? What was "this new trait in the city's culture that is shaping the pattern of the whole of living?" On this point, the Lynds had no doubts. In the Middletown they studied,

Both businessmen and working men seem to be running for dear life in this business of making the money they earn keep pace with the even more rapid growth of their subjective wants.⁶¹

Here, in the everyday dynamics of what was already a true consumer-oriented society, is the most important source of the apparent 'classlessness' of modern America.

Once American working people had made a commitment to what Henri

⁶⁰ These points are discussed at length in Ewen, Captains of Consciousness, especially pp.34-48. Ewen's book leaves no doubt that early twentieth century advertisers relied heavily on academic psychologists when formulating their basic marketing strategies. There is perhaps no better symbol of the marriage of psychology and advertising than the "retirement" of John B. Watson, a founder of behaviorial psychology, from Johns Hopkins University in 1922 to become a vice-president in the J. Walter Thompson advertising agency.

⁶¹ Middletown, p. 87.

Lefebvre calls the "ideology of consumption," the fundamental tension between themselves and the business class dissipated.⁶² This new ideology led most industrial workers to see their jobs as instruments, not ends in themselves. As they became consumers, these workers learned to accept the alienation of their labor as inevitable because it guaranteed them access to the material goods and leisure-time activities which unrelenting publicity placed at the center of everyday life and culture. They learned to dream, not of a society controlled by its working class, but of products, and a materialistic utopia populated by affluent, happy consumers of new technology. By 1930, a new, extremely attractive popular culture--a synthesis of "automobility", mass-consumerism, and Americanization--had driven a kind of cultural wedge between urban-industrial workers and their own pasts, cutting them off in particular from the tenuous traditions of radical unionism and socialist politics that were the legacy of the first Industrial Revolution. As tiny groups of rank-and-file radicals and socialists discovered during the Great Depression, such traditions were not easily revived.

After the automobile boom, America's industrial working people could still act as a class (as they demonstrated in building up the labor movement in the 1930s and 1940s). However, when they acted as a class, the overwhelming majority revealed an unwillingness (one is tempted to say inability) to project an alternative to industrial capitalism. The organization of industrial unions and the New Deal reforms which legitimized organized labor were the great achievements of the working class

⁶² Everyday Life in the Modern World, p. 56. Lefebvre describes this ideology as having "bereft the working classes of their former ideals and values while maintaining the status and initiative of the bourgeoisie," and as having "substituted for the image of the active man that of the consumer as the possessor of happiness and rationality."

of the 1930s and 1940s. Yet, as we can see clearly now, neither development pointed towards the radical restructuring of the industrial business system feared by so many opponents of the labor movement. The organized working class of the post-World War II era has been content with "the New Deal formula" that combined state subsidized economic growth, a social security system, legally regulated collective bargaining, and a political alliance between labor unions and the Democratic Party.⁶³ Such a working class has not threatened property rights, the factory system, or two-party democracy. Instead, this mid-twentieth-century American working class accepted a recognized, but distinctly subordinate place for itself within a political-economy still dominated by the corporate promoters of "automobility", mass-consumerism, and Americanization.

IV. To Flint

Few scholars have pursued the interpretation of modern American history presented in this chapter. As a result, our historical understanding of the deeper social, cultural, and political significance of the automobile boom remains quite tentative. Identifying the boom as a second Industrial Revolution which transformed and undoubtedly strengthened industrial capitalism in the United States is not the same thing as describing the historical logic behind that transformation. To discover that logic--the how and the why of America's second industrial revolution--we must confront the experiences of early twentieth-century Americans who were swept up in the automobile boom more directly; we must examine in detail the complex, interrelated sequence of economic, social, and

⁶³ The Definition of the "New Deal formula" is drawn from David Montgomery, Workers Control in America: Studies in the history of work, technology, and labor struggles (Cambridge, 1979), p. 161.

political events which actually changed the character of class and culture in a particular industrial community.

During the first half of the twentieth century, the industrial community at Flint, Michigan lived on the cutting edge of America's second industrial revolution. As the birthplace and largest production center of the General Motors Corporation, Flint experienced all the basic economic changes of the automobile boom in a compressed, dramatic manner which emphasized their impact on everyday life, class relationships, and political culture. In Flint, the use of new science and technology by industry, the simultaneous development of mass-production and consumer-oriented mass-marketing, the concentration of production and ownership in huge units, and a related 'managerial revolution' transformed a rather sleepy late nineteenth century industrial town into a truly modern industrial city (complete with suburbs) in just three decades. Of course, Flint's extremely rapid growth and transformation were extraordinary, even by automobile boom standards. For this reason, one cannot claim that the city was a typical early twentieth-century industrial community. Nonetheless, precisely because the pace of fundamental economic change in Flint was revolutionary, its history does throw the effects of the automobile boom on contemporary society, culture, and politics into sharper perspective. Moreover, although Flint was an exceptional boom town, it was not separated from what have been traditionally seen as the main currents of American history. Indeed, what makes a case study of the second Industrial Revolution in Flint so valuable is the way in which most of the major developments of twentieth-century political and social history--such as municipal socialism and progressive reform, welfare capitalism and Americanization, the New Deal and militant industrial unionism--were lived out there in conjunction with a local automobile

boom and its aftermath. In this sense then, Flint seems remarkably representative of the making of modern America. To find out just how representative, it is now time to examine the history of this important automobile production center in detail.

CHAPTER THREE

A VILLAGE GROWN OVERNIGHT INTO A CITY: SOCIAL CHANGE AND POLITICAL UPHEAVAL DURING THE EARLY AUTOMOBILE BOOM IN FLINT, MICHIGAN

The men at the head of Flint's industries . . .
are the men who made Flint and who are making
it. There is no question here of competition,
of lack of power.

--John Ihlder, "Flint: When Men Build
Automobiles Who Builds Their City,"
The Survey (1916)

I. An Industrial Boom Town

The origins of the automobile boom in Flint, Michigan, are not mysterious. Like fundamental economic and social changes elsewhere in American history, Flint's great boom began in a series of investment decisions made by prominent local businessmen. In the late summer of 1903, five directors of the Flint Wagon Works led by the firm's founder and president, James H. Whiting, borrowed ten thousand dollars so they could purchase the financially troubled Buick Motor Company of Detroit.¹ At the time, David Dunbar Buick's internal combustion engine-making

¹ The others included Wagon Works' vice-president George Walker, treasurer William Ballenger, and directors Charles Begole and Charles Cummings. By this investment all of them became charter members of Flint's automobile establishment. See George S. May's more elaborate account in A Most Unique Machine: The Michigan Origins of the American Automobile Industry (Grand Rapids, 1975) pp. 194-9.

enterprise was actually owned entirely by Frank and Benjamin Briscoe, a pair of automobile-minded sheet metal entrepreneurs who wanted to unload the debt-ridden company in order to back a rival car being developed by Jonathan Maxwell. Ever since opening in 1899 as the Buick Auto-Vim and Power Company, just one of Detroit's numerous, struggling automotive pioneers, Buick's firm had been plagued by his own inept management and financial difficulties which stemmed from the expensive, time-consuming experiments in automobile technology. Nevertheless, Whiting's group felt there was profit potential in Buick. The company made a respectable line of engine parts, transmissions, and other automotive components, as well as a dependable stationary internal combustion engine that could be easily marketed through the Wagon Works' own farm agencies. Buick and his chief associate, Walter Marr, also promised to improve automobile performance significantly with their powerful new 'valve-in-head' engine, once it was perfected and tested. In September, the purchase was completed amidst local speculation about the possibility of Flint becoming an automotive production center, and by year's end, the first steps had been taken. On December 11, 1903, twenty-five workmen began to make the first Buick engines in a hastily constructed factory adjacent to the Wagon Works. A new era in local history was about to dawn.²

During the first half of 1904, while Whiting and his partners tried to create a firmer financial foundation for the Buick Motor Company in Flint, back in Detroit, David Buick and Walter Marr continued work on an experimental car utilizing the 'valve-in-head' engine.

² The first cars produced in Flint were made by A.B.C. Hardy's Flint Automobile Company in 1903. Hardy could not attract the backing of local banks and businessmen, however, and without capital or volume sales, the venture quickly failed. By January 1904, the Flint Automobile Company had already closed its doors. See May, Unique Machine, pp. 194-6.

In July, a prototype was ready for testing.³ After a remarkable run in which Marr averaged nearly thirty miles per hour over a rough 115 miles from Flint to Detroit and back to Flint again, Buick's powerful little Model B was put into production. Perhaps as many as twenty eight of these cars were constructed in Flint during the next few months, with the first one going to local automobile enthusiast, Dr. Herbert Hills. By combining high performance and a relatively low selling price of \$950, the Model B soon caught the attention of the Midwest's motoring public, but even more importantly, Buick's car convinced William C. Durant, Flint's leading businessman, that the time had come to take the plunge into the automobile industry.

Until September 4, 1904, the day Dr. Hills took Billy Durant for a demonstration ride in his new Buick (at the request of James Whiting), the millionaire road-cart entrepreneur had resisted every attempt to induce him to invest in motor car manufacturing. A salesman at heart rather than an engineer, Durant had yet to see an automobile he could market confidently. But Buick's Model B was different. After two months of test driving the car under the most difficult conditions he could find, Durant invested in Buick because the Model B "was a vehicle like the old Flint Road Cart--one that he could sell with a clear conscience and one which would, in fact, sell itself."⁴

Durant's commitment came none too soon for James Whiting and the other directors of the Flint Wagon Works. By mid-1904, before Buick produced a single car, the company's backers had borrowed an additional

³ The Detroit factory was apparently closed down late in 1904, about the time William C. Durant was taking managerial control out of David Buick's hands.

⁴ May, Unique Machine, p. 201.

twenty-five thousand dollars from each of three hometown banks, tying the fate of the Wagon Works, a major employer, and hundreds of local depositors to the still shaky automobile company. To Durant, a co-creator of the world's biggest vehicle-making company, Buick's problems seemed clear. The company needed more capital, larger facilities, and a vigorous marketing campaign. It also needed strong leadership to replace the incompetent Buick and part-time participation of Whiting and his associates. Thus, when Durant formally entered the Buick Motor Company on November 1, 1904, he asked for and got absolute managerial control over the firm.⁵

Under Durant's dynamic leadership, Buick's fortunes were quickly and dramatically reversed. Using his enormous influence within the city's business community, Flint's 'El Capitan de Industria' easily raised enough capital to set Buick on a vigorous program of expansion and acquisition.⁶ As soon as he took power, Durant increased the Buick Motor Company's capitalization from \$75,000 to \$500,000. It was then tripled only ten months later in September 1905, and raised again to \$2,600,000 on June 12, 1907. Almost all of this money came from a network of prominent Flint businessmen already linked by their interest in the city's prosperous horse-drawn vehicle industry, local banks, and real estate speculation.⁷ Since he dealt mainly with friends, relatives, and

⁵ Buick was squeezed out of the company, unable to pay off the debts he contracted through the years of unprofitable experimentation. When he resigned in 1908, Durant reportedly gave him a large sum of money (perhaps as much as \$100,000), but over the years he gradually lost it all in a series of bad business ventures. David Buick died in Detroit in 1929, a pauper.

⁶ The nickname was derived from the labels on cigars distributed at a 1911 banquet honoring Durant.

⁷ The directors of the Flint Wagon Works stayed with Buick in the same roles. The Durant-Dort Company put up at least \$100,000 itself.

hometown competitors who had long admired the success of the Durant-Dort Carriage Company, Buick's new chief executive seldom resorted to the 'hard sell'. In fact, on one memorable occasion Durant sold a half million dollars of Buick stock in Flint in just forty-eight hours, even though as he recalled in his memoirs, "Few of the subscribers had ever ridden in an automobile."⁸ Given this kind of trust, Durant apparently could not resist adding a little bit of water to the company's first stock issues. Yet, on the whole, he was an honest, energetic promoter who immediately put Flint's capital to work expanding Buick's capacity and sales network.⁹ In addition, Durant always seemed able to design his plans for Buick in ways that would especially enrich himself and his closest hometown associates, a fact that would have a tremendous impact on the patterns of development in Flint.

W.A. Paterson and W.F. Stewart, owners of the city's other prominent vehicle-making firms, contributed heavily and became Buick directors. Among Flint bankers, Robert Whaley (who first backed Durant in 1882) and D.D. Aitken (former Congressman and mayor) of the Citizen's Commercial Bank; John J. Carton (Buick's attorney and prominent Republican) and George Walker (the Wagon Works' vice-president) of the First National Bank; and three of Durant's relatives (uncles William Crapo and James Willson and cousin W.C. Orrell) as well as chief cashier Arthur Bishop, all of the Genessee County Savings (where Durant himself was a director), each put up some of Buick's original capital requirements. Flint Smith, heir to the city's first lumber boom fortune and a director of the Union Trust and Savings Bank (along with Paterson and Stewart, the carriage-makers), also contributed and was made a Buick director. See Lawrence R. Gustin's Billy Durant: Creator of General Motors (Grand Rapids, 1975), pp. 75-8; May, Unique Machine, pp. 204-6; and the Genessee County Biography File, Flint Public Library (hereafter cited as FPL).

⁸ Quoted in Gustin, Billy Durant, p. 77.

⁹ After crediting every conceivable asset in September 1905, Buick's attorney, John J. Carton, was still left with \$60,000 he could not account for. He finally credited this to unpatented engine improvements made by Walter Marr, and used his political influence to get the necessary state approval. See May, Unique Machine, p. 203 and Gustin, Billy Durant, p. 78.

To reach volume production and generate some kind of cash flow quickly, and perhaps to cajole more capital from Flint's business community as well, Durant established Buick assembly operations in a large, conveniently vacant factory located in Jackson, Michigan. The plant had formerly housed a major wheel manufacturer, but was still actually owned by the Durant-Dort company.¹⁰ At the same time, in Flint, Buick expansion and Durant's other business interests intersected in an even more dramatic way. In 1905, the company began construction of a huge, fourteen acre manufacturing complex in the city's north end, several miles from the original Buick engine factory. The site selection in the Oak Park subdivision was not accidental, for Oak Park, already the home of several Durant-Dort facilities, had been wholly owned by a group of local speculators including Durant, J. Dallas Dort, and the banker-politician D.D. Aitken since 1900. Soon Oak Park, a former 220 acre family farm, became the new industrial and residential heart of Flint as the fast-growing Buick Motor Company attracted smaller supplier firms and thousands of working people to its environs. And, of course, with each new addition, the profits of the participants in the Oak Park Development Association, and the local reputation and influence of Billy Durant grew apace.¹¹

The strategy used to expand Buick was based directly on lessons

¹⁰ Part of the stock given Durant when he came into Buick (perhaps as much as \$350,000 worth) was probably tied to a promise to provide access to this Jackson factory.

¹¹ The profits of the Oak Park Development Association have never been publicized, but each person involved accumulated substantial a fortune in this period of rapid expansion. Throughout the automobile boom in Flint, connections between the car companies, banks, and real estate developers remained very tight. See May, Unique Machine, p. 213; Gustin, Billy Durant, pp. 80-4; and Frank Rodolph, "An Industrial History of Flint" (and unpublished manuscript written by the Flint Daily Journal's librarian in 1940), pp. 495-502; Rodolph's manuscript can be found in the Automotive History Collection, FPL.

Durant had learned from more than two decades in Flint's traditional vehicle industry. Having parlayed a two thousand dollar contract to assemble simple road carts into a multi-million dollar company that produced a wide range of horse-drawn vehicles, Durant knew only a complete range of reliable suppliers could insure truly efficient volume production. In his unpublished memoirs, the founder of General Motors recalled the experience of building up the Durant-Dort Carriage Company, outlining, in a sense, the same principles he would use in the automobile industry. Recollecting his original partnership with J. Dallas Dort in the Flint Road Cart Company, circa 1886, Durant explained:

We started out as assemblers with no advantage over our competitors. We paid about the same prices for everything we purchased. We realized that we were making no progress and would not unless and until we manufactured practically every important part that we used. We made a study of the methods employed by the concerns supplying us, the savings that could be effected by operating the plants at capacity without interruption, and with practically no selling or advertising expense. Having satisfied ourselves that we had solved our problem, we proceeded to purchase plants and the control of plants, which made it possible to build up, from the standpoint of volume, the largest carriage company in the United States.¹²

Similarly, in the years 1905 to 1908, when the vast new Buick plant was under construction in Oak Park, Billy Durant sought to insure his sources of automotive parts, components, and supplies. And as before, his final goal was nothing less than to create a fully integrated

¹² Quoted in Gustin, Billy Durant, p. 43. Ultimately, in its peak years just after 1900, the Durant-Dort Carriage Company made its own wheels, axles, paints, varnishes, and buggy tops, in addition to assembling a diverse line of horse-drawn vehicles. During this era, Durant-Dort not only owned several factories in Flint, it was a multi-national corporation that controlled plants in Toronto, Canada; Atlanta, Georgia; Pine Bluff, Arkansas; and mills in Tennessee and Arkansas. In its best year, 1906, Durant-Dort manufactured 56,000 vehicles in Flint alone, and perhaps as many as 150,000 nationwide.

company capable of dominating the market for its particular products.

Since it was a well established carriage and wagon-making center, Flint already had a number of firms which could produce some of the parts and components Durant needed to turn Buick into a mass-producer. In 1905, in addition to the major assemblers (Durant-Dort, the Flint Wagon Works, and W.A. Paterson) that diverted captial and personnel into the new industry, several other important local firms were drawn directly into the Buick orbit when it expanded production in Oak Park. The Imperial Wheel Company, Armstrong Steel Spring, the W.F. Stewart Body Works, Flint Varnish Works, and Flint Axle Works all made the transformation from traditional vehicle suppliers to automotive manufacturers through rapid expansion and, ultimately, absorption into Buick and General Motors. Other new independent companies, like Michigan Motor Castings and the Oak Park Power Company were also bought up quickly by General Motors after its formation in 1908 when Durant tried frantically to complete his rationalization of Flint's industrial economy while simultaneously launching similar plans for the national automobile industry.¹³

Of course, some of Buick's needs simply could not be filled quickly by the city's traditional vehicle factories, particularly in this first decade of the new century when wagon-making remained a highly profitable

¹³ Imperial Wheel, the Flint Varnish Works, and Flint Axle Works were already Durant-Dort subsidiaries in 1905. As Buick grew, the first two were immediatley absorbed by the automotive giant. The Varnish Works remained separate until 1918 when it was purchased by DuPont and turned into Buick's sole paint supplier. W.F. Stewart, a company that had started making carriage bodies in 1868, was bought out by General Motors in 1908 and immediately incorporated into Buick operations. Armstrong Steel Spring maintained its formal independence until it was purchased by General Motors in 1923. See May Unique Machine, p. 214. Gustin, Billy Durant, p. 123; and Arthur Pound, The Turning Wheel: The Story of General Motors Through Twenty-Five Years (Garden City, 1934), Appendix IV; "General Motors' Subsidiaries," pp. 453ff.

business.¹⁴ Thus, for Buick to expand rapidly, Durant and his associates had to attract certain reputable automotive producers to Flint immediately. In 1905 to secure a dependable, high volume source of automobile axle assemblies, Durant and Dort put their considerable persuasive powers to work luring a major producer, the Weston-Mott Company, away from its hometown of Utica, New York. After first offering Charles Stewart Mott and his partner William Doolittle a choice site right next to Buick in Oak Park, then adding a sole supplier contract with the growing automaker, and finally sweetening the deal with a \$100,000 to cover the costs of a new factory, Flint's leading businessmen convinced the New Yorkers to move despite misgivings that the self-proclaimed "Vehicle City" was just "a hick town".¹⁵

The Weston-Mott Company was duly reincorporated in Michigan in 1906. Charles Mott remained the firm's president, and William Doolittle was named treasurer. However, to safeguard Buick interests, the automobile company's lawyer, John J. Carton, became vice-president while Durant's trusted banking associate, Arthur Bishop, took the post of secretary with sole responsibility for the building fund.¹⁶ By

¹⁴ The Flint Wagon Works (35,000 vehicles per year) and W.A. Paterson's (23,000 units) also hit their peak production in these years. Between them, Flint's three leading traditional vehicle makers thus turned out more than 100,000 wagons and carriages per year at the very same time the Buick Motor Company was being built into a major producer of rival vehicles.

¹⁵ For the city's fiftieth anniversary celebration, a sign carrying the title, "The Vehicle City", was erected across Flint's main thoroughfare. See photo on page 232 of The Book of the Golden Jubilee of Flint, Michigan 1855-1905 which was published locally. For the New Yorkers' first impressions of Flint, see Clarence Young and William Quinn, Foundation for Living: The Story of Charles Stewart Mott and Flint (New York, 1963), pp.1-3; and May, Unique Machine, pp. 216-7.

¹⁶ Bishop apparently carried some of Durant's notes off the books at the Genessee County Savings during this period of rapid expansion. Later,

February 1907, Weston-Mott's management and machinery had moved, and the company began production at rates which soon established it as an industry leader. Ten months later, William Doolittle died, leaving Charles Stewart Mott the sole owner of this booming enterprise and a rising star in Flint's business community. Yet, Mott did not seek greater independence, even though Weston-Mott's success had already made him a millionaire.¹⁷ Instead, after Durant announced the formation of a General Motors holding company in September 1908, Mott quickly agreed to exchange forty-nine percent of his firm for stock in the new venture. Later, in 1913, Mott went further, surrendering all of Weston-Mott in return for more General Motors stock and a seat on the giant corporation's board of directors that he would hold for more than fifty years.¹⁸

In early 1908 when he had already begun to consider plans for a nationwide automobile merger, Billy Durant lured another vital automotive supplier to Flint. To establish a reliable source of ignition parts for Buick, Durant convinced a Toledo, Ohio sparkplug and magneto manufacturer, Albert Champion, to move his small operation to "the Vehicle City". Like the other firms Durant linked to Buick, Champion's enterprise grew rapidly as the Oak Park plant went into full production. Despite this instant prosperity, the price of expansion, a very subordinate role in Billy Durant's sprawling automobile corporation, seemed too

in 1915, Durant named Bishop a director of General Motors. See Arthur Pound, "General Motors' Old Home Town," Michigan History, XL March 1956, pp. 90-1; and May, Unique Machine, pp. 206..

¹⁷ Weston-Mott sales rose from \$200,00 in 1903 to more than \$2 million in 1908-9 and \$5.5 million in 1909-10. Initially capitalized at \$500,000 in 1906, Weston-Mott tripled that figure by 1908 to finance continuous expansion. See Young and Quinn, Foundation for Living, pp. 30ff.

¹⁸ Details on the stock exchanges between C.S. Mott and General Motors can be found in Pound, The Turning Wheel, pp. 489-90.

high for most of Albert Champion's original backers and associates. Thus, when Durant confirmed his intention to have General Motors swallow up Champion Ignition in the fall of 1908, Albert Champion's old partners took their capital and his name back to Toledo where they re-established the company which still uses the Champion trademark. Of course, a spark-plug factory and Albert Champion remained in Flint, and under its new name, AC Sparkplug soon became a profitable General Motors subsidiary and essential part of the city's automotive industry.¹⁹

The exodus of Albert Champion's partners was an exception among the businessmen who had been drawn into Durant's plans for the Buick Motor Company. Most stayed on in Flint as happy participants in the dramatic boom that followed the long awaited completion of Buick's production facilities in 1908. From less than a thousand cars in 1905, the combined output of Buick's factories in Jackson and Flint could be pushed to only 1400 automobiles in 1906 and just over 1600 vehicles in 1907. Still, driven by a salesman's faith in the car market, Durant remained confident even when sales temporarily slumped during the brief recession of 1907. Stalling on his bills and storing cars wherever space could be found, Durant pressed forward with full production of all Buick models (from the \$900 Model 10 to the more luxurious Model 5) until sales picked up and cash began to flow once more into company coffers. Finally, at

¹⁹ AC Sparkplug produced 2000 sparkplugs per day in 1912. During World War I, with the help of government contracts, capacity was increased to 50,000 sparkplugs every twenty-four hours. In the 1920s, AC diversified its line of automotive parts and components when it moved into the larger facilities of the defunct Dort Motor Company. By this time, with more than eight hundred mostly young single females on its payroll, the AC had become the city's biggest employer of women. See Pound, The Turning Wheel, pp. 456-60; and Women's Bureau Survey Material, RG 86, Bulletin 67, National Archives.

this point when orders began to outstrip capacity, the new foundry, drop forge, and final assembly sections of the Oak Park plant were brought into production, and Buick output soared. To keep pace with the growing demand for cars, the company increased its labor force to 2100 workers in February 1908. It also began running two shifts in Jackson, and three round-the-clock shifts in Flint, boosting daily capacity to fifty vehicles. In May, three hundred and fifty more workers were added in Flint, increasing capacity to eighty automobiles per day. Yet output still ran behind orders. In November, with virtually all car production shifted to the completed Flint facilities, works manager C.W. Nash announced he would add another thousand men to Buick's payroll in hopes of catching up with demand by mid-1909.²⁰ By year's end Buick had produced and sold more than 8800 automobiles, an industry record that approximated the combined total of the two next largest companies, Ford and Cadillac. And, of course, this was just a beginning. In 1909 Buick's output topped 14,000 units, and by 1910, at least 21,000 new Buick cars were put on the road.²¹ In other words, Durant had achieved his initial goal. The Buick Motor Company of Flint, Michigan, was the world's first truly integrated mass-producer of automobiles.

Buick cars sold best in this early period of American automotive history because William Durant, the master salesman, recognized that advances in productive capacity had to be matched by extensions of the sales network or the whole enterprise could fail. Thus, from his first days with the company in 1905, Durant worked hard to promote Buick car

²⁰ May, Unique Machine, pp. 218-9.

²¹ Output figures for 1910 are in dispute. For example, see Gustin, Billy Durant, p. 87; and Alfred P. Sloan Jr., My Years With General Motors (Garden City, 1964), pp. 445-7.

sales. Given the high level of public curiosity about all automotiles, the special interest shown in Buick's Model B, and the large number of widely scattered Durant-Dort Carriage Company outlets at his disposal, this task was not extremely difficult. Nevertheless, Durant threw himself into it with notable enthusiasm.

First, he professionalized Buick's distribution by hiring the bicycle industry's Charles Van Horn as sales manager, and Studebaker's W.L. Hibbard as assistant sales manager. In 1908, Canada's biggest carriage-maker, J.S. McLaughlin of Oshawa, Ontario, was given the sole rights to assemble and distribute Buicks in that country.²² Even more importantly, Durant committed Buick to production of a wide variety of automobile models (five by 1908) because he saw the car as a universally appealing product which could be tailored to different income levels. Like the Durant-Dort Carriage Company before it, and the General Motors Corporation that he created in 1908, the Buick Motor Company never tried to maximize productive efficiency by making a single, standardized model such as Ford's Model T. Instead, companies founded by William C. Durant always shaped fundamental design and production decisions to conform with a vision of American society in which individuals were ranked according to fine gradations in their incomes, and products were made to symbolize those differences.²³

At first Durant personally promoted Buick cars at all the major

²² McLaughlin served as board chairman of General Motors of Canada until his death in January 1972. May, Unique Machine, pp. 206 and 210.

²³ The incorporation of styling considerations based on perceptions of a highly stratified marketplace into basic production design is usually credited to Alfred P. Sloan by industry historians. Yet surely the foundation of General Motors' policy of producing a variety of car styles must be traced back to Durant's own sense of the marketplace and the expansion strategies he had used in the vehicle industry since the 1880s.

automobile shows. He also often spent time at struggling dealerships boosting moral and selling cars himself. However, as the company's capacity increased, more spectacular methods were adopted to generate national publicity for the new product. In 1907-1908, special trains loaded with shiny Buick cars and draped with the banners "MADE IN FLINT" were routed to Minneapolis, Kansas City, and the East. These trains traveled only by day at reduced speeds, making local headlines wherever they passed. In 1908 Durant also put together the greatest automobile racing team of the era. Bob Burman, Lewis Strang, and Louis and Arthur Chevrolet won over five hundred trophies in just three years, an unprecedented feat that helped earn Buick a national reputation as a maker of dependable high performance cars.²⁴

The rapid success of the Buick Motor Company confirmed William C. Durant's faith in the market potential of the car, encouraging him to immediately propose mergers with some of America's most important automobile manufacturers. Early in 1908, even before the new Buick plant was fully operational, Durant contacted most major Michigan automakers about the possibility of quickly grabbing a bigger share of the growing industry through financial combination. As it turned out, Henry Ford, Ramsom E. Olds, and the Lelands of Cadillac each wanted millions in cash for their firms, and the Flint automaker simply could not produce it. On the other hand, the Briscoe brothers, now with Maxwell-Briscoe, were interested in a merger with Buick, but their more conservative backers from the Morgan

²⁴ The creation of the sport motor car racing was one of the automobile industry's earliest and greatest public relations coups. Over the years it has provided a self-sustaining source of tremendous advertising value, as well as a leisure item pursuit which reinforced the consumer consciousness of its millions of fans. Racing heroes like "Wild Bob" Burman became living symbols of particular products and the kind of excitement "automobility" seemed to hold out. The Alfred P. Sloan Museum in Flint has extensive collections of material on Buick's early racing teams.

banking group refused to take the plunge with Billy Durant in control.²⁵

Despite these setbacks, Flint's leading businessman remained determined to turn Buick into the nucleus of a multi-national vehicle company by using mergers, just as he and J. Dallas Dort had already done with their carriage-making enterprise. In pursuing this goal, Durant knew he could count on the unwavering support of Flint's budding automotive-oriented business class, people he later described as "my personal friends who were willing to and did risk every dollar they possessed believing as I did in the future of the automobile industry."²⁶ Thus, by mid-1908, when fast rising Buick sales promised to increase that company's cash flow geometrically, Durant felt the time to advance his own plans and the fortunes of his Flint associates had arrived.

On September 16, 1908, Billy Durant announced the formation of the General Motors Corporation, a holding company chartered in New Jersey with just two thousand dollars in original capital. Almost immediately, however, the new company's capitalization and prospects soared as both the Olds Motor Works of Lansing, Michigan, and Buick were absorbed through the exchange of stock. Before year's end, Durant added another of the jewels of Michigan's motor industry, the Cadillac Motor Company, to General Motors, but only after paying Henry Leland \$4.7 million in cash. To this core of prominent manufacturers Durant soon attached other automakers (most notably the Oakland Motor Company of Pontiac, Michigan), truck companies, and automotive suppliers. By 1910 a total of twenty-seven separate firms scattered across Michigan, Ohio, New

²⁵ See Flink, Car Culture, pp. 60-3.

²⁶ From Durant's unpublished memoirs, quoted in Gustin, Billy Durant, p. 138.

York, and Ontario had been brought under General Motors' control, boosting the holding company's capitalization to more than \$60 million.²⁷

In Flint, the six companies acquired by General Motors formed a well-integrated operation centered on Buick car and truck production, but elsewhere, Durant's expansion strategy was far more speculative. Purchasing supplies on credit, Durant could finance some mergers with cash drawn directly out of revenue (earned chiefly by Buick and Cadillac). More commonly, companies were absorbed by General Motors after an exchange of securities. To make such stock transfers attractive, General Motors declared healthy dividends even though Durant's many questionable acquisitions placed a heavy burden on the firm's capital resources.²⁹ Of course, these methods left the holding company with virtually no cash reserves, but Billy Durant and his closest cohorts felt no fear with demand for new cars running consistently ahead of advances in capacity throughout 1909.

In the midst of continuous growth in the local automotive industry and a tremendous spurt in population and general business activity, most people in Flint remained confident in Durant's newest efforts. When

²⁷ For details on the negotiations between Durant and Leland and a complete list of General Motors' initial acquisitions see Gustin, Billy Durant, pp. 120-3.

²⁸ In addition to Buick, W.F. Stewart Bodies, Michigan Motor Castings, Champion Ignition, the Oak Park Power Company and the Randolph Truck Company were under the General Motors banner in Flint by 1910.

²⁹ General Motors' dividends increased 150% during 1909 on profits of more than \$9 million. Most of this profit came from cash sales of Buick and Cadillac cars. Unfortunately, some of the other companies bought by General Motors turned out to be near total losses. The Heany Lamp Companies which Durant purchased for \$7 million proved to be his biggest blunder when patents it claimed were shown to be fraudulent. More costly than Buick and Olds combined, Heany Lamp could not compete profitably with General Electric. See Gustin, Billy Durant, pp. 132-7.

Buick needed a million dollars to replace its old engine factory in 1909, nearly two-thirds of the sum was raised locally in three days with Buick workers purchasing over \$120,000 in stock themselves.³⁰ By 1910 the Oak Park plant employed more than 6500 workers, making it the biggest automobile factory in the nation. All together, Flint factories employed over ten thousand wage earners in that year, more than double the number in 1908, and five times as many as in the city at the turn of the century. By 1909 these workers were employed at more than a hundred industrial establishments, nearly twice the number that existed in 1899. In addition, the salaried workforce at these establishments increased dramatically as well. At factories alone, white collar employment grew almost eight hundred percent in just ten years, creating a small but important group of professional managers for the first time in local history.³¹

This rapid expansion of employment in the automobile industry generated a tremendous increase in the city's size and population. From a town of 13,000 inhabitants in 1900, Flint grew into a bustling industrial city of more than 38,000 people by 1910, with most of the growth occurring after the opening of Buick's Oak Park plant. Drawn together by the promise of high wages and steady employment in the automobile industry, working people literally swamped Flint's existing housing facilities, splitting shifts in rooming houses and hotels, and even setting up tent colonies which provided homes for more than a thousand families in 1910.³² Of course, for property holders and real estate

³⁰ Billy Durant, p. 132.

³¹ By 1909, there were more than six hundred salaried employees at Flint's industrial establishments. 13th Census of the United States Volume IX, Manufacturers, (GPO, 1912), p. 577. Also see Young and Quinn, Foundation for Living, p. 37.

³² Stephen R. Williams, "The Rise and Fall of Piano Box City,"

developers, this boom presented an incredibly lucrative opportunity. Property values soared, and farm land surrounding the original town was annexed, subdivided, and sold as fast as local capitalists could work. In 1906, a group of businessmen led by Durant and longtime partner, J. Dallas Dort, founded the Flint Improvement League to encourage faster real estate development and promote the extension of necessary public services. The League established regular communications with General Motors during these early boom years, becoming, in a sense, an unofficial housing authority for the automaker. With this kind of backing the physical expansion of Flint could be rushed to try to keep up with advances in the local automobile industry. Yet despite furious activity that saw seven square miles of farm land annexed, and 3200 sites plotted and sold in early 1910 alone, demand for new housing continued to outstrip actual construction.³³

The boom that had begun in 1905 came to an abrupt halt in the summer of 1910 when a brief but sharp recession cut deeply into new car sales. To meet his payroll commitments, fixed costs, and the demands of creditors while burdened with too many unprofitable operations that had drained cash reserves, Durant was forced to turn to an Eastern banking syndicate to save General Motors. The price was high. In exchange for nearly \$13 million in cash, the bankers received \$6 million dollars in General Motors stock, and \$15 million in five year six percent notes. In

an unpublished paper dated 12/6/73 found in the collection of the Alfred P. Sloan Museum, Flint. This and other unpublished papers cited below were prepared by students at the University of Michigan Flint, for Dr. Richard Meister's urban history course.

³³ Williams, "Piano Box City," pp. 4-5; "The Flight of Time" and "All Flint Held its Breath in 1910," anonymous, undated articles from the Flint Journal found in the collections of the Sloan Museum, Flint.

addition, Durant had to resign as president of the company, although he retained a seat on the five-man, five-year voting trust which was established. James R. Storrow of Lee, Higginson, and Company acted as president until 1912 when C.W. Nash, who had served as president of Buick since 1910, succeeded him.³⁴

In Flint, the impact of the General Motors' cash flow crisis was especially severe. By mid-summer 1910, the Buick Motor Company completely shut down, and also ceased construction on a half-finished brass and aluminum foundry and another new drop forge. Elsewhere in the city, Weston-Mott and other important automotive suppliers announced big layoffs, increasing the already unprecedented mass-unemployment. Of course, Flint's housing boom also stopped suddenly as local credit dried up and some disillusioned working people simply left town.³⁵

Fortunately for the unemployed, the city's economic crisis did not last long. Just three days after the loan to General Motors was approved in early September, one hundred men were recalled at Buick's drop forge, and within a week, new orders for Buick cars totaling nearly \$14 million had poured into Flint from dealers all across the country.³⁶ Under Nash, a conservative manager who had always been troubled by the frantic pace of Durant's expansion, and Walter P. Chrysler, who was brought to Flint in 1911 as Buick's works manager, the automobile company streamlined

³⁴ The details of General Motors' 1910 financial difficulties have been rehearsed by many competent historians. See Pound, Turning Wheel, pp. 126ff.; Gustin, Billy Durant, pp. 136ff. and Flink, Car Culture, pp. 63-65.

³⁵ This composite picture of the recession of 1910 in Flint is drawn from the Flint Journal's "All Flint Held its Breath in 1910,"; Pound, "General Motors' Old Home Town," p. 91; and Young and Quinn, Foundation for Living, pp. 38-40.

³⁶ Gustin, Billy Durant, p. 140 and "All Flint Held its Breath in 1910."

its operations. This effort slowed the automaker's recovery, but when Buick began to set new production records in 1913-14, it did so with a labor force twenty percent smaller than that of 1910.³⁷

Despite the shock of mass-unemployment and the substantial reduction of Buick's workforce, as a whole, Flint's economy rebounded strongly in the years preceding the outbreak of the World War in Europe. Buoyed by the strength of the national car market and a reorganized General Motors Corporation, and impressed by the overwhelming triumph of Ford's low-priced Model T, local businessmen continued to pour their capital and energies into the automobile boom. In 1911, William C. Durant and some old associates helped William Little open the Little Motor Company in a factory vacated by the declining Flint Wagon Works.³⁸ Within a year, Durant combined Little Motor with the Chevrolet Motor Company which he and Louis Chevrolet had recently founded in Detroit. In late 1913, while Durant began acquiring another series of automobile companies, Louis Chevrolet closed his Motor City plant to concentrate production of a new, low-priced roadster in Flint. Though just over 5000 Chevrolet 490s (the price as well as the model number) were made in 1914, production nearly tripled in 1915 without coming anywhere near satisfying demand. By September 1915 Durant was ready to use Chevrolet as a lever for regaining control of General Motors when the bankers voting trust

³⁷ Buick produced 42,000 vehicles in 1914 with just 5000 workers, whereas it had taken 6500 employees to produce just over 20,000 cars in 1910. See Rodolph, "An Industrial History," pp. 260-1; and Sloan, My Years with General Motors, pp. 466-7. This rationalization performance coincided so well with the bankers' plans for General Motors that they promoted Nash to president of the company in 1912.

³⁸ A.B.C. Hardy of Durant-Dort Carriage and the ill-fated Flint Automobile Company, and William Ballenger and Charles Begole of the Wagon Works and Buick joined Durant in this venture.

expired. Trading five shares of Chevrolet, now a holding company capitalized at \$80 million, for every share of General Motors he could lay his hands on, and forging alliances with new major stockholders like Pierre S. DuPont, Durant amassed enough support to announce his control in May 1916. Within a month, Nash resigned, and for the second time, William C. Durant took over the presidency of the national corporation that increasingly dominated life in his hometown.³⁹

In these same post-recession years, other local entrepreneurs started their own automotive operations, helping to absorb the remaining slack in Flint's labor market. About the same time Durant began his gambit with Little Motor, Arthur Mason, a former Buick engineer, opened the Mason Motor Company in the original downtown Buick engine factory. For a short time, Mason's workmen built motors for Little and then Chevrolet cars, but as part of Durant's consolidation plans, Mason Motors was purchased by Chevrolet in 1915. J. Dallas Dort's quality automobile manufacturing firm, the Dort Motor Company, successfully maintained its independence from Durant and General Motors during Dort's lifetime, but ultimately it too was swallowed up by the giant automotive corporation. Dort Motor turned out its first vehicles in 1915, two years after Dort mysteriously terminated all business connections with William C. Durant.⁴⁰

³⁹ The financial maneuvers that Durant used to recoup General Motors are detailed in Pound, The Turning Wheel, pp.152-9; Gustin, Billy Durant, pp.162-82; and very succinctly in Flink, Car Culture, pp. 64-6. When Durant began trading shares of Chevrolet for General Motors, Chevrolet consisted of the manufacturing operations in Flint, as well as other factories in Tarrytown, New York; Oakland, California; Kansas City; St. Louis; Atlanta; and Canada. In other words, in its holding company structure, it closely resembled Durant's previous major ventures, Durant-Dort Carriage and the General Motors of 1908-1910.

⁴⁰ Though Dort and Durant separated their finances in 1913, the two men apparently remained friends for many years. See Gustin, Billy Durant, pp.158-9.

For nearly a decade, Dort workers, a group that included many highly skilled veterans of the carriage industry, specialized in finely crafted, luxury automobiles for the high-priced market. In addition, the company made trucks and cargo trailers under government contract during World War I.⁴¹ Despite this success and the firm's solid reputation, the Dort Motor Company did not survive its founder's death in 1925. Instead, J. Dallas Dort's factory was purchased by General Motors so that AC Sparkplug could move out of its antiquated facilities and expand its productive capacity.

Of course, beginning in 1911, new investment in the automobile industry by Durant, Dort, and other prominent Flint businessmen rapidly renewed the boom which had stopped so abruptly when General Motors collapsed. During the first two years of recovery, expansion was slow enough for local builders to catch up with the city's housing needs; however, with mass-production at Chevrolet, the establishment of Dort Motor, and finally, war production and further expansion at Buick all coming in quick succession between 1914 and 1916, severe labor and housing shortages developed. By the autumn of 1916, Flint's industrial workforce included more than 19,000 production workers, almost twice the 1910 figure without anything like a corresponding increase in the city's housing capacity. As a result, hundreds of working people once more set up homes in tents and tarpaper shacks, while perhaps as many as 2700 other workers commuted from Saginaw and Bay City, thirty to forty miles away.⁴² Flint's

⁴¹ Dort Doings, Volume II, Number 1 (War Memorial Number). This undated company news magazine was found in the collection of the Sloan Museum, Flint.

⁴² John Ihlder, "Flint: When Men Build Automobiles Who Builds Their City?" The Survey, September 2, 1916, pp. 550-4. In this article, one of a series on war boom towns, Ihlder is very critical of local industrial leaders for their failure to anticipate the housing shortage.

automobile boom, and the making of "automobility", were in high gear once again.

II. A Challenge 'From Below'

When viewed exclusively from the entrepreneurial perspective that has long dominated the history of the automobile boom in Flint, social and political events surrounding General Motor's financial difficulties can be passed over briefly as merely interrupting longterm development trends already set in motion by the transfer of capital and labor from the traditional carriage and wagon companies to the new business of motor car manufacturing. However, if examined from a different angle, with an eye to the creation (or destruction) of class values and a sensitivity to changes in the everyday life of local residents, the recession of 1910 and its immediate aftermath form a crucial moment in Flint's history. For during those years of mass-unemployment and slow growth, doubts about the automobile boom and its social consequences troubled many citizens of 'the Vehicle City', and in their disillusionment, they gave the local Socialist Party a shortlived, but significant triumph at the ballot box.

Socialists actually began to organize in Flint just after the turn of the century, when local economic activity remained diversified, personalized, and clearly under local control. Though wagon and carriage-making was surely the town's biggest industry by 1900, cigarmaking, agricultural processing, and agricultural services also held down important places in the growing local economy.⁴³ At the time, however, rapid

⁴³ Flint's first cigarmaker opened his doors in 1875. In 1898, eight companies turned out 4.6 million cigars. By 1905, there were twelve firms in this prosperous business, yet none would survive the

expansion and the introduction of mass-production techniques in the traditional vehicle industry seemed to threaten the balance and intimacy of everyday life in Flint, and as a result, the new Socialist Party was able to establish itself among a small contingent of disaffected workers. In 1901, the same year the national party got its start, Flint's first Socialist candidate for mayor garnered a surprisingly respectable total of over four hundred votes.⁴⁴ It is likely that most of this support came from the cigarmakers, the town's highest paid and most effectively unionized workers, and from a group of skilled vehicle workers who were fighting (unsuccessfully as it turned out) to establish a local of the Carriage and Wagon Workers Union.⁴⁵ Some members of the recently formed and struggling Typographical, Barbers, and Retail Clerks unions may also have given their votes to the first Socialist candidates since all these organizations had just joined with the Cigarmakers in a Central Labor which quickly became the sole local public forum for discussing socialism.⁴⁶

1920s. Flint, the Genessee County seat, also became an important agricultural center as lands cleared during the lumber boom were put into food production. In 1905 there were two major grain mills, several creameries, a pump factory, broom factory, and other small implement makers located in Flint. See The Book of the Golden Jubilee, pp. 92-6; and Lawrence R. Gustin, The Flint Journal Centennial History of Flint (Flint, 1976), pp. 107ff.

⁴⁴ Flint Flashes: The Voice of the Exploited Worker, April 4, 1912, p. 1 has an article discussing the local party's history. Scattered issues of this Socialist newspaper published in Flint in 1911-1912 are almost the only insider source on the local movement. Surviving copies may be found in the Sloan Museum, Flint.

⁴⁵ Like every other attempt to unionize automobile workers prior to the 1930s, this effort failed. Early automobile union failures in Flint are discussed in Chapter Five below.

⁴⁶ "Research Notes," Box 3, Edward Levinson Collection, Archives of Urban and Labor History, Walter Reuther Library, Wayne State University (hereafter cited as Reuther Library). These notes are based on Levinson's reading of the Journal of the Carriage and Wagon Workers Union and the Flint Flashes (including issues not presently available).

In 1902, the party's second year in Flint, the Socialist vote total in the annual April municipal election dropped by more than fifty percent, and for the next four years, Socialist candidates were lucky if they drew more than a couple of hundred votes in a rapidly expanding electorate. By 1907 local organizers seemed to have lost heart. Faced with the beginnings of the automobile boom and the collapse of all union activity in the traditional vehicle industry, Flint socialists put up no candidates for local office in 1907, 1908, 1909, and 1910. In fact, with the exception of just over two hundred Socialist votes cast in the statewide elections of November 1908, there is no evidence of any public party activity whatsoever in Flint during this boom period of accelerated expansion at Buick and the city's other automotive manufacturers.⁴⁷

In 1910, the financial breakdown of General Motors provided a catalyst for a stunning revival of the Socialist Party in Flint. When Buick shut down completely that summer, throwing thousands of automobile workers onto the streets for the first time in local history, and when hometown idol Billy Durant simultaneously lost control of General Motors to an Eastern banking syndicate, much of Flint's general boomtown optimism suddenly vanished. In the uncertain months which followed the reorganization of the giant automaker, socialists sensed an opportunity to revive party organization by capitalizing on widespread dissatisfaction with the pace and quality of recent local growth and fears that power over Flint's economy had slipped into the hands of a distant, impersonal national corporation. Spurred on by an unexpected record Socialist vote

⁴⁷ The lack of evidence may, of course, stem from the inadequacy of the remaining sources. See the Flint Flashes, April 4, 1912 for a complete list of local Socialist election results from 1901 to 1912.

in the gubernatorial election in November, a new local organizer James McFadden, a lawyer, revived the dormant party and began preparing it for the upcoming municipal elections.⁴⁸ Over the winter of 1910-11, regular meetings in conjunction with the Central Labor Union were begun again. In addition, to reach a wider local audience, the party and the political committee of the Central Labor Union pooled their resources to start a weekly newspaper called Flint Flashes: The Voice of the Exploited Worker which sold for three cents a copy.

During the early months of 1911, in their newspaper and at increasingly well-attended public meetings, Flint's Socialists hammered away at the city's severe housing shortage and lack of public services, placing the blame for both these pressing problems squarely on the shoulders of local businessmen and developers, and complacent authorities. At a time when the city was still recovering from the shock of its first major recession of the automobile age, this unprecedented attack caught both Republicans and Democrats off guard, creating political issues that only the Socialists themselves were prepared to deal with immediately. In March, the party announced a full slate of workingmen's candidates for the following month's election. Its platform highlighted pledges to extend existing services (sewers, water and roads) as rapidly as possible, and to ameliorate the plight of those working people living in inadequate housing by building a free public bath, free hospital, and a central city market.⁴⁹

⁴⁸ "Notes", Box 3 Levinson Collection, Reuther Library.

⁴⁹ "Notes", Box 3 Levinson Collection. This description of the Socialist platform is based on material from 1911 issues of Flint

To a city that usually voted Republican and always supported "reasonably conservative" businessmen and professionals, the Socialist campaign presented a truly radical departure from traditional politics, and the major parties tried to ignore it. In the past, a similar approach had seemed to be the best way to handle local socialism, but in the different circumstances of 1911, this tactic backfired. On April 4th, John Menton, a Socialist cigarmaker and union member for twenty-eight years, was elected mayor by a 582 vote plurality in a three-way race that drew a record seven thousand citizens to the polls.⁵¹ The Socialists also did well in other contests, electing three of the twelve aldermen, two members each to the Board of Supervisors and the School Board, and one Justice of the Peace. The latter official, a vehicle worker, Bill Adams, was immediately disqualified for his lack of legal training. This event returned the incumbent to office but did little to diminish the anti-socialist trauma that rippled through the city's establishment.⁵²

Menton and his colleagues drew votes from all parts of the city, but they ran particularly well in three wards populated by new automobile workers and traditional vehicle workmen, a fact that deeply disturbed local businessmen. The socialist vote was strongest among "the factory hands" of the downtown First Ward where an automobile worker named Trafaleet easily won a seat on the city council. The

Flashes no longer available.

⁵¹ "Notes," Box 3, Levinson Collection. Menton's Union record is used by James Weinstein in his The Decline of Socialism in America 1912-1925 (New York, 1967) as exemplifying working class participation in Socialist electoral success; see his note on p. 43.

⁵² "Notes," Box 3 Levinson Collection.

party also scored an impressive victory in the Fifth Ward when Orin Castle, a blacksmith for fourteen years at the Durant-Dort Carriage Company, upset that firm's treasurer, Fred Aldrich, in the clearest example of worker versus management politics in this election.⁵³

Once in office, Mayor Menton and his socialist colleagues found it impossible to fulfill their campaign promises. Falling far short of a council majority, and faced by the united opposition of the city's traditional business and political leaders, Mayor Menton discovered that he could propose his party's municipal socialism but not deliver it. As a result, the Socialist cigarmaker spent a frustrating year at City Hall. He opened an investigation into corruption and inefficiency at the Flint Water Works, and defined local problems which his successors were forced to acknowledge. However, Menton simply could not overcome the local establishment's intense hostility to municipal socialism.⁵⁴

This hostility was frequently expressed in nine to three votes against the Socialists in the city council, but it often took other forms too. Alderman Traftlet lost his job at the Buick Motor Company shortly before the election and was out of work for seven months. He was finally rehired for eight weeks only to be fired when he announced he would stand for re-election. Traftlet next took a job under an assumed name at the General Motors' plant in Saginaw. He held that position until his true identity was discovered, and then he was quickly fired

⁵³ This summary is based on Levinson's "Notes."

⁵⁴ Flint Flashes, March 23, 1912. Of course, the city's only daily newspaper, The Flint Daily Journal, consistently opposed the municipal Socialists.

again.⁵⁵ Apparently, John Menton also felt pressured by local businessmen in his private life. At least this is the recollection of the historian Arthur Pound, who was part of the Flint establishment himself at this time. As Pound boasted much later,

He (Menton) really didn't do a bit of harm because wise old D. D. Aitken, Flint's foxy grandpa, took hold of Jack by his bank mortgage and gentled him into conservatism.⁵⁶

Of course, it is hard to say just how much this sort of arm-twisting actually contributed to the decline of socialism in Flint. Given the weakness of the Socialist position in local government and the party's failure to make good its campaign promises, as well as the slow but steady economic recovery which temporarily eased the housing shortage and related problems, the Socialists probably would have run into difficulty in 1912 against even a weak and divided opposition. Working class political loyalties, just recently activated by mass-unemployment and the campaign of 1911, were not so deeply rooted that voters could ignore a strong, 'progressive' candidate drawn from the city's traditional leadership group. And in early 1912, Flint's business class pushed just this sort of challenger forward in the person of Charles Stewart Mott.

The fusion of the local Republican and Democratic parties and the nomination of a full slate of "Independent Citizens"

⁵⁵ Flint Flashes, March 23, 1912, p. 5. This experience led Traftlet to quit the automobile industry permanently.

⁵⁶ "General Motors Old Home Town," p. 91. Pound arrived in Flint in 1902, married the daughter of the city's original wagon-maker W. A. Paterson, and stayed on for a number of years writing and collecting material for his book, The Iron Man in Industry (Boston, 1922), a study of the effect of automatic machine tools on industrial work and production.

headed by the young millionaire industrialist C.S. Mott culminated the political mobilization of Flint's business class on behalf of anti-socialism. Running as a reformer and a successful businessman with a reputation for getting things done, the president and majority stockholder of the Weston-Mott Company easily outdistanced three lesser-known contenders in the combined March primary election. Then, to open his showdown effort against John Menton, the millionaire Mott moved quickly to undercut the Socialist's position by presenting himself as "The Candidate of the Factory Men". To dramatize this slogan, he substantially increased wages at Weston-Mott, the city's second largest employer, amid a great deal of hoopla in the Flint Daily Journal.⁵⁷ Moreover, hoping to co-opt Menton's municipal socialist platform, Mott and his new Independent Citizens' Party announced their own program of public works and municipal reform. In addition to pledges to provide new schools, paved roads, improved sewer and water services, more parks, and free public baths; Mott also promised "to assist in the passage and enforcement of additional regulations for the proper protection of life, health, and property."⁵⁸ In other words, although he acknowledged the problems created by rapid economic growth, Mott offered the voters of Flint business-like efficiency and regulation as solutions instead of the public ownership still advocated by the Socialists.

⁵⁷ Young and Quinn, Foundation for Living, p. 47. Given the entrepreneurial bias of most Flint history, records of Mott's political career have been preserved far better than those of the Socialists.

⁵⁸ From Mott's first public statement after winning the 1912 primary. Foundation for Living, p. 46.

To counter the Independent Citizens' well-organized and well-financed campaign, Menton was forced to rely on the same combination of party and Central Labor Union resources, the Flint Flashes, and public meetings which had carried him to victory in 1911. However, in their new role as defenders of an incumbent without an impressive record of municipal achievements, the Socialists now relied more heavily on party slogans and personal attacks on Mott to sustain their majorities in working people's wards. From the outset of the contest, Menton and his supporters followed the lead of Ed McGurty, a national party organizer sent from Chicago. They branded Mott "the Flint Representative of Wall Street interests."⁵⁹ The Socialists also tried to dismiss the Independent Citizens as nothing more than the political arm of Flint's big business community. They harped on Mott's close ties to the now banker-dominated General Motors Corporation, and on the fact that he was already a millionaire at age thirty-seven. This class-conscious style of attack sharpened in the final days of the campaign when more specific charges were leveled against the anti-Socialist candidate. The Flint Flashes opened this offensive with a frontpage banner headline declaring "MOTT IS A CHAMPION TAX DODGER."⁶⁰ In the same issue, the Socialists also alleged that Mott intended to squelch their water works investigation and prepare the city police for a crackdown on potential labor organizers. Finally, Menton and his party worked to make an issue out of local unfair labor practices, especially the blacklisting of Alderman

⁵⁹ Young and Quinn, Foundation for Living, pp. 48-50.

⁶⁰ The accompanying article went on to explain that Weston-Mott had never paid city property taxes on the full value of its holdings, much to the benefit of the company's only stockholders, C.S. Mott and the General Motors Corporation. See Flint Flashes, March 23, 1912.

Trafalet and charges of child labor law violations brought by the State of Michigan against C. W. Nash, president of the Buick Motor Company.⁶¹

Despite this flurry of serious accusations, Mott defeated Menton in the April election by more than 1500 votes. Although the Socialists still ran well in the downtown industrial neighborhoods, and returned one of their number to the city council, Menton's tally in the all-important mayoral race fell 1100 votes short of his winning total in 1911. Most of this shortfall can be traced to apathy among former supporters. For while Mott appeared to have held onto the combined vote of those who had identified themselves as Republicans and Democrats in the previous election, the overall electorate shrunk by more than a thousand voters, almost exactly the extent of the Socialist's decline between 1911 and 1912.

Immediately after the election, in an article titled "Unholy Combination Wins For a Time," the Flint Flashes attempted to find a silver lining among the discouraging results. "Driving the old parties together," it suggested,

is a victory for the Socialists. The mask has been torn off. Now all workers know that these parties stand for the same thing. The Democratic party has been wiped out of existence as far as city matters are concerned.⁶²

Unfortunately for John Menton, this positive interpretation of the Socialist's defeat proved incredibly naive. For in reality, Mott's election in 1912 actually secured the political power of the local business class, hastened the decline of the Socialist Party, and ultimately, opened the way for a return to 'politics as usual' in Flint.

⁶¹ Flint Flashes, March 23, 1912. Nash was charged with keeping boys under the age of eighteen at work for more than fifty-four hours a week. He pleaded guilty and was fined five dollars.

⁶² Flint Flashes, April 6, 1912.

When C.S. Mott took office, he rapidly established his progressive credentials by pressing forward with his own version of municipal reform. First, he called in experts from the University of Michigan to evaluate the city's water and sewer systems and to make recommendations for new construction. Protests from property holders over higher assessments slowed sewage improvements, but a new water filtration plant was begun, and ten miles of city streets were paved. Though a far cry from municipal socialism, these tangible improvements were more than the Socialists had accomplished in their year in office. And Mott was just beginning. Early in 1913, he started a stepped up campaign against local vice, much to the delight of the city's older residents. He also mounted a successful campaign to build a new YMCA, drew up a new bond proposal, and offered a plan to revise the city charter so as to put municipal administration in the hands of an appointed professional staff.⁶³

When it came time to stand for re-election in the spring of 1913, Mott and his Independent Citizens' colleagues quite naturally ran on their record, though this time they called themselves the People's Party. As the only opposition, Menton's Socialists had no alternative except to criticize Mott's record as inadequate while they simultaneously renewed their appeals to the class loyalties of Flint's vehicle workers. Hampered by financial difficulties at the Flint Flashes, and by the steady expansion of the local automobile industry, Menton simply could not get his socialist message across to the voters he had lost in 1912. As a result, Mott was able to increase his majority by several hundred votes in April 1913, while Menton seemed lucky to hold onto approximately

⁶³ This summary of Mott's first year as mayor is based on Young and Quinn, Foundation for Living, pp. 52-9.

the same support he had garnered in the previous election.⁶⁴ Other Socialist candidates fared just as poorly. In fact, since the People's Party picked up new votes in all parts of the city, not a single Socialist was returned to office. Moreover, Mott's bond issue passed easily in the same election, although his proposed charter revision went down to defeat.

During the rest of 1913, the same year C.S. Mott completed the merger of his Weston-Mott Company with General Motors, the pace of municipal reform quickened. Aided by business confidence in his leadership (something Menton could never secure), Mott pushed a whole package of new regulatory laws through the city council. A rudimentary factory inspection code was initiated, and a smoke abatement law was enacted. Finally, at Mott's request, a child welfare ordinance was passed, making city-paid nurses responsible for monitoring health problems among Flint's younger population.⁶⁵

In January 1914, Mott announced that he would run again for mayor in order to complete the task of giving the people of Flint "what they needed in the way of improvements and what I believed and still believe they want."⁶⁶ In this effort he could count on the support of many who had aided him in the past, especially leading businessmen from the automobile industry like C.W. Nash. However, by 1914, Mott's ambitious plans for further expansion of city services in the North End, the purchase of

⁶⁴ The official tally gave Mott 4290 votes to Menton's 2341.

⁶⁵ These achievements were reviewed in a retrospective article, "Ordinance Record Reflects the City's Progress for Over Quarter Century," Flint Weekly Review, May 14, 1926. Also see Young and Quinn, Foundation for Living, p. 60.

⁶⁶ Foundation for Living, p. 63.

new voting machines, and the resubmission of the city charter revision had fractured the unity of the anti-Socialist coalition. Older residents and small businessmen from downtown had begun to express outrage at the rising cost of civic improvements and municipal reforms designed to upgrade living standards in the booming North End. Led by J.R. MacDonald, a lawyer and Flint resident for thirty-five years, these conservative dissidents deserted Mott in the spring of 1914. Meeting separately as the Progressive Party, they subsequently nominated MacDonald as their candidate for mayor.

Of course, had the Socialist Party still been perceived as a viable political challenger, the old Independent Citizens' harmony probably could have been maintained. Yet it was clear to most local observers that the election defeats of 1913 had dealt a fatal blow to Socialism in Flint. After two successive failures at the polls, local Socialist stalwarts simply could not hold their movement together.

Perhaps most importantly, the Socialists had lost control of the two institutions that had given them direct access to the minds of Flint's working people. In the wake of the election debacle of 1913, the Socialists were first driven from power in the Central Labor Union by a coalition of 'business-unionists' who wanted no more involvement with radical politics. Then, to complete their triumph, these conservative union men immediately terminated the Central Labor Union's support for the Flint Flashes, forcing the already troubled Socialist newspaper to shut down.⁶⁷ Soon after, the newspaper's assets were purchased by George Starkweather,

⁶⁷ Though nominally a weekly, the Flint Flashes had been published sporadically since John Menton's first electoral defeat in April 1912. Declining revenues from advertising and subscriptions were the principal cause of the difficulties. Without the Central Labor Union's subsidy, it could not pay its bills.

a former Pennsylvania Railroad worker and member of the International Association of Machinists who had moved to Flint in 1910 and quickly established himself as the city's leading business-unionist. Under Starkweather's direction, the labor weekly resumed publication in August 1913, initially calling itself the Flint Labor News, but shortly changing its masthead to the even more innocuous Flint Weekly Review.

In the next two decades, using the Flint Weekly Review as his mouthpiece, George Starkweather made himself the unchallenged spokesman for Flint's tiny band of A. F. of L. members, yet he could hardly be called a working class hero. As the frequent president of the Flint Federation of Labor (the new name for the reorganized Central Labor Union), a vice-president of the Michigan Federation of Labor, and a local Republican activist (he ran for mayor in the 1929 primary), Starkweather consistently used his influence and his newspaper to oppose socialism, strikes, and the organization of local vehicle workers.⁶⁸ Far from continuing the Flint Flashes' self-appointed role as "the voice of the exploited worker," Starkweather's Flint Weekly Review called itself "The Official Newspaper of Flint." It typically praised the accomplishments of businessmen and the city's many fraternal organizations while simultaneously urging workers to cooperate with management for the good of the entire community. Like their business counterparts, George Starkweather and the other leaders of the local A. F. of L. encouraged Flint's factory workers to trust sustained economic expansion and entrepreneurial leadership to meet their everyday needs. For example, in 1918, when C.S. Mott entered the Republican mayorial primary, Starkweather's labor newspaper endorsed the millionaire industrialist in headlines

⁶⁸ Specific examples of this kind of activity are outlined below in Chapters Four and Five.

explaining, "'Mott For Mayor' Should Be the Slogan of Every Citizen Voter Who Desires a Just and Efficient Administration of Local Government for Progressive Flint."⁶⁹ In other words, instead of advancing class-conscious independence, Flint's nominal working class leaders steered the city's principle labor-oriented institutions, the Flint Federation of Labor and the Flint Weekly Review, onto a course that made them paragons of 'business-unionism' and pillars of the local establishment.

Undoubtedly, George Starkweather's rise to prominence and the collapse of the Flint Flashes were among the events which encouraged the conservative dissidents within the Independent Citizens' coalition to desert C.S. Mott and put up their own candidate for mayor. Thus, in March 1914, Flint once again witnessed a three-way mayoral race, but unlike the election of 1911, this campaign did not lead to a surprising Socialist victory. In fact, it sounded the death knell for socialism in the Vehicle City.

As the campaign opened, both the persistent Menton and "Progressive" MacDonald attacked Mott for his wealth and his connections with Wall Street. Yet this election would not turn on class struggle. The feebly organized Socialists still relied heavily on a party platform that had not been changed since the hard times of 1910-11, and were ignored. On the other hand, MacDonald's campaign proved formidable because it acknowledged Mott's achievements and prospects for a renewed automobile boom. The "Progressives" resented Mott's riches and connections only because they felt these things blinded him to the concerns of lesser property-holders and the small downtown businessmen who were the traditional

⁶⁹ Quoted in Foundation for Living, p. 76. This sketch of George Starkweather's career is based on materials found in the Genessee County Biography File (FPL).

backbone of Flint's Republican party. They wanted to slowdown Mott's programs for civic improvements in the booming North End where the expansion of Buick and the other large automobile factories had created neighborhoods that now rivaled the old central city districts in size and political significance. Mott responded to "Progressive" charges of waste and extravagance with a strong defense of his businesslike administration.⁷⁰ He produced evidence to show that Flint had the lowest property assessments of any Michigan city, and a 1914 municipal budget nearly \$13,000 lower than the previous year. Still undaunted by criticism of civic improvement plans, Mott aggressively pushed them forward during the campaign by submitting a new storm sewer extension proposal to referendum.

Ironically, in April, Flint voters approved the storm sewer funding, but turned its author out of office. MacDonald won majorities in eleven of fourteen wards, gaining almost 3200 votes to just 2445 for Mott. John Menton polled fewer than five hundred votes, a result that convinced the veteran Socialist leader to abandon his quest for a second term in the mayor's office.⁷¹

Following the election, a bitter C.S. Mott eased the shock of defeat with a trip to Europe, while disheartened Socialists gave up the battle for local political power. Not surprisingly, once he took office, Mayor MacDonald abandoned all pretense of "Progressive" politics. He presided over programs already established, but staunchly refused to come up with

⁷⁰ Foundation for Living, pp. 64-6.

⁷¹ John Menton made a brief but unsuccessful return to local politics in 1930. Running without the Flint Federation's support in the first non-partisan elections for the new city commission, Menton failed to win one of the nine available seats. Then in July, Menton circulated nominating petitions for the State Legislature as a Republican. However, he did not

any plans to provide basic services for the thousands of new residents who were streaming into the North End, attracted by job openings in the reinvigorated automobile industry. MacDonald's premeditated unconcern pleased older residents because it held down property taxes and preserved the visible trappings of their privileged status. However, in the outer subdivisions, living conditions deteriorated rapidly. Throughout most of this "village grown overnight into a city," there were still no sewers, no garbage pickups, and no paved roads.⁷² In the worst areas like the notoriously overcrowded section known simply as 'the Jungle', hundreds of families paid one dollar down and fifty cents a week to purchase tiny lots for their tents and tarpaper shacks. Elsewhere, homeowners took in lodgers while many rooming houses converted to double shifts, using every square foot for extra beds. Some young workers endured by cracking jokes about "the town where they sleep them so thick their feet hand out the windows."⁷³ Many others looked to political leadership to improve the conditions of their everyday lives.

At this turning point in Flint's history, when a rapid renewal of investment in the automobile industry was lifting the local economy from recovery to boom, working people did not embrace socialism as a political solution to their urban problems. In fact, even the Socialist Party remnant who remained in Flint seemed to have given up on this alternative. Certainly they made no public efforts to influence local elections after

gather enough signatures to make the primary ballot. See the Flint Weekly Review, February 7th and July 11th, 1930.

⁷² Ihlder, "Flint: When Men Build Automobiles Who Builds Their City," p. 555. Photographs included with this article in The Survey dramatically reveal the underdeveloped state of the city at this time.

⁷³ Ihlder, p. 549.

1914. Instead, Alderman William G. McKeighan, a drug store chain operator by trade, seized the opportunity to make himself the political champion of the automobile workers. Building a base of support with ward organizations that were particularly strong among established Irish Catholics, and recently arrived Poles, Hungarians, and other Eastern Europeans in the North End, McKeighan felt bold enough to challenge Alderman John G. Windiate, the choice of conservative 'old Flint', for the now re-formed Republican Party's mayoral nomination in early 1915. When Windiate proclaimed "the main issue in this campaign is the enforcement of law and order" to please older residents shocked by the appearance of 'blind pigs' and prostitutes in the North End, McKeighan shrewdly posed as the candidate "for all the people" and won a narrow victory in the March primary.⁷⁴

During the following campaign for the mayor's office, McKeighan's opponent was not a Democrat--that party had not yet reformed. But, a somewhat reluctant Charles Stewart Mott was persuaded by his friends in the automobile industry to run again, though he insisted on maintaining his nonpartisan status. Since both candidates were committed to improve conditions in the recently settled districts, this election turned on personality and related matters, especially McKeighan's opposition to the reimposition of local prohibition (it had been repealed in 1911), and Mott's continued demand for a city charter revision creating a city manager. Facing an overwhelmingly Republican electorate and a Republican opponent already considered "the young, handsome hero of the 'North-end new people'," Mott hoped to rekindle the same spirit of independent

⁷⁴ The candidates' public statements are quoted at length in Foundation for Living, p. 71.

citizenship which had carried him to earlier successes as an anti-Socialist candidate.⁷⁵ However, the time for Mott's kind of progressive, non-partisan politics had passed. In 1915, McKeighan won the first of his five widely scattered terms at city hall by a comfortable 1200 vote margin. He would remain a force in local politics for nearly twenty years.

III. The Failure of Socialism in Flint

In Flint, the demise of the Socialist Party, reformation of the local Republican Party, and subsequent election of William McKeighan as mayor heralded the beginning of the politics of prosperity Warren G. Harding would soon label "normalcy". For the remainder of the automobile boom, the boundaries of the anti-Socialist consensus forged by C.S. Mott's Independent Citizens held fast, keeping class from becoming a political issue. This consensus, certainly Mott's most significant achievement as mayor, rested on the assumption that businessmen alone had the responsibility for directing economic and social development, and on the need to exclude independent-minded working people from public decisions affecting these matters. In 1911-12, Mott reminded businessmen that they had to offer political leadership and reform solutions to problems created by private economic decisions or they would face a threat to their privileges and power. Aided by the swift recovery from the recession of 1910, and by the class-conscious unity among businessmen he helped to inspire, Mott seized the reform initiative from the Socialists in 1912. And they never recovered. Confronted by a united business class ready to act on the problems they had defined, and wed to a platform which did not anticipate such political innovation, the Socialists

⁷⁵ This description of McKeighan is by the Mott biographers, Young and Quinn, Foundation for Living, pp. 71-2.

found themselves abandoned by an electorate anxious to get on with the automobile boom.

Viewed from a distance, the rise and fall of the Socialist Party in Flint appears as an isolated moment that expressed shortlived emotions, not a deeply rooted working class-consciousness. Having lost all support for its alternative vision of social development by 1914, the Socialist organization in the city completely disintegrated, leaving Flint without an institution capable of maintaining nineteenth century traditions of working class independence. Thus, the way was cleared for businessmen to once again completely dominate the economic, social, and political decisions which shaped everyday life in Flint for the duration of the automobile boom. In short, the failure of Socialism made it possible to create an industrial community where there was simply no place for industrial unions or independent working class politics.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL FOUNDATIONS OF NORMALCY IN FLINT, 1915-1930

As long as possessions continue to pile up, the worker can feel that he is moving forward; as long as his wants do not give out, he can feel that he is ambitious.

--Eli Chinoy, Automobile Workers
and the American Dream

I. Normalcy: An Overview

The renewal of heavy investment in Flint's automobile industry begun by William C. Durant and his associates in 1913 created a boom that would quadruple Flint's population in just fifteen years. Through World War I, a relatively brief postwar slump, and two more reorganizations of General Motors, Flint continued to grow at a remarkable pace because investors confident in the future of "automobility" continued to pour vast amounts of capital into the expansion of automotive production in the Vehicle City. At the same time, these automotive entrepreneurs and a second generation of high company officials remained politically and socially active. Having learned from their encounter with socialism that the shape of local society and politics could not be left to chance, Flint's 'progressive' industrial business class tried to create a community free from institutionalized threats to their authority over development decisions. It was not always easy, but they nearly succeeded. By

the late 1920s, what Warren Harding had dubbed "normalcy," the domination of political-economic decision-making by Republican businessmen, appeared to be a permanent condition in Flint.

Prosperity was the key. It enabled businessmen to control civic affairs, establishing a social hierarchy in which every new resident (regardless of cultural background or economic status) deferred to the wisdom and power of the automotive elite. Throughout the 1920s, Flint's leading businessmen made the decisions that had the greatest impact on social relationships and attitudes in the growing city. They directed the fraternal organizations, wartime patriotism, and postwar 'Americanization' programs. They also sponsored citywide welfare plans, educational and recreational reform, and political campaigns. In this heyday of welfare capitalism, their high wage policy helped them assemble a massive factory labor force that accepted the rigors of scientifically managed piecework without serious protest. Thus, despite considerable ethnic diversity and very clear economic stratification, a homogeneous industrial society which encouraged individual materialism and deference to business class leadership emerged in Flint. Though temporarily disturbed by the appearance of the Ku Klux Klan in the mid-1920s, a business-dominated political culture continued to grow in strength throughout the decade.

Ironically, just as the boom ended, in December 1929, Flint's 'progressive' business class celebrated what should have been one of their greatest political triumphs when voters approved a new city charter establishing non-partisan elections and a city manager form of government. The product of sustained effort by all segments of the business community, the new charter was supposed to insure the permanence of business-like

thinking in municipal affairs. In particular, it was designed to insulate public policy from the uncertainties inherent in the enduring competition with William McKeighan's political machine. But the victory was shortlived. In 1930, the collapse of the national automobile market began to force businessmen to strip Flint's working people of the high wages and steady work that had formed the day-to-day underpinnings of normalcy. As a result, the city's business class soon faced challenges to its authority which could not be deflected by the subtleties of 'progressive' politics and welfare capitalism. During the Great Depression, events beyond the control of local businessmen brought normalcy to an end.

II. Economic Growth and a Local Managerial Revolution

Even before the United States entered the Great War in Europe, Flint's older diversified economy and the intimate social order it supported had been replaced by an economy and society that depended entirely on the booming car and truck market. By September 1916, as one observer noted, "In Flint, there are two great industries, the manufacture of automobiles and the selling of land."¹ And, for the most part, these industries were controlled by the same people. Relentless expansion of the city's automotive capacity throughout the 1920s created a nearly constant demand for new homes and industrial construction which principally enriched those small groups of vehicle-makers and their associates who had bought land cheap before 1908.

During Billy Durant's second reign at General Motors (1916-1921), Flint's place as the corporation's leading production center was assured by steady investment in expansion at Buick, Chevrolet, AC Sparkplug, and

¹ Idhler, "When Men Make Automobiles," p. 550.

its smaller local subsidiaries.² New automotive capacity and jobs were also created by other members of the city's traditional vehicle-making establishment in this prosperous era. While Ford's Model T still dominated the low-priced, first car market, there was plenty of incentive for Flint's leading carriage and wagon makers to enter the competition in the higher-priced automobile and truck markets. The Durant-Dort Company turned out its last horse-drawn vehicle in 1917, but using its rural sales network, wartime government contracts, and its established name to great advantage, Dort Motors successfully sold two kinds of trucks and the finely-crafted Dort automobile until the founder's death in 1925. W.A. Paterson, the city's major carriage producer, also equipped his factory for the new market, and up to his death in 1923, his skilled workers made the highly regarded Paterson car for the Midwest's more affluent driving public. Though neither of these firms survived the 1920s, in their day, they created a comfortable way for some of "old" Flint's business elite and craftsmen to make the transition to the automobile age without sacrificing their traditional social relationships and status.

In 1917-18, the addition of war contracts at Buick, AC Sparkplug, and, Dort Motors increased the pace of social change in Flint, for rather than abandoning the car for the duration, Flint's industrialists continued to make automobiles and trucks while borrowing against guaranteed Federal revenues in order to expand capacity to meet War Department demands. For example, under Walter P. Chrysler's reluctant but forceful leadership, the Buick Motor Company actually doubled its passenger car output when it was contracted to produce Liberty aircraft engines, tank motors, and truck parts for the war effort. Despite the drafting

² For a complete list, see note 13 in Chapter Three above.

of nine thousand of its workers, Buick's total labor force was also doubled in just two years.³ Increases in capacity and employment at other plants were not as dramatic, but overall, local growth was phenomenal. In 1919 Flint's economy employed almost 25,000 wage-earners, up from 8700 in 1914. And by 1920, the Vehicle City's population topped 92,000 persons, nearly two and a half times its size ten years earlier.⁴

Flint's well-organized employers were able to attract these new workers and their families by advertising high wages, steady work, and home-owning opportunities all over Michigan, the Middle West, and nearby Canada.⁵ Despite the competition with Detroit, Pontiac, Lansing, and other Great Lakes area automobile production centers, between 1914 and 1920, no serious labor shortages developed in Flint, in part because the region's pool of surplus rural workers and single young men returning from the war was so great. In these years, when the number of factory workers in the city nearly tripled, tent colonies and shanty towns were once again thrown up as fast as local speculators could buy and subdivide surrounding farm lands. Within the old town, early automotive era arrivals

³ Rodolph, "An Industrial History," pp. 261-2. Like his predecessor C.W. Nash, Chrysler found Durant's freewheeling, personal style of leadership irksome. Durant recognized this problem, and to keep his talented manager, he had offered Chrysler a three year contract in 1916 which paid \$10,000 a month in cash and \$500,000 at the end of each year in either cash or GM stock.

⁴ Fourteenth Census of the United States, Vol. IX, Manufacturers, p. 684.

⁵ Flint's Manufacturer's Association had handled general recruitment and a free labor exchange since 1900. The following advertisement brought to Flint from Minneapolis by a young worker in the early 1920s seems typical: "Plenty of work in Flint, Michigan, good wages, steady work, and only men interested in helping build up and make a city." Quoted in an interview with L. Frey, National Recovery Administration, "Hearings on Regularizing Employment and otherwise Improving the Conditions of Labor in the Automobile Industry," held in Flint, Michigan, Volume I, December 17, 1934, National Archives, p. 287 (hereafter cited as NRA Hearings). Also see "Hiring Policies in the Automobile Industry," a WPA National Research

and older skilled workers rented out spare rooms, and in a few cases, actually began to buy up and rent extra houses themselves.⁶

In 1919, at Billy Durant's direction, General Motors established the Modern Development Corporation to build substantial single family houses for its workers in Flint. Plans were also drawn up for a giant seven-story dormitory, but these were dropped during the recession of 1920-21 when Durant was driven from the company's highest office. The Modern Development Corporation was also curtailed in 1920-21, but over the years it eventually sold 3200 well-built homes in the Civic Park and Chevrolet Park subdivisions (land which General Motors purchased from the Civic Building Association, a consortium of local speculators).⁷ Despite this record, Flint's housing shortage remained critical. As late as 1921, Polk's City Directory still listed 651 families living in tarpaper shacks and another 96 in tents. And the urban homesteaders kept on coming throughout the 1920s, providing a healthy market for the services of local developers, real estate agents, banks, and construction crews.

Although wartime prosperity accelerated Flint's already soaring growth rate, it also laid the foundation for the end of direct hometown control over the General Motors Corporation, the city's largest employer.

Project prepared by Blanche Bernstein (New York City, 1, 1937), Box 2, Levinson Collection, WSU.

⁶ The fact that some workers became landlords was revealed in the NRA hearings held in Flint in 1934. For example, at that time Carl Michael, a forty-one year old Buick metal finisher told investigators how he had bought up five houses between 1919 and 1929, only to lose them all in the early Depression. See NRA Hearings, Vol. II, December 18, 1934. pp. 508-15.

⁷ Undated "Memo: Buick Employees to Have New Dormitory," and Carolyn Rose, "The Attempt of GM to Aid in Easing the Housing Shortage in Flint, Michigan," an unpublished paper dated November 30, 1971; Sloan Museum.

In simple terms, the tremendous demand for cars, added war-related revenue, and Durant's loose control over corporate finances encouraged almost everyone in the General Motors' hierarchy to make their expansion plans too grandly. Of course, by his example, William C. Durant was a principal offender, but his enthusiasm was not unreasonable. As Alfred P. Sloan, who sold the Hyatt Roller Bearing Company to General Motors in this period, recalled in his fascinating autobiography, The Adventures of a White Collar Man,

It was easy to be optimistic if you had been in a position to observe the booming growth of Detroit, Flint, and other places where cars were being made; and Durant had seen it all.⁸

Moreover, in his defense, it should be added that many of Durant's acquisitions in his second tenure as General Motors' president, firms like Fisher Body and Frigidaire, proved to be very profitable longterm investments.⁹

Durant's worst blunder, the purchase of the Sampson Tractor Company, had cost the giant automaker \$42,000,000 by 1920, the same year that the bill for the new General Motors' headquarters in Detroit skyrocketed to \$20,000,000 and the firm's division managers exceeded their limits for expansion and inventories by \$60,000,000. All these problems were not Durant's fault. In fact, a recent biographer has laid much of the blame for General Motors' financial difficulties in 1920 on the shoulders of John J. Raskob, finance committee chairman and the DuPont's highest ranking representative in Detroit. Nevertheless, as the nation slid

⁸ (New York, 1941), p. 105.

⁹ Durant's other achievements included the acquisition of five important automotive accessories makers grouped as United Motors, and the creation of the General Motors' Acceptance Corporation to extend consumer credit.

into its delayed postwar recession, orders for new automobiles began to drop rapidly, forcing Billy Durant to face another General Motors cash flow crisis. When Durant went to the Eastern banks for loans, Pierre S. DuPont (whose company and associates had been buying into General Motors since 1916 with some of their wartime profits) led a stockholder's revolt against Durant's alleged mismanagement. Durant tried to support the price of General Motors stock out of his own funds while drastically curtailing automobile production, but investor confidence could only be restored by surrender to DuPont and his allies at the Morgan bank. After absorbing an estimated \$90,000,000 in paper losses, Durant finally resigned from General Motors on November 30, 1920.¹⁰

As compensation, Billy Durant received \$3,000,000 in stock and a \$500,000 cash loan, but he had finally been driven from power in his own company. DuPont gained some 2.5 million shares of General Motors through the settlement giving his family commanding control of what soon would become the world's largest, most profitable manufacturing enterprise. To correct the company's immediate financial problems the Morgan bank extended a \$80,000,000 loan to General Motors. Pierre DuPont himself served as president during the initial year of reorganization; he then retired, leaving the company in the extremely capable hands of Alfred P. Sloan.¹¹ Sloan moved quickly to rationalize General Motors. In the early 1920s, he eliminated competing models, formalized the

¹⁰ See Gustin, Billy Durant, pp. 204ff. and Flink, Car Culture, pp. 116-19 and 123-6.

¹¹ In 1949, the Justice Department opened an anti-trust suit against the DuPonts for their acquisitions of General Motors stock. The case was dismissed by a lower court in 1953, but it was upheld upon a final appeal to the Supreme Court in 1961. In order to cushion the blow, a compliant Congress then passed a special law allowing the DuPonts to sell their sixty-three million shares of General Motors, worth \$2.7 billion, without a tax loss.

multi-divisional structure, and urged production designers to emphasize styling and design changes to satisfy the growing market of second car buyers. These decisions, coupled with Ford's reluctance to abandon the Model T, vaulted General Motors into industry leadership in the later 1920s. Since then, General Motors has never been seriously challenged in the domestic American marketplace.

In Flint, the combination of widespread automotive layoffs and General Motors' reorganization left the local economy in disarray for most of 1921-22. In his efforts to economize, Durant had cut General Motors' total workforce from a postwar peak of 86,000 in late 1919 to just 25,000 workers a year later. In Flint, layoffs were not as severe as those in other General Motors production centers, but more than 10,000 local automobile workers were without jobs in the winter of 1920-21. Of course, in these conditions, the local housing boom ground to a halt and was not fully revived until General Motors opened the first of its two Fisher Body plants in the city in 1923.¹²

Recognizing the significance of Flint in the company's operations, the new management of General Motors quickly moved to reassure local investors that the corporation would sustain its commitment to the Vehicle City. Both DuPont and Sloan visited Flint, and pledged \$300,000 of General Motors' financing to help erect a Durant Hotel in the downtown business district. General Motors' new professional leaders did cease construction of the company's Modern Development homes, but they also expanded the functions of the General Motors Institute, making it into

¹² Fisher Body 2, as it came to be known (because it was the smaller of the two plants), produced Chevrolet bodies for the Flint assembly plant. Statistics compiled from "Report to the Stockholders of the General Motors Corporation . . . December 31, 1921," p. 9; and the Flint Daily Journal, March 28, 1924, p. 1.

a kind of corporate university where both white collar and blue collar specialists were trained for well-defined places in the national organization.¹³ Most importantly, General Motors continued to invest in new and upgraded production facilities for Flint.

The cutbacks of 1921-22 were temporary, and unlike the unemployment of 1910-11, this time around local recession and a shakeup at General Motors did not create class hostilities.¹⁴ Once the national car market recovered in the second half of 1922, old employees were quickly called back. By 1924, total factory employment topped 31,000 workers, 4,000 jobs more than the previous peak. Buick remained the city's principle employer. Between 1919 and 1928 the Buick factory's maximum capacity was increased from 350 to 2000 cars per day, while total employment reached 22,000 workers. With George Kuudsen, one of C.S. Mott's proteges, directing the division, Flint's Chevrolet production facilities were upgraded. By the late 1920s, 18,000 workers in several Chevrolet plants were turning out 400 motors per day and 11,000 completely assembled cars each month. AC Sparkplug Division's output was diversified in 1925 when it moved into a second Flint location; and finally, General Motors created the world's biggest body plant in Flint in 1926 when it purchased the

¹³ The General Motors Institute was officially created in 1924 when the Flint Institute of Technology was absorbed as the core of the corporation's new training center. The Flint Institute had been set up in 1919 at the urging of the general managers of both Flint's Chevrolet and Buick operations to train needed skilled workers. When it expanded in 1924, the General Motors Institute offered classes in Buick authorized Service, technical trades like tool and die work, and a four-year college level "Co-operative Engineering" curriculum. By 1918, more than 500 carefully screened high school graduates were enrolled in these management training courses. See Albert Sobey, "General Motors Institute," Foreman's Magazine, III, 3, March 1923; and Clarence Young and Robert Tuttle, The Years 1919-1969... a history of the General Motors Institute (Flint, 1969).

¹⁴ An ill-fated attempt to organize automobile workers during the postwar recession is discussed in the next chapter.

under-utilized factory put up by Durant Motors and turned into Fisher Body 1, Buick's sole body-builder. By 1929, the Fisher Body division employed more than 7500 Flint automobile workers. In that final year of the boom, perhaps as many as 60,000 men and women found jobs in Flint factories during the peak production periods. Average factory employment would not surpass 1929 levels until the middle of the Second World War.¹⁵

Since General Motors' vigorous expansion sustained the automobile boom throughout the 1920s, local businessmen adjusted easily to the loss of direct hometown control over the automobile industry. Reaction to Durant's second fall from corporate power illustrates this phenomenon. At the end of World War I, the automotive elite of Flint regarded Durant as "our hero, actual at the start, mythical towards the end--almost a god." Consequently, when General Motors changed hands, there was considerable trepidation among those in "old" Flint who had sunk their savings in Billy Durant's company. A few of these people, including some older workmen, grumbled about "'them Jews from Wall Street'" who had taken over the town's principal industry.¹⁶ But this extreme anti-Semitic reaction appears to have been both isolated and shortlived. As one local historian observed, once the automobile market recovered and General Motors began pouring new capital into the local economy, "Flint's first families, though having little influence in the corporation,

¹⁵ Yearly industrial employment averages kept by the Flint Manufacturers Association in Robert C. Schmitt, "The Future Population of Metropolitan Flint," Institute for Human Adjustment, University of Michigan, 1947, p. 30. Estimates for 1929 peak vary. Information on General Motors' divisions in "General Motors Scrapbooks" (Chevrolet Division Vol. I, Buick Motor Division, Vol I, and Fisher Body Division), Automotive History Collection, FPL.

¹⁶ Arthur Pound, The Iron Man in Industry, pp. 77-9.

equated the city's interests with the corporation's."¹⁷

The continued presence of Arthur Bishop and Charles Stewart Mott on General Motors' Board of Directors kept Flint's voice alive in company councils, further cushioning the effects of the 'managerial revolution' in the Vehicle City. As men whose careers epitomized the way in which vast fortunes were made by local entrepreneurs who tied investments in the automobile industry to interests in real estate and banking, Charles Mott and Arthur Bishop remained living links between General Motors' old hometown and the corporation's new professional management.¹⁸ Mott was extremely important in this respect. In his official role as head of the corporation's Advisory Staff, and as a close friend to Arthur Sloan, Mott could translate his concern for Flint into action. More than anyone else, Mott shaped the decisions that made Flint the world's second biggest automotive production center.

The actual timing and pattern of General Motors expansion in the city also helped diminish the impact of the passing of Flint's vehicle-making pioneers. Just as the Flint Wagon Works had formed the foundation for Buick's entry into the city, one after another, the automotive

¹⁷ Richard Meister, "The Rise of Two Industrial Cities: A Comparative Study of Gary, Indiana and Flint, Michigan" (an unpublished paper originally presented at the Duquesne University History Forum, October 28, 1971), p. 6. A copy of the paper may be found in the Michigan Historical Collection.

¹⁸ In 1928, Mott was president of the Industrial Savings Bank and its subsidiary, the Bankers Trust Company of Flint. In 1929, these banks merged with Bishop's old company, Genessee Savings, to form Flint's biggest financial institution, the Union Industrial Trust and Saving. At the time, Bishop was also president of the First National Bank and Trust. Mott's resources were so great in this period that he could personally put up \$3.6 million in cash to cover funds embezzled by bank subordinates, a story that made national headlines in 1929. See Walter Dunham, Banking and Industry in Michigan (Detroit, 1929), pp. 158-61; Rodolph, "An Industrial History," p. 286; and Young and Quinn, Foundation for Living, pp. 100-1.

companies owned by the original wagon and carriage makers were absorbed by General Motors. W.F. Stewart's body-building plant and workforce had disappeared into Buick as early as 1912. In 1923, Armstrong Steel Spring was bought up, and was operated as a separate division of General Motors until 1933 when it was taken over by Buick. Also in 1923, most of W.A. Paterson's works and workforce were incorporated into Fisher Body 2, and just two years later, J. Dallas Dort's factory was purchased by the expanding AC Sparkplug division. Finally, As William C. Durant's last automotive holding company, Durant Motors slid towards bankruptcy in 1926, he sold the giant new Flint Motors factory to General Motors for its Fisher Body 1 plant.¹⁹ Thus, in terms of sustaining growth and employment, and fully utilizing existing production facilities, General Motors' continued investment in Flint made the local 'managerial revolution' as relatively painless affair. Between 1915 and 1930, real control over the city's principal industry passed easily from the hands of hometown entrepreneurs to the offices of a distant, professionally managed corporation. Of course, many people mourned the passing of leading citizens like J. Dallas Dort and W.A. Paterson, but with both local stockholders and workers enjoying unprecedented prosperity throughout the 1920s, few voices were raised to protest General Motors' ascendancy.

III. The Working People of Flint

The growth and prosperity created by General Motors' steady expansion formed the economic basis for normalcy in Flint. Yet the connections

¹⁹ Durant Motors was founded in January 1921 after Billy Durant raised \$7 million in forty-eight hours from 67 friends. A modern factory was built in Flint, but never used to full capacity.

between general economic conditions and the specific content of the prevailing political culture were not made simply. To explain how businessmen could dominate local politics and industrial relations, and even define the character of citizenship; and to discover why working people accepted this unequal distribution of power virtually without protest, a closer examination of the ways in which the automobile boom changed the everyday lives and expectations of Flint's industrial workers is necessary.

By early 1930, nearly 156,000 people (twelve times the town's population at the turn of the century) had settled in the Vehicle City while as many as 24,000 others were assembled in four surrounding 'suburban' townships.²⁰ Though certainly not as diverse as a metropolis like Detroit, during the automobile boom Flint's populace was far from homogeneous. Most importantly, unlike the first generation of motor car workers in contemporary Britain, France, and Germany, the new automobile workers of Flint were not recruited from an established industrial labor force which had inherited and institutionalized the class consciousness of an earlier era. Though some who came to Flint had previous industrial experience,

Many small local investors bought shares in Durant Motors in 1922-3, confidently expecting their hometown hero to make them rich. Though Durant Motors captured perhaps as much as one-fifth the national car market in its best year, Durant lost interest in the company in the late 1920s, and liquidated it in 1933. Many Flint investors never forgave him.

²⁰ Between 1910 and 1930, Burton, Flint, Genessee, and Mount Morris townships more than quadrupled in size. However, unlike the suburban growth of the post-World War II era, this expansion was not a result of flight from the city. The first Flint suburbs were actually settled by newly arrived working people who could not afford the cost of a home in the city. See I. Harding Hughes Jr., "Local Government in the Fringe Area of Flint, Michigan," (1947), pp. 3-5; and Leo F. Schnore, "The Separation of Home and Work in Flint, Michigan," (1954), p. 46. Both papers done for the Institute for Human Adjustment, University of Michigan. Also see Schmitt, "The Future Population of Metropolitan Flint," pp. 6-8.

prior to the Great Depression, the majority of the new arrivals were entering the factory and urban society for the first time in their lives.

Initially migrants from rural Michigan predominated, but soon the widely publicized opportunity to work in Flint's high-paying new industry was drawing people from neighboring states and Canada.²¹ Before 1920, when the local Manufacturers' Association advertised heavily all over the region in competition with similar employers' groups from Detroit and the other Great Lakes automotive production centers, foreign-born workers arrived in large numbers. These immigrant workers were about equally drawn from Canadian (mostly English-speaking), Western European (principally British), and Southern and Eastern European origins (particularly Poles, Hungarians, and Russians).²² During the 1920s, white and black migrants from the rural upper South, especially Missouri, comprised the biggest blocs of people responding to ads which typically proclaimed, "Come to Flint and earn \$10 a day."²³ Like the older wagon workers and non-English speaking newcomers before them, black migrants settled in segregated neighborhoods, but the white Southerners dispersed themselves

²¹ The exodus from the Michigan countryside continued throughout the boom but could not keep pace with expansion in the cities. Between 1920 and 1930, forty percent of rural Michigan's population aged 10 to 20 in 1920 moved to the cities, extending the trend of the previous decade. See "The Labor Market in the Automobile Industry," a WPA National Research Project prepared by Blanch Bernstein (February 1937), Box 2, Levinson Collection, WSU.

²² As a percentage of total population, Flint's foreign-born population peaked in 1910 when just over 6600 immigrants made up 17% of the population. By 1930, Flint had nearly 21,000 immigrant residents, but they made up just 13% of the population. In 1929, the largest non-native English speaking groups were comprised of an estimated 9000 Poles, 2000 Hungarians, and 1500 Russians. See File "Statistics--Population," Michigan Room Information Catalog, FPL.

²³ Quoted in "Hiring Policies in the Automobile Industry," p. 1. Missouri natives, who made up about half the new Southern-born population, were clustered at Chevrolet because the factory's personnel manager came

throughout the city and surrounding suburban townships even though their jobs were highly concentrated at Chevrolet and Fisher Body.²⁴

Some native-born industrial workers (principally skilled machine tool and die makers, and miners from the copper fields of upper Michigan and the coalfields of the lower Midwest and West Virginia) also came and settled in Flint during the boom, often at the urging of a friend or relative who had already made the trip. Within these small kinship and friendship groups there were a few class-conscious veterans of union activity and strikes, but until the Great Depression, they remained silent, dwarfed in both numbers and influence by the great flood of rural migrants and foreign immigrants. Finally, in the late 1920s and early 1930s, many children of the Vehicle City's first generation of industrial workers began to enter the factories, adding a new, potentially militant group to the workforce.²⁵ In other words, as long as the automobile boom endured, Flint's population of working people remained in flux, a collection of disparate groups and younger individuals at various stages of adaptation to permanent life in this true mass production center.²⁶

from that state and liked to recruit back home. See Interview with E.C. Paget, NRA Hearings, I, p. 205; and Elmer Back to Henry Kraus, February 22, 1937, Box 10, Kraus Collection WSU.

²⁴ In the 1920s, approximately 2700 blacks and 8000 whites from the South settled in Flint in these patterns. White Southern migrants lived in fairly heavy concentrations on the city's south and west sides, but they did not form the same kinds of tightly-knit communities as their black counterparts. Erdmann Beynon, "The Southern White Laborer Migrates to Michigan," The American Sociological Review, III, 3, June 1938, pp. 337-41; and Meister, "The Rise of Two Industrial Cities," pp. 9-10.

²⁵ Interview with Larry Huber, director UAW Region 1-C, February 22, 1977, notes in my possession. The role of the few union veterans and the second generation workers in the organizing drives of the 1930s are presented in detail in Chapter Six below.

²⁶ Given the boomtown conditions that prevailed in Flint, it is not surprising that the majority of early arrivals were young males. In 1920,

Throughout the boom, the heterogeneous aspects of Flint's population certainly created what social historians like to call 'structural barriers' to the development of a unified automotive working class. In the city's most important ethnic districts, fragments of traditional cultures were preserved by family practices, shopfloor friendships, and other neighborhood institutions.²⁷ The largest groups of non-native English speakers--Poles, Hungarians, and other Eastern Europeans--settled in the old North End wards around the Buick factory where most of the men worked. In the 1920s, a much smaller group of Italians established themselves on the south side of Flint, close to the expanding Chevrolet plant. Flint's black population tripled in the same decade, but it remained very small and tightly packed in the traditionally segregated neighborhoods near Thread Lake and Buick.²⁸ Though a handful of black males obtained jobs at the Buick foundry or as sweepers and janitors in a few of the General Motors plants, for the most part, Flint's black workers had to accept low-paying, menial positions outside the booming automobile industry. As a result, more than any other group, Flint's black population was excluded from the improvements in everyday life felt by most local

there were 129 men for every 100 women in Flint. However, by 1930 this ratio had dropped to 109. In that later year, forty-seven percent of Flint's population was twenty-five years old or younger. See Meister, "Two Industrial Cities," p. 9.

²⁷ Flint neighborhoods were described, classified, and mapped according to income levels, occupational groups, ethnic and racial composition, and type of dwelling by the Home Owners Loan Corporation in the mid-1930s. Though compiled after Depression-related out-migration had slightly lowered the city's total population, it seems fair to assume that HOLC's data represent prior settlement patterns. See HOLC Survey File, 1935-40, RG 195, Box 23, "Flint, Michigan Master File, July 18, 1937" in the National Archives.

²⁸ Beynon reported that only 18 of the 2737 Southern blacks he studied settled outside these neighborhoods.

working people during the 1920s.²⁹

Within the Vehicle City's principal ethnic neighborhoods, the church usually provided the most important center for the kind of cultural activities that renewed traditional group loyalties, and consequently, numbed potential class consciousness. This was particularly true in the large Polish community where priests at the All Saints Catholic Church (established in 1910) earned a city-wide reputation for their regular condemnations of socialism, communism, and radical unions like the I.W.W.³⁰ Of course, a strong religious identification was not the sole possession of Flint's Catholics in this era. Organized religion flourished during the automobile boom with very little evidence of the rise of a reform-minded, labor-oriented clergy. By 1920, the city had forty-five churches, including All Saints, a Hungarian Reformed, two Eastern Orthodox, and three all black congregations. Ten years later, the total number of churches had more than doubled, with the greatest increase coming among Southern Protestant denominations both black and white.³¹

In addition to their churches, minority groups created other institutions that reinforced kinship ties and social relationships. Four parochial schools isolated the education of some of the city's youngsters from the influence of the public schools attended by the Protestant majority. More importantly, as ethnic communities matured, people within them confirmed their separate identities by forming social clubs and service

²⁹ Edith Whitney, "Three Decades of Employment in Flint's 'Black Belt' and its Effects on the Socio-Economic Condition of Blacks," unpublished paper dated November 10, 1972, FPL.

³⁰ Lawrence Gustin, The Flint Journal Centennial Picture History of Flint (Flint, 1976), p. 173; and Donna Cunningham, "Americanization in Flint in the 1920s," unpublished paper dated November 5, 1972, FPL.

³¹ Gustin, Centennial Picture History, p. 172.

organizations which extended traditional group consciousness to new generations. In the Old North End where ethnicity was strongest, a Polish National Alliance Lodge received its charter in 1910. A Hungarian-American Culture Club got started a decade later. In the 1920s, the two organizations carried virtually the entire local populations of these ethnic groups on their membership rolls.³² Other groups organized similarly. By the late 1920s Flint's Italian community had formed an active Italian-American Club and a branch of the Sons of Italy. Leaders in the city's few black neighborhoods finally banded together to set up a Flint Negro Recreational Council to serve their neglected constituents in 1933.

Everyday economic activity in the ethnic neighborhoods preserved a feeling for the traditional cultures, but its impact was not as clear-cut as religion and organized social life. Ethnic grocery stores, butcher shops, bakeries, and other small businesses dotted all of these communities, adding to the insular quality of their life. However, these small business economies also fostered social hierarchies which mimicked the shape of the wider society. Successful ethnic businessmen tried to make themselves into neighborhood political and social leaders. To achieve this end, some of these ethnic leaders courted the favor of their far more powerful counterparts in Flint's industrial economy. For example, Edward Niedzielski, a Weston-Mott machinist and Polish National Alliance official who had left the factory to set up a prosperous grocery, regularly endorsed C.S. Mott in Polish during that industrialist's many campaigns for public office.³³ Thus, while they worked to maintain

³² Files: "Local History: Ethnic Groups" and "Statistics: Population," Michigan Room Information Catalog, FPL.

³³ For a brief biographical sketch of Niedzielski, see Williams, "The Rise and Fall of Piano Box City," in the Sloan Museum.

aspects of their traditional culture, ethnic community leaders could likewise reinforce the dominant political and social position of the native-born automotive business class. By the early 1920s, this kind of two-sided posture was extremely difficult to maintain because most of Flint's industrial elite fully supported an extensive array of programs designed to 'Americanize' the immigrants.

Flint's ethnic and black communities were not extraordinary. Their appearance in this era of rapid industrial expansion conformed to patterns of social development that had been observed in most American cities since the late nineteenth century. Hence, for the minority groups most affected in Flint, a leading social historian's conclusion that "ethnicity provided the major organizational framework for workers' adjustment to the pressures of factory labor and city life" seems a fair summary of the facts.³⁴ Yet, even admitting this much, ethnicity alone cannot explain the lack of working class activity during Flint's long automobile boom. First of all, ethnic organization was limited to just a small fraction of Flint's total population of working people. On their own, the mere existence of these few ethnic communities would not have prevented the great majority of Flint's auto workers from organizing as a union. Moreover, ethnic workers themselves were not isolated from the other facets of the automobile boom (including the material prosperity, welfare capitalism, and 100% Americanism) that generally blunted the development of working class consciousness. Thus, viewed in retrospect, in Flint, ethnicity appears as just one of a variety of ways in which working people who did not feel compelled to organize as a class reconciled

³⁴ Tamara Hareven, "The Laborers of Manchester, New Hampshire, 1912-1922: The Role of Family and Ethnicity in Adjustment to Industrial Life," Labor History, XVI, 2, Spring 1975, p. 260.

themselves to a new life in the industrial city.

It is important to remember that Flint, a genuine twentieth century boom town, was primarily populated by native born Americans who had migrated from rural areas to find a better life in the city. By 1930, two-thirds of Flint's inhabitants were the descendents of two American-born parents; and of the remaining immigrants and children of at least one foreign-born parent, more than half were of Canadian and British lineage.³⁵ Within this vast white, English-speaking majority, Irish-American Catholics retained something of their original ethnic identity.³⁶ However, among most of Flint's working class people, the foremost 'structural barrier' to working class consciousness was not ethnicity, but the combination of income differences and social status distinction rooted in long residence that separated older skilled vehicle workers from semi-skilled workers, operatives, and laborers.

Throughout the automobile boom, skilled workers like toolmakers, die sinkers, and maintenance men earned considerably more than the lesser skilled workers who made up the bulk of Flint's industrial workforce. Income differences were greatest before World War I when employers institutionalized training for skilled jobs. In 1916, skilled automobile workers reportedly averaged up to \$14 per day while newly hired lesser

³⁵ Meister, "Two Industrial Cities," p. 10. Census figures reveal that the number of native-born whites in Flint never fell below eighty-two percent of the population during this era.

³⁶ Flint's first Irish settlers arrived before the Civil War, establishing Saint Michael's Church and school in 1856. Their numbers swelled during the lumber boom of the 1870s, but then dropped off as many of the loggers moved on. By the early 1900s, Irish-Americans in small businesses saw their fortunes grow with the town. William McKeighan, a pharmacist who opened a chain of drug stores and several movie theaters, was one of the most successful of these entrepreneurs.

skilled workers received between \$2.30 and \$3.00 each shift.³⁷ By the late 1920s, skilled workers (who still made up at least ten percent of each factory's labor force) earned from \$2500 to \$3000 annually. In the same period, some semi-skilled workers like metal finishers, painters, and upholsterers could take home over \$2000 in a good year, but most lesser skilled workers earned from \$1200 to \$2000.³⁸ The skilled workers could count on longer, more regular hours than their lesser skilled counterparts, and they suffered less from annual layoffs for model change-over. As a result, their incomes were more secure, allowing them to pursue material advantages which were closed to most working people. In this sense, Flint's experience confirms Andrew Dawson's general observation that labor's "skilled aristocrat remained, often meeting mechanization head on, emerging triumphant in the end."³⁹

As a rule, the skilled workers' higher incomes encouraged them to own homes. In fact, most lived in comfortable houses in the older residential districts near downtown, or in the newer homes built on the city's northwest side (by the Modern Development Corporation and other developers) after World War I.⁴⁰ Since the relatively high earnings of Flint's

³⁷ Idhler, "When Men Make Automobiles," p. 553.

³⁸ "Exhibit 19: Preliminary Report on the Study of Regularization of Employment and Improvement of Conditions in the Automobile Industry," U.S. National Recovery Administration, Research and Planning Division, Leon Henderson, director, January 23, 1935, pp. 4-5 (hereafter cited as NRA Report). Also see NRA Hearings for evidence of individual earnings in various job categories upon which above report is based. Ratio of skilled workers in labor force from interviews done with plant managers by William Chalmers for "Labor in the Automobile Industry: A Study of Personnel Policies, Workers' Attitudes, and Attempts at Unionism," unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Wisconsin, 1932, p. 65.

³⁹ "The Paradox of Dynamic Technological Change and the Labor Aristocracy in the United States, 1880-1914," Labor History, XX, 3, 1979, p. 335.

⁴⁰ HOLC City Survey File, "Flint, Michigan Master File."

skilled auto workers were not quite as susceptible to the fluctuations of the industry's business cycle, over time, these working people were able to amass considerable savings. In Flint, older skilled workers commonly made investments in real estate and the companies that employed them. By the 1920s a few of these veteran workers had left the factories to establish small businesses; others leased one or more houses to newer arrivals.⁴¹ In addition, many skilled workers held an interest in General Motors which they had either purchased during one of Durant's early promotions or through the company-wide savings and investment plan instituted in 1923 as part of Alfred Sloan's welfare capitalist reforms.⁴²

Extraordinary as these material achievements may seem by late nineteenth century standards, they were not unusual in booming Flint. During the 1920s a great number of lesser skilled automobile workers were able to build or buy their own homes.⁴³ Despite erratic annual earnings, some

⁴¹ Like other generalizations that follow, these points were elaborated on in the testimony given by 105 automobile workers to National Recovery Administration investigators in Flint on December 17-18, 1934. Transcripts of these hearings (also held in Detroit, Pontiac, and other automotive production centers) are a remarkable source of information on the material lifestyle of auto workers in the 1920s. Hearings were held day and night to accommodate both shifts. All participants were volunteers who responded to posted notices to discuss working conditions with governmental officials. Questioning was very informal; in fact, most workers were simply asked to tell how the depression had changed their work and living standards. For Flint, the transcripts of these interviews in the National Archives fill two volumes with more than six hundred pages of testimony.

⁴² In 1923, 2500 Flint workers enrolled in the new plan. By 1928, a year in which General Motors reported 89% of the eligible workers participating, over 4000 Flint workers contributed to the program. That year a worker who had put \$300 into the plan in 1923 received \$2680 back when the investment reached maturity. See Annual Report of the General Motors Corporation 1928, pp. 21-2 and Meister, "Two Industrial Cities," p. 15.

⁴³ In 1925, a survey of 867 homes in the "more crowded, less prosperous" sections of Flint found more than 40% were owner occupied. A Civil Works Administration survey of Flint housing conducted in early

lesser skilled workers also achieved a fragile kind of financial security by putting money in the bank or the company's savings plan.⁴⁴ Yet, neither these workers nor the later arriving skilled workers could enter Flint's real 'aristocracy of labor' because they lacked the social credentials that stemmed from long residency and close association with the city's automotive elite. In other words, in Flint, objective material standards alone did not define labor's elite.

Though the skilled automobile workers' higher incomes and greater freedom within the factories set them apart from the lesser skilled auto workers, the sustained political significance of Flint's labor aristocracy stemmed from the living social relationships certain skilled workers maintained with the city's business elite. The politically active core of Flint's 'aristocracy of labor' consisted of the original carriage and wagon workers who had made the transition to automotive production, many of the skilled workers who had arrived before World War I, and the (building) tradesmen associated with George Starkweather's Flint Federation of Labor. Most members of this influential group earned high wages at Buick or one of the smaller independent firms that were eventually

1934, after many auto workers had lost their homes, found 46% of the city's units owner-occupied. Based on these data, it seems reasonable to assume that roughly half of the city's homes were owner-occupied at the height of the boom in the late 1920s. See Women Workers in Flint, Michigan, Bulletin of the Women's Bureau No. 67, prepared by Ethel Best, U.S. Department of Labor (GPO, 1929), pp. 12-3. and 49; and A.C. Findlay, "The Housing Situation in Flint, Michigan" (Flint Institute of Research and Planning, February 1938) in the FPL.

⁴⁴ There are several accounts of this kind of activity by lesser skilled workers in the NRA Hearings. For example, Emmet Gardner, a Buick sheet metal finisher whose annual earnings averaged \$2089 from 1923 to 1929 (high of \$2590 in 1923 and low of \$1753 in 1925), was able to pay for a \$8000 home, put money into the savings and investment plan, and make other stock purchases before the Great Depression undermined his financial security. See NRA Hearings, I, pp. 142-51.

absorbed by General Motors. For them, allegiance to the automobile companies was rooted in personal friendship. In the older factories, skilled workers were frequently on a first name basis with supervisors and managers who had been recruited from their own ranks. As Arthur Pound recalled, "a good many steady old hands from the carriage factories went over to automobiles, found better jobs, and kept on rising."⁴⁵ Charles W. Nash's ascent from a dollar-a-day trimmer at the Flint Road Cart Company in 1890 to general manager at Buick in 1910 and president of General Motors in 1912 was certainly the most dramatic example of this kind of mobility, but other more humble success stories abounded, and not surprisingly, were often used by business leaders to boost the virtues of life and work in Flint.⁴⁶

As the city grew, businessmen and company officials residentially segregated themselves from even the most prosperous blue collar workers, but shared memberships in a variety of exclusive clubs prolonged the intimate social relationships of the wagon-making era. Just as the Board of Commerce, Manufacturers' Association, and Rotary provided places where the city's older industrial entrepreneurs, professionals, and small businessmen could meet on a regular basis with the newer corporate managers; fraternal groups like the Elks, Oddfellows, and several Masonic Lodges sustained social ties among veteran workers and members of the business class. The Masons were particularly important

⁴⁵ "General Motors Old Home Town," pp. 89-90.

⁴⁶ For instance, see the biography of Harry Clyde Parkhurst, a Flint area farm boy who rose from carriage assembler at the Flint Wagon Works and Durant-Dort to superintendent of Chevrolet's No. 1 assembly plant, in the Accelerator: For Our Mutual Benefit, June 14, 1919, p. 1. Copies of the Accelerator and other company newspapers may be found in the Sloan Museum.

in this respect. The connections were first made in the 1890's, when many vehicle workers shared Masonic duties with leading businessmen such as William C. Durant, J. Dallas Dort, D.D. Aitken, and Arthur Bishop.⁴⁷ By the 1920's, even though Billy Durant had departed, the fraternal link between the automotive establishment and Flint's 'aristocracy of labor' remained strong. For example, in 1923, Buick furnished fifty cars and Chevrolet supplied its fifty member company band to the local Knights Templar when they hosted that organization's statewide meeting. And throughout the decade, the Flint Weekly Review, skilled labor's "official" voice in the Vehicle City, energetically boosted both the Masons and the Oddfellows in regular news features on lodge activities.⁴⁸

Considering their economic status and special social connections, it is not surprising to find that Flint's 'aristocracy of labor' usually supported the political goals of the automotive business class. Though firsthand testimony is lacking (because workers generally abstained from the direct competition for office), a comprehensive reading of the Flint Weekly Review covering the years from World War I to the Great Depression gives a clear impression of just how closely the political opinions of the city's older skilled workers coincided with the views of most business leaders. During the war, skilled workers strongly backed the patriotic war bond campaigns organized by J. Dallas Dort and

⁴⁷ Membership lists, Knights of the Loyal Guard, clipped from the Flint Daily News, March 2, 1895, Michigan Room microfiche collection, FFPL. At the time, carriage and wagon workers made up the largest occupational group in the Masons.

⁴⁸ Frontpage examples of this kind of boosterism may be found in the May 11, 1923; August 31, 1923; May 14, 1926; and September 2, 1927 editions of the newspaper.

the Board of Commerce. In fact, with their help, Flint achieved the highest per capita subscription rate of any city in the United States.⁴⁹ After the war, the Flint Federation of Labor and the Flint Weekly Review wholeheartedly endorsed the combination of welfare capitalism and 'Americanization' that the business elite pressed upon the automotive workforce. And, they opposed every attempt to bring unions into the automobile factories.⁵⁰

As both a demographically distinct group with its own social life and an active force in Flint's public life, the local 'aristocracy of labor' retarded the development of a unified working class-consciousness for the duration of the automobile boom. In this sense, the political impact of labor's elite was similar to that of ethnicity. However, unlike the ethnic groups who organized to (at least partly) protect their native cultures from the homogenizing efforts of the business class, Flint's older skilled workers assisted those efforts. Indirectly, the material achievements of the established skilled workers served as a visible success model for other workers who were just entering the new consumer-oriented industrial economy. More directly, by their participation and public endorsements, the labor aristocrats of Flint reinforced the welfare capitalist programs, 100% Americanism, and 'progressive' political reforms through which business leaders tried to shape local society and culture. As a result, the thousands

⁴⁹ See letters from J.D. Dort to John Jay Carton (May 22, 1918), and Daniel Reed, secretary of the Board of Commerce, to Carton (June 19, 1918) in Box 14 of the John Jay Carton Papers, MHC for details on the organization of the war bond drive. Carton was a prominent attorney who served many of Flint's leading business figures during the automobile boom.

⁵⁰ The role Flint's nominal labor organization and newspaper played in shaping the city's political culture is discussed in the next chapter.

of new industrial workers who moved to Flint had no contact with the traditions of 19th century working class independence. Their class traditions, if they were to have any, would arise primarily out of twentieth century experiences.

IV. A Consumer-Oriented Society Takes Shape

Though certain groups of Flint's working people preserved fragments of their traditional cultures throughout the automobile boom, as the city grew, it became a more and more homogeneous society. To a large extent, the specific cultural content of the homogenization which actually occurred during the 1920s was the result of deliberate public programs formulated by the city's industrial leaders in order to maintain their control over all aspects of Flint's development. For this reason, normalcy cannot be viewed simply as either an evolutionary 'stage' in, or a 'spontaneous' response to, the automobile boom. However, the success of welfare capitalism and 'Americanization' in promoting cultural homogeneity in Flint was built upon mundane foundations. Both the migration experiences most working people shared, and the increasingly similar circumstances of everyday life and work, encouraged the growth of similar material values and aspirations. By the 1920s, as one social historian has recently noted, the nation's "economic and social life reflected an awareness of what was commonly referred to as 'the American Standard of Living'."⁵¹ This 'awareness' was particularly strong in Flint, a city where most working people learned to see themselves as genuine participants in the new consumer-

⁵¹ Winifred D. Wandersee Bolin, "The Economics of Middle Income Family Life: Working Women in the Great Depression," Journal of American History, LXVI, June 1978, p. 64.

oriented society. In fact, it served as a primary cornerstone of the political-economy of normalcy.

Regardless of their backgrounds, most workers migrated to Flint because they believed the move would improve the material condition of their lives. For the many who had found rural life hard and unrewarding, the widely advertised promise of high wages and home ownership in Flint was extremely attractive. It must be remembered that early twentieth century rural America was not the bucolic utopia conjured up by some romantic reformers today. The unelectrified farms and small towns of that era were often a frustrating place for common working people. Opportunity seemed to lie in the bright lights of the city and the new technology of the factory, not on the land or in the mines and forests they knew all too well. In 1934, when a Buick assembler was asked by investigators from the National Recovery Administration to explain why he had left Michigan's Upper Peninsula nearly twenty years earlier, his answer reflected the kind of experience that brought many auto workers to Flint. "I used to work on a farm there," Rheinhold Draheim remembered,

and they called for men here. I was working on shares. I had no farm, and I just rented it, and I could not make a living.⁵²

In Flint, a working person like Draheim could (and in his case, did) 'make a living' which eventually included ownership of a house and a car. Of course, not all of Flint's auto workers came straight from the farm. With industry booming throughout the Great Lakes region, many working people took an indirect route to their eventual destinations.

⁵² NRA Hearings, II, p. 307.

Indeed, young workers commonly moved from job to job before finally settling down at a company where conditions were tolerable.⁵³ But throughout the boom, it was usually individual materialism which initially led working people to the automobile production centers of the Midwest. In this sense, the auto workers of Flint (and elsewhere) were part of a self-selected group. Whether the immediate catalyst for their migration had been a manufacturer's notice, the glowing report of a relative or friend who had preceded them, or even problems with a previous employer, most working people who moved to Flint shared a similar set of material expectations and a similar instrumental view of factory labor. For them, success could be measured in terms of improved income and the things they could buy with it. As they saw it, industrial work was principally a means to this kind of individual material fulfillment; not part of a craft tradition which conveyed its own standards of value. Hence, they could accept the rationalization of the work process as long as their earnings improved and their absolute physical and psychological limits were not tested. "It was pretty hard work in Buick in 1916, 1917, and 1918 already," recalled Lauri Nieminen, a metal finisher (and homeowner) who moved over to Fisher Body in 1923, "but still we had such a big price."⁵⁴ There is little reason to doubt that the pragmatic individual materialism implicit in Nieminen's recollection shaped the attitudes of most Flint auto workers towards their jobs.

Union organizers who viewed the situation of the automobile workforce quite differently, as being the epitome of what Marx con-

⁵³ This point is elaborated in Chapter Five below.

⁵⁴ NRA Hearings, II, p. 508.

sidered 'alienated' labor, could never really reach their potential constituents. Lester Johnson, a representative of the Auto Workers Union who was unable to establish even a skeleton local in Flint during the 1920s, was still confused thirty years later. After partially blaming his failures on the communist faction which took over the union's leadership in the period, Johnson remembered,

of course, that got along in 1925, '26, '27 when there were good times, when the workers did not need an organization. They needed it but they did not feel they needed it because they were making good money. They could quit one job and go over and get another job.... So even if the communists had not come into the organization it might have petered out.⁵⁵

Indeed, since the union had already been ignored by the vast majority of the workers prior to the communists' ascendancy, it is more likely that auto workers' satisfaction with their own individual material progress continued to be the fundamental reason for the organizational failures of the period.

The relative contentment of Flint's industrial working people during the 1920s was not an example of what is sometimes called 'false consciousness'. Local automobile workers (estimated to be ninety-six percent of the men and sixty-two percent of the women employed in manufacturing in 1925) made real material gains despite the uncertainties of an industry tied so closely to consumer confidence.⁵⁶ In the first half of the decade, the annual earnings of most auto workers fluctuated dramatically. The postwar depression of 1920-21 cut deeply into workers'

⁵⁵ UAW Oral History Project interview, June 3, 1959, p. 16. The failures of the Auto Workers Union in Flint are discussed in Chapter Five below.

⁵⁶ Estimate from Women Workers in Flint, Michigan, p. 12.

take-home pay, but prices also fell rapidly, somewhat cushioning the effects of mass layoffs and short time. The boom was fully renewed by 1923-24, the years of the first big migrations from the South; and since prices remained rather stable for the rest of the decade, real wages actually improved a bit.⁵⁷ Brief recessions in mid-1924 and late 1925 again held down the annual earnings of many auto workers, though the impact of these short-lived slumps was not nearly as severe as the depression of 1920-21. Finally, in the last four years of the decade, both the wages and earnings of most of Flint's automobile workforce reached the levels that would be remembered as prosperity in the midst of the Great Depression.

Comparing the annual earnings of Flint auto workers in the late 1920s with the authoritative income standards for a family of five first set down by Paul Douglas in Wages and the Family in 1925 gives a clearer picture of the Vehicle City's relative prosperity.⁵⁸ First, it seems certain that none of Flint's automobile workforce lived below Douglas' "poverty" line, although a Brookings Institution study done in 1929 found twenty-one percent of the nation's families did. Moreover, very few, if any, auto workers and their families lived under the

⁵⁷ This was probably more true in Flint than elsewhere because money wages were less 'sticky' in the automobile industry than most other industries. For general figures see Bernstein, Lean Years, p. 67. The stability of basic prices in Flint is indicated by an Industrial Conference Board survey of local rents which showed absolutely no change between 1923 and 1929. See Memorandum report, "Current Housing Situation Flint, Michigan as of March 31, 1941," Division of Research and Statistics, Federal Housing Administration, RG 207, Box 6, National Archives.

⁵⁸ This discussion uses definitions and figures drawn from Bernstein, Lean Years, pp. 63-5. Income levels for Flint auto workers are taken from NRA data previously cited.

"minimum subsistence" standard (sufficient to meet physical needs with nothing left over for emergencies or pleasures). Douglas defined this level as a family of five living on an income of \$1100 to \$1400 per year. In Flint, women workers at AC Sparkplug and the other auto plants had earnings in this range, but they either lived alone or were married to a male wage earner.⁵⁹ Some unskilled male auto workers also had annual earnings in this range, but in the late 1920s, even their wages seemed to improve enough to push up their living standards.⁶⁰ In contrast, the Brookings study of 1929 placed another twenty-one percent of the country's family units in the "minimum subsistence" category.

Most Flint auto workers had annual earnings in the late 1920s which gave them what Douglas called a "minimum health and decency" standard of living (supplied adequate food, housing, and clothing and a modest amount for recreation). Douglas claimed a family of five could achieve this standard on an income of \$1500 to \$1800 per year, about what most lesser skilled male auto workers earned in the period. However, many workers in the higher semi-skilled categories exceeded this level throughout the 1920s by working long, hard hours to maximize

⁵⁹ In the recession year 1925, the Department of Labor's study found the median earnings of women auto workers located at the low end of Douglas' "minimum subsistence" criteria. However, virtually none of the females in the auto industry were supporting a family on their income. The majority were young (under twenty-five) and single, and lived at home or alone and in groups in rooming houses. Married women made up about one-fifth the female workforce in the auto industry, and they told investigators their earnings were needed to supplement their husband's earnings. See *Women Workers in Flint, Michigan*, pp. 21-2 and 41-6. Fragmentary evidence from the NRA Hearings confirms the idea that even female auto workers experienced higher, more steady earnings in the late 1920s.

⁶⁰ For example, Luther Cain told NRA investigators that he and six other Buick janitors averaged \$1500 per year from 1927 to 1930. See *NRA Hearings*, II. pp. 244-7.

on their piece rate pay. Metal finishers, painters, trimmers, and other semi-skilled body shop workers commonly exceeded \$1800 annually during the last years of the boom.⁶¹ On Douglas' scale, the earnings of these workers topped "minimum health and decency", but did not reach "minimum comfort" (the so-called "American standard") which began at \$2500 a year. In this era, about thirty percent of the nation's families attained this "American" standard of living, including virtually all of Flint's highly skilled auto workers.

Though this comparison of annual incomes demonstrates the relative prosperity of Flint's industrial working people rather forcefully, it still underestimates the actual material welfare of most auto workers in the second half of the 1920s. First of all, Douglas' living standard definitions were for the typical family of five, while the average family in Flint was smaller than in most industrial cities.⁶² In fact, many auto workers were either single or recently married in this era, so it is fair to assume that their disposable incomes were much higher than Douglas' definitions would allow. Moreover, many auto workers' families had more than one income-earner, a pattern which developed in the uncertain years of the early 1920s. In 1925, nearly two-fifths of the city's working women (about ten percent of the total labor force) were married women who "felt the earnings of their husbands were insufficient to support the family."⁶³ Of course, this willingness

⁶¹ For examples see the wage records of Everett Francis, a Fisher Body trimmer, in the Everett Francis Papers, WSU; and the NRA Hearings, I, pp. 133 and 143.

⁶² In 1920, Flint had just 3.7 persons per factory worker, far below the usual 6-7 persons the Department of Labor found in most manufacturing centers. See Women Workers in Flint, Michigan, p. 40.

⁶³ Women Workers in Flint, p. 46. A recent study already cited

to work reflects the higher material expectations raised by life in Flint, not an absolute need, since the earnings of most workers were sufficient to keep their families out of poverty. It was also common practice for auto workers with large families to take in one or more lodgers to supplement their incomes and help with house payments. Indeed, of the nearly 900 auto workers' homes surveyed by U.S. Department of Labor researchers in 1925, thirty percent had at least one lodger living with the family.⁶⁴ Finally, as has already been noted, many of the semi-skilled and highly skilled auto workers in the higher income brackets derived added income from savings and investments. Thus, it is fair to conclude that by the later 1920s, when new cars still sold for less than \$500 and some local houses were priced under \$2000, Flint's working people achieved the ability to meet their basic needs and set aside considerable disposable income for recreation and other non-essentials. In other words, at the very least, they became potential consumers.

Besides income levels, there are other strong indications that everyday life in Flint during the 1920s changed enough to consider the city as a true consumer-oriented society. The smaller families and large number of two wage earner households mentioned above foreshadowed developments that became national in scope after the Great Depression. Likewise, the patterns of widespread home ownership and

(Bolin, "Economics of Middle Income Family Life"), reveals that the percentage of all women who were gainfully employed and the ratio of married women who worked in Flint were almost exactly in line with the national averages in the 1920s. The fact that many young women (and some young men) lived at home with their families during their first years in the labor force helped raise some household incomes.

⁶⁴ Women Workers in Flint, Michigan, p. 49.

residential sprawl clearly pointed towards the kind of suburban growth which characterized the full-blown consumer society of the post-World War II era. "The city has spread out and become one of detached houses and small apartments," noted the Labor Department study published in 1929.⁶⁵ As working people purchased newer houses in the fringe areas, or sought lower rents in less conveniently located districts, the central core of old Flint contained a progressively decreasing proportion of the city's total population. In addition, during the 1920s, the four townships immediately surrounding the Vehicle City more than doubled in size, becoming the first real suburbs of metropolitan Flint.⁶⁶

As the city spread out over an ever larger area, automobile ownership and use grew accordingly. By the Great Depression, private cars were the principal link between individual households, and the rest of the local economy. A survey done in 1936 by city planners (the first time such data were collected) showed that fully two-thirds of Flint's auto workers depended upon the motor car to get to work. And, more than half of these blue collar commuters drove alone in their own vehicles.⁶⁷ Since other evidence suggests that the Depression forced at least some auto workers to abandon their cars, it seems likely that this pattern of commuting, so typical of modern consumer-oriented America, had been established in the 1920s.⁶⁸

The vitality of recreational business in Flint prior to the

⁶⁵ Women Workers, p. 1.

⁶⁶ Schnore, "The Separation of Home and Work," pp. 5 and 46.

⁶⁷ Schnore, p. 16.

⁶⁸ Several auto workers complained of the hardships imposed on themselves and others by the loss of their automobiles in the 1934 NRA Hearings. See Vol. I, pp. 60, 95, and 150.

Great Depression was yet another sign that this industrial city had moved into the consumer-oriented era. As early as 1916, the Vehicle City supported fifteen movie theatres and six dance halls. Economic problems drove about half of these facilities out of business in 1920-21. However, by the mid-1920s, the city once again had fifteen flourishing theatres, and the newest ones were far bigger and more elaborate than their pre-war predecessors.⁶⁹ Flint's central welfare capitalist organization, the Industrial Mutual Association, also managed a booming recreational trade. By 1925, its downtown bowling alleys, pool rooms, and dance hall drew from 3000 to 5000 working people every Saturday night. Encouraged by this kind of attendance, the I.M.A. erected a 6000 seat auditorium in 1929 for shows and other cultural events. Unfortunately, the economic collapse of 1930 quickly turned the facility into a white elephant as hard-pressed workers who had purchased subscriptions demanded refunds.⁷⁰

Perhaps the most convincing evidence of Flint's new consumer-oriented popular culture can be found in the U.S. Department of Labor's study of the city's working women which was conducted in 1925-26. The government's investigators discovered a genuinely modern kind of individual materialism was guiding the life-shaping decisions of women workers. First, almost all women in industry had not bothered to finish high school; in fact, only a third had gone beyond eight grades of formal schooling. Interviews with hundreds of working women revealed that jobs

⁶⁹ Idhler, "When Men Make Automobiles," p. 555; and Debbie Narde, "Culture in Flint, 1915-1930," unpublished paper dated November 30, 1971, FPL.

⁷⁰ Flint Daily Journal, March 1, 1925, p. 7; and Narde, "Culture in Flint."

in the auto factories were most desired simply because auto workers' earnings were high. Even office work, which could provide earnings comparable to those of most female auto workers, was shunned because the special courses needed for such work would have delayed material gratification.⁷¹ The study also showed that the young single women who comprised the bulk of the city's female labor force regularly ate their meals in restaurants (even though Flint was "not an eatery center"). More significantly, these same women placed an extremely high priority on buying new clothes to keep up with the latest fashions, and they often went into debt to stay in style. The report's authors traced this fashion-consciousness to the widespread belief that most men "naturally favored the better-dressed girls."⁷² Of course, it is impossible to prove a direct link, but this kind of thinking must have been influenced by the new style-oriented mass advertising which was proliferating in the newspapers and magazines on the day.⁷³ Furthermore, the observations of the Labor Department's investigators disclose just how far the extension of credit to ordinary working people had gone in Flint by this time. Previously, the banks and General Motors had begun to offer loans to workers for houses and new cars. Now, here in the mid-1920s, there is authoritative testimony that local retailers had set up installment plans for even this lowest paid group of industrial workers.

⁷¹ Women Workers in Flint, pp. 46-7.

⁷² Women Workers in Flint, pp. 18ff.

⁷³ The Flint Daily Journal began running regular fashion features in the 1920s.

Material improvements in everyday life affected the values of almost everyone in Flint during the automobile boom. Like their female counterparts, most men who worked in the Vehicle City's factories embraced an instrumental view of their jobs and a strong desire to partake immediately in the 'American Standard of Living'. Some looked to work their way up through the ranks to more skilled positions, and a few took advantage of the opportunity to advance as foremen or supervisors. For these workers, the company provided training and education at the General Motors Institute; and, as long as the boom endured, their goals could generally be attained.⁷⁴

Yet, most auto workers were not 'career-minded' in the traditional middle class sense of the term. Extended formal education and long training programs delayed gratification of the material expectations which built up during the 1920s, so many auto workers simply avoided them.⁷⁵ These modern worker-consumers had already learned to define personal advancement in terms of the acquisition of a house (a rather traditional goal), a car, and the other new mass-marketed durable goods which industries like their own were beginning to pour into the American marketplace. For them, high wages and the kind of steady work which increased purchasing power, not white collar status, were what mattered most about a job. When explaining why he had left a promising

⁷⁴ By the late 1920s, the General Motors Institute had become the corporation's central training center. It offered practical courses in automobile service and the technical trades, in addition to its four year management training program. In 1927-28, when enrollment in the management program topped 500, enrollment in other courses neared 7000. Of course, the Great Depression forced drastic cutbacks in all programs. See The Reflector for 1928 (first yearbook of the graduating class at the GMI) in FPL, and Young and Tuttle, The Years 1919-1969, pp. 61-4.

⁷⁵ See UAW Oral History Project Interviews with Everett Francis, Ted LaDuke, Bud Simons, and Carl Swanson for personal histories and motivations.

position as a store manager to work at Buick after World War I, Arthur Case frankly recalled, "the big money in the factory took me back to the plant again."⁷⁶ The individual materialism and instrumental view of work revealed in this recollection were typical of the new consumer-oriented outlook on life which emerged in Flint during the last decade of the automobile boom. As long as prosperity continued, these values formed an insuperable barrier to the development of working class consciousness and organization. They were, in other words, the essential foundation for the politics of normalcy.

⁷⁶ UAW Oral History Project interview, August 4, 1960, p. 1.

CHAPTER FIVE

THE POLITICAL CULTURE OF NORMALCY

IN FLINT, 1915 - 1930

There is no reason why Republicanism should offer the prospect of complete equality, or why it should cultivate a distaste for luxury, refinement, prosperity and amusement . . . People do not wish to be all alike. Each person desires to be the equal of a king or better.

--lead editorial, Flint Daily Journal, June 9, 1924

I. Welfare Capitalism and 'Americanization'

Though the common private pursuit of higher material living standards formed the everyday basis for creating a more homogeneous, consumer-oriented society in Flint, the public character of that society was shaped by the same group of 'progressive' businessmen who had led the fight against socialism before World War I. Prior to the Great Depression, this class-conscious group of business leaders dominated the institutional life of the city. They built up an elaborate network of privately sponsored welfare programs, insurance plans, community action groups, and charitable organizations in order to make Flint a place where working people would be able to adjust to urban, industrial life without demanding public welfare programs or independent working class action. The city's industrial-

financial elite also tried to control local politics, absorbing challenges to their leadership position that arose from the far Right and from William McKeighan's rejuvenated ward organizations. Yet, business men like J. Dallas Dort, C.S. Mott, D.D. Aitken, and William Ballenger were not real autocrats, motivated simply by a will to power and a desire to protect their economic privileges. Instead, their attempt to control social and political change after World War I reflected a complicated set of motives, including a genuine concern for the well-being of Flint's working people that was consistent with Mott's earlier reform efforts and local paternalistic traditions.

Welfare capitalism in Flint had its origins in the intimacy that existed between employers and workers in the turn of the century carriage and wagon industry. As Arthur Pound recalled,

Employers made a point of keeping in close, personal relations with their men; boosted mutual insurance funds; supported athletic teams and workers' bands; gave away turkeys at Christmas; and tapped the till promptly in case of emergency need.¹

By the 1920s, the familiarity between boss and worker was gone, but local paternalism had spawned one of the most comprehensive welfare capitalist experiments in the nation. As already indicated, skilled workers derived most of the benefits from the Savings and Investment Plan, the General Motors Institute, and the Modern Development Corporation which were all directly administered by the giant corporation. This distribution was probably intentional. General Motors depended on skilled workers twelve months of the year, and these programs helped insure their loyalty by binding their personal finances and advancement

¹"General Motors Old Home Town," pp. 85-6.

opportunities closer to the company.²

Skilled and lesser skilled workers alike were included in the programs and coverage provided by the Industrial Mutual Association. This citywide organization had its roots in the Flint Vehicle Factories Mutual Benefit Association, a worker-managed mutual insurance plan that was set up in September 1901 at the suggestion of J. Dallas Dort and other manufacturers. The catalyst for this employer initiative had been the formation of the local Socialist Party and a Central Labor Union resolution in favor of organizing all workers in the carriage and wagon factories.³ Initially, this insurance plan required modest weekly dues which were scaled according to skill, and it provided similarly graduated benefit payments in the event of sickness, injury, or death. For many years, enrollment was not mandatory, but workers were strongly advised to sign up when they took a new job. About three-fourths of the eligible workers had done so in 1914. By that year, the organization had paid out \$120,000 in benefits.⁴

In 1912, a year when the state's first "elective" workmen's compensation law went into effect, the Manufacturers Association (which also ran the central employment exchange) augmented the insurance offered by the Mutual Benefit Association. For an additional annual dues

² This welfare capitalist policy was widespread. See Sumner Slichter, "The Current Labor Policies of American Industry," Quarterly Journal of Economics, XLIII, May 1929; and Stuart Brandes, American Welfare Capitalism (Chicago, 1970), p. 140.

³ Rodolph, "An Industrial History of Flint," pp. 508-9; and Franklin V. V. Swan, "Industrial Welfare Work in Flint, Michigan," The Survey, XXXII, 16, July 18, 1914, p. 411.

⁴ Swan, "Industrial Welfare Work," p. 412; and Idhler, "When Men Build Automobiles," pp. 553-4. Weekly dues were checked off and scaled from five to fifteen cents. On that scale, weekly benefits ranged from three to nine dollars, while death benefits were graduated from twenty-five to seventy-five dollars per family.

checkoff of \$1.20, standard benefits could be extended beyond the usual thirteen weeks up to a maximum period of twenty-four months.⁵ Together, the two group insurance plans offered Flint workers provided a kind of minimum social security which worked well in normal times. However, in periods of mass distress, the program could not meet the demand for benefits. Of course, unemployment insurance was never offered by either organization, but during the worst months of 1910-11 and 1920-21, the worker-dominated board of the Mutual Benefit Association did divert funds into a program which distributed meager food and coal allowances to members. Moreover, in the event of some natural disaster, factory managers seemed to have possessed the ability to supplement the welfare benefits of their employees. This was certainly the case during the flu epidemic of 1919-20 which struck down hundreds of workers at every plant. Such activities were well-publicized, and quite naturally prolonged the paternalistic reputation of local management.⁶

Other welfare capitalist programs were also initiated in this period prior to the organization of the I.M.A. In 1910, a Flint Vehicle Workers Club was formed to provide recreational facilities and a small loan service for the local 'aristocracy of labor'. This group strengthened ties between traditional carriage and wagon workers and newly arriving skilled auto workers, but it did not reach out to most factory employees. In 1916, to fill this gap, employers started an Industrial

⁵ Approval for these extended benefits required the assent of a management-dominated board, not the worker-controlled board of the Mutual Benefit Association.

⁶ Though the amounts offered were not large, they did have public relations value. For instance, in 1920 Chevy management made a big story out of its aid for worker-victims of the flu, even though sick workers got only \$319. See Chevrolet Accelerator, February 21, 1920, p. 1.

Fellowship League which offered the same kind of services as the Vehicle Workers Club plus educational courses under the auspices of the YMCA. Three years later, the League's industrial training classes were separately incorporated as the Flint Institute of Technology (the immediate forerunner of the General Motors Institute). However, its recreation program, loan service, and 'Americanization' effort continued at the "Y".⁷ Finally, in 1923, the Vehicle Workers Club, the Industrial Fellowship League, and the various group insurance plans were combined into the new citywide Industrial Mutual Association. Membership in the I.M.A. was made mandatory for virtually all Flint factory workers, including those employed by General Motors. In addition, the giant corporation made the I.M.A. its sole local administrator for the group life and health insurance plans it inaugurated in 1926.

When viewed in retrospect, it is clear that the complex network of welfare capitalist organizations created in Flint had an important impact on the shape of the newly emerging industrial society. By anticipating workers' need for recreation, mutual insurance, emergency financial help, and adult education, Flint's industrial employers gained a degree of control over these programs that would not have been possible under laissez faire conditions. Seen in this light, welfare capitalism in Flint usurped the kind of 'friendly society' functions which had so often been the nucleus of independent working class activity in the past. As the shop newspapers and the Flint Weekly Review, the official

⁷ During the boom, the YMCA served as a vehicle for implementation of social programs desired by the automotive business class. D.D. Aitken and William Ballenger both had enormous influence on the YMCA board in the 1920s. This is not surprising. Elsewhere, the "Y" had been used as a welfare capitalist organization since the 1870s. See Brandes, American Welfare Capitalism, p. 15.

voice of local organized labor, constantly reminded them during the 1920s, auto workers did not have to set up their own welfare organizations because employers had already done it for them.⁸ In this sense, since it had been put into effect as a complement to high wages and tolerable working conditions, welfare capitalism in Flint helped smooth the auto workers' transition to permanent life in the industrial city while increasing their dependence on business initiative. It was thus another significant 'structural barrier' to the development of working class consciousness.⁹

However, it is not enough to judge welfare capitalism as just another industrial relations technique. Indeed, the author of the most comprehensive study of welfare capitalism suggests that its ultimate goal "was no less than the propagation of an improved American working man."¹⁰ Some aspects of this 'improvement', like thrift, industry, and loyalty to the company, were promoted directly by the welfare programs of General Motors and the I.M.A. But other desired civic virtues, especially temperance and patriotism, could be more effectively encouraged by businessmen who assumed the role of community and political

⁸ All the major companies and GM divisions published newspapers for their employees. They explained management policy, urged workers to cooperate with their supervisors, and spread information about welfare and recreational activity. The I.M.A. News was aimed at all industrial workers. In the later 1920s, the widely circulated Flint Weekly Review began to feature I.M.A. news and advertisements right along with its regular stories on the local Federation of Labor and various fraternal organizations.

⁹ It is hard to judge workers' response to welfare capitalism. Participation in the programs before they were made mandatory, and heavy use of the I.M.A. facilities would indicate widespread acceptance. This notion is reinforced by the fact that only four of the 105 auto workers who appeared at the NRA Hearings in 1934 mentioned I.M.A. dues as one of their grievances.

¹⁰ Brandes, American Welfare Capitalism, p. 33.

leaders. By the 1920s, there was no shortage of this type of business class leadership in Flint.

As early as 1909, J. Dallas Dort had led the Local Option group which wanted to impose prohibition on Flint and surrounding Genessee County. Drink was actually outlawed that year, but in 1911, Flint citizens voted to reopen the saloons.¹¹ Dort continued to lead the campaign against alcohol, and in 1916, the city voted with the state majority to reimpose prohibition. On May 1, 1918, prohibition took effect in Flint, though the illegal sale of liquor continued behind closed doors much as it did in industrial cities all across the United States.¹²

Just prior to America's entry into World War I, new criticism of deteriorating living conditions prompted a renewal of social activism within the city's business class. Locally, the respected Reverend Bradford Pengelly (of Saint Paul's Episcopal Church) and reformer Lucy Stone stepped up agitation for housing code changes until the businessmen who controlled the city council agreed to make some adjustments. About the same time, Flint industrialists were sharply rebuked for having "not yet awakened to their responsibilities" in a nationally circulated article in The Survey.¹³ These events, and the war, struck a responsive chord among the automotive elite, especially J. Dallas Dort.

At Dort's urging, the old Board of Commerce was reorganized by

¹¹ The issue probably worked to the Socialists' favor that year, but there is no evidence that it divided the candidates who ran for office in April.

¹² John Steby, "Prohibition in Flint, 1909-1934," unpublished paper dated November 11, 1971, FPL.

¹³ Idhler, "When Men Build Automobiles."

friend and supporter Daniel Reed. The new Board, which included Fred Aldrich, Walter Chrysler, Arthur Bishop, and the Reverend Pengelly as its chief officers, plunged headlong into the war effort. With its organizational assistance, Flint surpassed its quota in both the National War Savings Bond drive and the Red Cross campaigns. In 1917-18, Dort was a particularly active figure in whipping up local patriotism. Among his own class, he personally circulated a chain letter with U.S. Government Thrift Cards enclosed. Each recipient was to attach one Thrift stamp to five cards and send them on to help in "the cause in which we are so righteously engaged at this time -- the elimination of the Kaiser and the atrocities he stands for."¹⁴ Within the community at large, Dort formed a Choral Union which drew huge crowds for mass singing of popular songs and patriotic anthems. He also endorsed the creation an "Unconditional Surrender Club," a brainchild of Flint Daily Journal publisher Myles F. Bradley.¹⁵ And finally, in early 1918, Dort was one of a group of prominent business leaders who backed C.S. Mott's bid for another term as mayor. As expected, Mott won the primary and then swept to victory at the head of a united Republican ticket. However, he soon retired to accept a commission in the Army's Quartermaster Corps.

Business class political and social activism did not subside after World War I. Instead, the war seemed to have drawn leading businessmen into permanent roles as community leaders. Though Mott never ran again

¹⁴ Dort to John Carton, May 16, 1918, Box 14, Carton Papers, MHC.

¹⁵ The Choral Union was permanently organized as the Community Music Association after the War. In 1919-20, it was still able to attract 166,000 people to its events; by 1926-27 attendance had fallen to less than 12,000 persons (See Narde, "Culture in Flint"). The "Unconditional Surrender Club" is discussed in a letter from John Carton to Bradley, August 8, 1918, Box 14, Carton Papers.

for local office, he was succeeded as mayor by important business figures who ran virtually unopposed in the general municipal elections of 1919, 1920, and 1921.¹⁶ In other fields, such as the sponsoring of more parks, recreational facilities, libraries, and hospitals, the automotive elite took the initiative. Certainly, this kind of voluntarism was neither extraordinary (when compared to other cities), nor was it completely altruistic. For example, the Mott Foundation, set up in 1926 to put the city's richest man's assistance to the Community Chest, Red Cross, Flint Institute of Arts, and other charities on a "businesslike" footing, clearly served as a tax shelter.¹⁷ More subtly, the constant positive publicity these fund-raising and philanthropic activities received in the city's leading mass media (the Flint Daily Journal, the Flint Weekly Review, and WEAA, the first and only local radio station, a completely controlled subsidiary of the Daily Journal), built up confidence in the social responsibility of business leadership. Simultaneously, such publicity reinforced the belief that public problems could be solved by private initiative. In this way, Flint's business class extended the political effects of welfare capitalism beyond the factory gates, encouraging the growth of a deferential culture in which working people's only public function was to reaffirm the rule of their economic superiors at the ballot box.

¹⁶ George Kellar, a leading realtor who had preceded Mott as mayor in 1917, followed him in office in 1919. E.W. Atwood, a woolen mill and hardware store owner and past president of the old Board of Commerce, was elected in 1920 and 1921. Mott, who had obvious political ambitions, ran for governor in the GOP primary of 1920. He finished third out of nine candidates, and never ran for public office again.

¹⁷ This point is explained in Young and Quinn, Foundation For Living, pp. 97-9.

"CO-OPERATION MEANS THE CONTINUED PROSPERITY OF FLINT," trumpeted the local Federation of Labor's official newspaper on Labor Day, 1923.¹⁸ It was a declaration which must have warmed the heart of every welfare capitalist in the city.

The obvious success of welfare capitalism in Flint supports David Brody's contention that "it was a more vital phenomenon than it has seemed from the modern perspective."¹⁹ By the 1920s, industrial welfare work, community fund-raising, and philanthropy provided local citizens with the highest degree of social security and the widest array of public services they had ever known.²⁰ For this reason, historical criticism of the manipulative aspects of Flint's welfare capitalism, made with full knowledge of the inadequacies which were exposed by the great Depression, must be tempered with the recognition that it did contribute to higher living standards, and that it was never generally resented.

A vigorous 'Americanization' effort sponsored by leading Vehicle

¹⁸ Banner headline, Flint Weekly Review, August 31, 1923, p. 1. The article that followed praised local industrialists for their accomplishments and urged all workers to cooperate with their efforts at the factory and in the community.

¹⁹ "The Rise and Decline of Welfare Capitalism," in Change and Continuity in the Twentieth Century: the 1920s, ed. by John Braeman, Robert Bremner, and David Brody (Columbus, Ohio, 1968), p. 148.

²⁰ For example, in this era, the public library was expanded, from one branch with 25,000 volumes to eleven branches holding 140,000 volumes, partly through private funding. William Ballenger founded the Community Chest in 1922 and contributed heavily to the construction and running of the city's women's hospital. J. Dallas Dort helped plan the city's park system and donated some of his own lands to it. Among the charities C.S. Mott supported, the Rotary's Crippled Childrens Program and the Lion's Sight Saving Fund, extended invaluable assistance to people in real need.

City businessmen in the years immediately following World War I deserves less consideration. The product of parochial xenophobia excited by wartime passions and the postwar Red Scare, 'Americanization' was ultimately designed to force complete assimilation of Flint's non-native English speaking population. Adult education for foreign-born residents had actually begun during the biggest wave of immigrant settlement prior to the Great War. Elizabeth Welch, principal of the Fairview School in the city's North End, set up night classes in the English Language and civics at her facility as a genuine humanitarian service.²¹ Then, about the time the United States entered the conflict in Europe, the Industrial Fellowship League started offering similar courses to immigrant factory workers through the YMCA. D.D. Aitken, one of Flint's most influential businessmen and prominent member of the YMCA, appears to have been an important booster of this attempt to combine assimilation programs with welfare capitalism.

Although non-English speaking immigrants represented a distinctly declining portion of Flint's population after the war, demands to 'Americanize' them increased as newspaper editors and businessmen joined in the anti-radical, nativist hysteria that swept the nation. In 1919-20, the Flint Daily Journal, the city's primary source of news and opinion fed local prejudice by featuring relentless attacks on foreigners, Bolsheviks, and other assorted "Reds". For months, editorials warned readers about the dangers of Bolshevism, a doctrine which the newspaper claimed "impudent and criminal foreigners are seeking

²¹ Welch also established a day care center in the same neighborhood for working mothers. See Idhler, "When Men Make Automobiles," p. 553.

to impose on free America!"²² Throughout this period, news of the counter-revolutionary invasion of Russia and the Palmer Raids received enthusiastic frontpage coverage, while cartoonists repeatedly used the stereotypic image of the bomb-throwing immigrant in their efforts. Fearful that radical activity might break out in Flint, although there was absolutely no evidence to warrant such anxiety, publisher Bradley asked for a doubling of the city's police force and stricter laws against "loafers."²³ He even went as far as censoring the news. In 1919, a year of tremendous labor unrest, Bradley kept virtually all information about strikes and union activity in the United States out of his newspaper, reasoning that "if the workers of Flint were reading every day of strikes in other cities and employers' acceding to strikers' demands, they would become restless."²⁴

The intensity of the Flint Daily Journal's reaction to the Russian Revolution and the postwar strike wave was, of course, typical of the way establishment newspapers all across the country responded to these events. Yet, given the conservative history of local workers and immigrants, it seems particularly irrational. The same can be said for businessmen's stepped up efforts to 'Americanize' Flint's small non-English speaking population. In 1920, the YWCA board of trustees (also

²² "A Close-up on Bolshevism," December 5, 1919, p. 4. The same editorial page also featured another tirade titled, "A Notice to Parlor Reds."

²³ See editorials on page 4 of the January 23rd and January 30th, 1919 editions. Bradley was his own editor at this time.

²⁴ Interview with Business magazine, quoted in The Auto Worker: the Official Journal of the United Automobile, Aircraft, and Vehicle Workers of America, March 1920, p. 5.

dominated by industrialists and bankers including D.D. Aitken) decided to follow the YMCA example by setting up an "International Institute" that had a single function, conducting classes in English and American citizenship for foreign-born women. Less than two years later, business leaders who were still unsatisfied with the progress of existing assimilation programs met in the Board of Commerce, and voted to establish a "Cosmopolitan Club" for the purpose of "promoting a very aggressive Americanization program in the north end of the city."²⁵

Cosmopolitan Club members actively recruited foreign born residents for public night school classes in a five-year 'Americanization' course which included English, American history, citizenship, industrial trades, and preparation for naturalization. Flint's leading business-unionist, George Starkweather, lent his support to the program in a 1923 Labor Day editorial. The Flint Weekly Review editor noted that "foreigners were getting to be a real problem," and if any of them did not learn English and officially express a desire to be a citizen, "he should be sent back and with him should go his wife and family."²⁶ The Cosmopolitan Club campaign proved to be extremely effective. In 1924, enrollment in its program topped 2100 adults. Special English classes were also set up for foreign-born youth. By 1926, former Congressman Aitken could boast, with real justification,

There is probably no city in the country where there has been such an efficient and successful effort made at Americanization. There are few people in Flint now that do

²⁵ Flint City Directory 1922, quoted in Donna Cunningham, "Americanization in Flint in the 1920s," unpublished paper dated December 5, 1972, FPL.

²⁶ Special Labor Day edition, August 31, 1923, p. 4.

not speak English and who do not practice the customs of the American people.²⁷

II. A One-Dimensional Political Spectrum

'Americanization' undoubtedly hastened the creation of a more homogeneous society in Flint. However, it also poisoned the city's political atmosphere, upsetting the clear dominance of municipal government the industrial business class had established during the wartime boom. There were two major reasons for this unforeseen turn of events. First, when they made ethnicity a public issue, business leaders drove ethnic voters back to the machine politics of William McKeighan. Secondly, by stirring up nativist sentiments in this period of massive in-migration from rural America, these same business leaders legitimized the political position of a group of Ku Klux Klan adherents who had begun to filter into the city as the economy recovered in 1922-23.

The revival of McKeighan's power was remarkable. During the immediate postwar period, when his opponents in the industrial business class were asserting their leadership in public affairs, the former mayor was in constant trouble with the law. Nevertheless, his organization still functioned well enough to get out enough votes to defeat a half-hearted attempt to abolish the wards in November 1919.²⁸

²⁷ "Third City in Michigan Owes Growth to Sterling Citizenry," The Christian Science Monitor, May 14, 1926, p. 3.

²⁸ In 1918, McKeighan actually went to prison after a conviction for assault and robbery. He was released when the State Supreme Court reversed the verdict. In 1920, he was back in court, successfully defending himself against vote-fraud charges. The city charter amendment which would have crippled his organization was defeated in the disputed election 2608 to 705.

The coincident recession of 1920-21 and growing 'Americanization' movement helped McKeighan start his comeback by increasing his appeal, particularly among ethnics and Catholics. In 1922, making his usual campaign as "the Candidate of All the People," McKeighan eked out a victory over several other Republican rivals in the primary, and then moved on to an easy win in the general mayoral election. A year later, Republicans again divided in the primary, and even though a majority cast their ballots against him, McKeighan was renominated for what looked to be a certain third term as the city's chief executive.²⁹

Though McKeighan was fiercely resented by the local business elite, his organization's ability to deliver votes, especially from the ethnic neighborhoods of the First Ward, gave him a crucial advantage over GOP rivals who had to overcome factionalism and widespread apathy in municipal elections. In traditionally Republican Flint, winning the primary, as McKeighan did in 1923, almost always assured a candidate victory in the general election. However, that year local Democrats nominated a popular sawmill operator, David R. Cuthbertson, who promised "Service, Efficiency, Merit" and lower property taxes instead of the alleged corruption and mismanagement of McKeighan's administration. At the last minute, a bipartisan coalition formed to defeat the incumbent, and for five days preceding the balloting, the newspapers were filled with stories and advertisements backing Cuthbertson while McKeighan's campaign was ignored. The result of this effort was the heaviest turnout in years, and a clearcut majority for Cuthbertson

²⁹ This summary is based on newspaper accounts in the Flint Daily Journal and the Flint Weekly Review.

amidst the usual Republican sweep of all other contests in Genessee County.³⁰

Cuthbertson pledged to run the city's business "with the same attention to details tending towards economy that a man would give to his own private business."³¹ In other words, as a Flint Daily Journal editorial noted, "in reality the Democrat label attached to the mayor means but little."³² For the first year of his two year term, Cuthbertson lived up to the faith Republicans had placed in him. He worked closely with the City Council, encouraging extensive construction projects in the downtown business and eastside industrial districts. But in April 1924, when Cuthbertson vetoed the Republican Council's decision to create two new wards, and then moved to block the Republican city attorney's proposed suit against the railroad which ran the local streetcar service, partisan hostilities appeared, and so did the Ku Klux Klan.

While prominent Republicans (led by the editor of the Flint Daily Journal) merely attacked the Democratic mayor for usurping the Council's power, when the local Klan came out into the open, it immediately launched a petition drive designed to recall Cuthbertson and install their own man in City Hall.³³ The recall petitioners charged the mayor

³⁰ The Democrat won by a 2200 vote margin. Local pundits attributed McKeighan's defeat to the lack of support from GOP regulars, vote-switching in the ethnic precincts, and a strong effort by a "Women's Campaign Committee" who wanted to oust the mayor over the firing of a policewoman.

³¹ Flint Daily Journal, April 4, 1923, p. 1.

³² April 3, 1923, p. 6.

³³ The precise origins of the KKK in Flint remain hidden. Its rise in the period of rapid in-migration from the lower Midwest and

with "gross incompetency", "failure to control the liquor traffic and vice", as well as a list of other very vague complaints including the failure to recognize the requests of the "unselfish class" which made up the "sober-minded electorate".³⁴ Since Flint had the best record of enforcing prohibition in the state during Cuthbertson's first year in office, it is clear that the Klan's only specific charge was patently false and opportunistic. Indeed, as the subsequent special election campaign developed, the fact that Cuthbertson had appointed a Catholic Chief of Police, and that he had hired several married women to fill City Hall jobs seemed to lie closer to the heart of the Klansmen's grievances.

At first the mayor tried to ignore the Klan's charges against him; then he offered facts which refuted the idea that he was soft on vice and prohibition. Neither tactic worked. Finally, Cuthbertson tried to block the recall petition in a Pontiac court, but he failed there too. The day before the actual recall vote, Genessee County Kleagle, Maurice Steenbarger, made a spectacular bid to insure victory by hiring an airplane to bombard the city with anti-Cuthbertson propaganda. Recall proponents, using the Klan organization, also made sure that they got out their vote on June 12th, while Cuthbertson had no such organization behind him. As a result, he was recalled and forced to run in a special election the following month.³⁵

upper South, and its activity as a virtually autonomous local unit conform to the patterns described by Norman Weaver in "The Knights of the Ku Klux Klan in Wisconsin, Indiana, Ohio, and Michigan" (unpublished PhD. dissertation, U. of Wisconsin, 1954).

³⁴ Official recall petition as described on ballot, reprinted in the Flint Daily Journal, June 11, 1924, p. 1.

³⁵ The recall vote went 8259 to 6037 against the mayor.

Though the effort to replace the mayor was directed by local Klan leader Steenbarger, the campaign took on the appearance of greater respectability when Judson L. Transue, a school teacher turned banker from upstate New York, was picked to run against Cuthbertson. Initially, several other candidates entered the race, but only one, Homer Vette, a former sheriff and alderman stayed in the race, vowing to fire Police Chief Cole and clean up the police department if elected. The main contest remained between Cuthbertson and Transue, yet Klansmen and Vette supporters came to blows on a few occasions. Transue kept a low profile, spending much of the month prior to the election "off fishing".³⁶ However, his backers organized a series of daily mass meetings and nighttime rallies during the final week of the campaign, generating intense interest in the outcome.

Transue posed as a reformer who would restore morality to local government, but his campaign mixed half-truths, lies, and innuendos into a sensational presentation designed to appeal to the fears and insecurities of people who were trying to adjust to a new life in the industrial city. In particular, it pandered to the nativism which had already been aroused by the drive for 'Americanization'. "I have been informed that foreign-born residents comprise a large percentage of the bootleggers in Flint," Transue told a crowd of 4000 persons outside the Buick plant five days before the election. He continued,

I feel it is our duty to educate these foreign-born residents regarding our laws. If they refuse to be educated they should be sent back home on the boats on which they came to America.

To this typical scapegoat approach, the Klan-backed candidate added a

³⁶ Flint Daily Journal, July 8, 1924, pp. 1ff.

kind of psuedo-populism, making completely unfounded, unspecified charges about the local rich. "I understand that some wealthy Americans in our city are law violators," Transue alleged in the same speech; "They should be punished more severely than the foreigners." It was a good example of what is known in contemporary jargon as a 'law and order' campaign, and its proposed solutions were as simple-minded as the problems it outlined. After reorganizing the police department, the 'reformer' proposed to create a police-reserve he described as "a clean-cut body of men to aid in the enforcement of our laws."³⁷

In the waning days of the campaign, Cuthbertson received ringing endorsements from the major newspapers, J. Dallas Dort, and other prominent citizens. These probably increased his support among the city's regular Republican majority, though as a Democrat, the mayor got no help from the GOP organization. On election day, thousands of voters who had never cast a municipal ballot turned out, giving Transue a clear margin of victory.³⁸ When the results were announced that evening, crowds filled the downtown streets in noisy celebration, but in an act some took as a sign of hoped for responsibility, Klan leaders prevented their followers from parading in their hoods.

The summer and fall of 1924 marked the high water mark of the Ku Klux Klan's influence in Flint. During his first months in office, Mayor Transue lived up to expectations of his reactionary backers. He fired the married women at City Hall, pushed an "anti-hugging" ordinance

³⁷ Flint Daily Journal, July 10, 1924, pp. 1ff.

³⁸ Though each major candidate carried 19 precincts, Transue polled fifty-three percent of the votes to Cuthbertson's forty-five percent.

through the City Council, and forced a reorganization of the police department's vice squad. He also stepped up the provision of essential services by placing new bonding issues for sewers, water mains, and street-paving before the voters. This last initiative was very well received by the business community, and by the Flint Daily Journal which had demonstrated a willingness to support Transue almost as soon as he took office.³⁹

For a short while following Transue's election, the Klan retained its political power in Genessee County. During the Republican primary in September 1924, Klansmen passed out sample ballots at the polls, and every candidate they endorsed received at least a plurality of the vote.⁴⁰ Six months later, during the regularly scheduled municipal elections, Mayor Transue and a Klan-backed slate of candidates ran successfully in both the GOP primary and the general election. William McKeighan resurfaced as an independent in this latter contest, and gave Transue his stiffest opposition even though Cuthbertson was also running on the Democratic line. McKeighan openly denounced the Mayor as a tool of Steenbarger and the Klan. His old enemies at the Flint Daily Journal took up Transue's defense, accusing McKeighan of "mud-slinging."⁴¹

³⁹ Less than two weeks after the election, the newspaper editorially agreed with the dismissal of married women workers.

⁴⁰ Local voters even gave a plurality to James Hamilton, longtime supporter of a constitutional amendment to abolish parochial schools, over the popular incumbent Governor Groesbeck. See Flint Daily Journal, September 11, 1924, p. 6. and Weaver, "The Knights of the Ku Klux Klan," pp. 277-8. Given the Klan's ability to determine the outcomes of elections in Flint (and Lansing) at this time, Kenneth Jackson's claim that "Detroit became the unquestioned center of Klan strength in Michigan" (The Ku Klux Klan in the City 1915-1930, New York, 1967, p. 129) seems mistaken.

⁴¹ April 3, 1925, p. 6.

Once more, the Klan issue brought a record number of voters to the polls. Just over fifty percent cast their ballots for Transue, more than enough to defeat his divided rivals.

From 1925 to 1930, local politics lapsed into a more familiar pattern: contests between William McKeighan's organization and candidates supported by the local economic elite marked by lower rates of voter participation. Judson Transue hastened the return to this version of normalcy by ignoring the Ku Klux Klan. With a full-two year term ahead of him, the Mayor sought recognition from the city's business class through moderation of his campaign positions. There were no more verbal assaults on foreigners or the rich. Even Police Chief Cole kept his job. Meanwhile Transue extended city services in a fiscally conservative manner designed to please business leaders.

By the time he came up for reelection in 1927, the Mayor had become the establishment's man. D.D. Aitken and William Ballenger headed the list of prominent businessmen who formed a special campaign committee for Transue.⁴² However, running in a four-way race in the Republican primary, the incumbent still could not overcome McKeighan's ability to get out the vote in the wards. This election marked the last significant intrusion of the Ku Klux Klan into Flint politics. Embittered by Transue's treachery, Klan leader Steenbarger tried to smear him with charges that he accepted a bribe to protect a downtown gambling operation. This accusation was presumably made to benefit Lester Mott, an obscure movie theater operator whom Steenbarger was supporting for mayor. When most leading city officials and McKeighan himself denounced the charges and produced

⁴² The complete list is contained in a full page advertisement in the Flint Daily Journal, March 6, 1927, p. 20.

evidence to refute them, the issue seemed dead. Yet, in the end, Transue received just thirty-three percent of the primary vote, an unusually poor showing for a business-backed incumbent.⁴³

In the regular election, McKeighan had to fight off a strong challenge by a Democratic lawyer, Charles Adair, who was able to get the endorsement of the Flint Daily Journal as the anti-machine candidate. McKeighan outfoxed his opponents by coming out for nonpartisan elections in a speech before the League of Women Voters. But more importantly, on election day, even though Adair carried four of the city's six wards, McKeighan's organization in the ethnic First Ward delivered enough votes to give him his third term as mayor.⁴⁴

During the last few years of the automobile boom, McKeighan's numerous opponents in the business class were continuously trying to oust him from City Hall. In November 1927, a recall petition launched by the Flint Daily Journal's general manager, J.A. Taylor, failed to win enough support to put it on the ballot thanks, in part, to the intercession of George Starkweather's Flint Weekly Review. By highlighting the role of known Klan sympathizers in a series of page one articles on the recall effort, Starkweather managed to discredit the petitioners without really endorsing Mayor McKeighan.⁴⁵

A more consequential attempt to shut McKeighan out of local politics began a few months later when municipal justice Frank Cain formed a charter revision club to lobby for the abolition of the wards and the

⁴³ Klan-backed candidate Lester Mott got just 1900 votes, fourteen percent of the total.

⁴⁴ The final tally gave McKeighan a 1377 vote margin over Adair. In the First Ward, McKeighan's edge was 2344 votes.

⁴⁵ Flint Weekly Review, November 4 and 11, 1927.

appointment of a city manager. The efforts of this club produced genuine business class unity. Virtually all the city's business organizations and businessmen's clubs endorsed its efforts. In May 1928, the Board of Commerce collected signatures to put the issue before the voters. Over the summer months, nine charter club members were nominated as a charter review commission, and club members set up branch organizations in all fifty-three precincts in the city. Club members also held mass meetings, and spent unprecedented amounts on newspaper and radio advertisements. As one student of the charter revision club has said, "It was in fact a machine to end a machine."⁴⁶

Despite the hoopla, voter participation in the referendum of September 1928 was considerably less than in any of the five preceding municipal contests. Only thirty-eight percent of the eligible voters turned out, approving the establishment of a charter-writing commission by a two-to-one margin. This group took a year to prepare the document that eventually set up nonpartisan elections, a nine member City Commission, and an appointed city manager. In the interim, Mayor McKeighan lost his post to Roy Brownell, a former executive at Durant-Dort and Dort Motors and founder of the Industrial Mutual Association. As the establishment's candidate in the spring 1929 GOP primary, Brownell topped McKeighan after George Starkweather had thrown his hat in the ring, dividing the Mayor's usual constituency. Voter participation continued to decline in this contest and the subsequent general municipal election which formally ratified Roy Brownell's triumph. This trend was culminated in December 1929 when just sixteen percent of the city's eligible

⁴⁶ Harold Slyvester, "City Management: The Flint Experiment, 1930-37," unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Johns Hopkins University, 1938, pp. 9-10.

citizens went to the polls in the special election that actually approved the new charter.⁴⁷

Several conclusions can be drawn from this extended examination of local politics in Flint during the 1920s. First, it is clear that the appearance of the Ku Klux Klan threatened business class domination of public life far less than socialism had fifteen years earlier, and thus it did not draw the same kind of united business class opposition. In Flint, the Klan sought moral influence, not real power. Unlike the pre-World War I socialists, Flint's Klansmen had no clear vision of an alternative institutional structure for local society. Nor did they try to create a party of their own capable of challenging the hegemony of the GOP. Instead, the local Klan backed candidates within the Republican Party who seemed to share its own narrow, nativist vision of what was true American morality. In this sense, Ku Klux Klan discontent in Flint merely amplified political trends which had been already initiated by the ruling elite. This was especially true of its demands for 'Americanization' of foreigners, stricter enforcement of prohibition, and a crackdown on local vice. Of course, in its amplification of these political issues the Klan offered none of the paternalism that had traditionally softened the way business leaders approached social control. Yet, as the smooth transition of Judson Transue from Klan-backed candidate to establishment mayor revealed, there was no unbridgeable philosophical gulf separating Flint's business class from the majority of those residents who temporarily embraced the local Ku Klux Klan in

⁴⁷ Of the 8995 votes cast, only 5171 (fifty seven percent) approved the change.

the mid-1920s.⁴⁸

The Klan did not pose a fundamental threat to Flint's establishment because it was essentially a social organization, not a political movement. This point also helps to explain the transitory character of the KKK's presence in the Vehicle City. As a voluntary fraternity of native-born rural migrants, in its time, Flint's Klan met certain social needs of people who were new to the region and urban life. During the early and mid-1920s, when most newcomers were arriving from the lower Midwest and upper South and scattering themselves throughout the city, the Klan's rituals, parades, and picnics, as well as its politics, gave many migrants a feeling of community and connection with their common rural past. Hence, as long as its members felt uprooted, the Klan lived on. However, in the later 1920s, as migrants adjusted to their new circumstances, Michigan Klan membership dropped rapidly, and it never rebounded. By August 1927, when the last big Klororo (statewide Ku Klux Klan convention) was held in Flint, the decline was already evident. Although 5000 people turned out for a barbeque-rally in Kearsley Park, only 500 Klansmen from all over Michigan marched in the torchlight parade which was the meeting's highlight.⁴⁹ These figures indicate a dramatic drop in Klan strength in Flint and the state as a whole. In fact, this convention marked the last public appearance of Klansmen in Flint for

⁴⁸ This statement does not mean that Flint's leading businessmen held political views similar to those of the stereotypic Southern Klan. Rather, it is meant to describe the Klan that existed in Flint. As Norman Weaver emphasized in his study of the Midwestern KKK, each local unit (like the one in Flint) was virtually autonomous, deriving its specific political character from local circumstances. See Weaver, "Knights of the KKK," p. 301ff.

⁴⁹ Records of the Executive Office 1927-30, Fred W. Green Governor, Box 33, File 4 -- "Ku Klux Klan," Michigan State Archives, Lansing, Michigan; and Flint Weekly Review, September 2, 1927, p. 1.

forty years.⁵⁰

Judging by their political activity in the 1920s, Flint's leading businessmen certainly regarded William McKeighan as a more serious problem than the Ku Klux Klan. The time, money, and energy they expended in efforts to prevent him from gaining power far exceeded anything done to lessen the influence of the Klan. This conclusion should not be shocking. For in this era when business leaders were making a concerted effort to 'Americanize' local society, Klan politics were much less disruptive than McKeighan and his machine. Both as a political boss who represented toleration of ethnic differences and opposition to prohibition, and as a slightly disreputable public celebrity, William McKeighan personally defied the cultural and moral consensus which the local elite was trying to establish in Flint. Throughout the automobile boom, he endured as a political power because he managed to remain at least a symbolic alternative to the business class' demands for social conformity. In this sense, his successes defined the ultimate limits of normalcy.

Yet, it would hardly be accurate to describe McKeighan as a representative of a nascent working class-consciousness or a potential political Left. During this era, the political spectrum in Flint was truly one-dimensional. Republicans dominated elections (even more so in contest for state and national offices), and businessmen dominated the definition

⁵⁰ A handful of Klansmen appeared in Flint in September 1967 to protest racial desegregation. See Clippings Collection, "Ku Klux Klan," in Michigan Collections, State Library, Lansing. At its peak in 1924-25, Weaver estimated total Klan membership in Michigan may have reached 80,000 persons.

of politics in both parties.⁵¹ A Republican and entrepreneur himself, William McKeighan never challenged the economic interests or ideological position of other Flint businessmen. On the kind of basic issues that created real political divisions elsewhere -- like the maintenance of virtually unregulated free enterprise, opposition to industrial unionism, the provision of social insurance and welfare programs through private sources, and the appropriateness of business priorities in public policy making -- there was unanimous agreement among all Flint politicians. Thus, for more than fifteen years following the demise of the local Socialist Party, political competition in Flint was primarily factional, and trivial.

Instead of focusing the public's attention on questions about the proper role of government in a complex, developing industrial society as both John Menton and C.S. Mott had begun to do before World War I, postwar politicians obscured this critical problem. The politics of normalcy in Flint revolved around personalities, nativism, and individual morality, but not power. Neither the Ku Klux Klan or William McKeighan ever questioned the business class' right to monopolize economic and social decision-making. Consequently, despite the appearance of great controversy, politics changed very little in Flint during the 1920s. The power to develop industrial society and 'Americanize' its citizens was left in the hands of a business elite which was increasingly dominated by men who owed their ultimate allegiance to the General Motors Corporation.

⁵¹ In the 1920s, for example, Republican candidates held on to the traditionally Republican 6th District seat (which represented Flint, Lansing, and the farm areas between) winning an average of seventy-three percent of the vote. By comparison, in the period 1896 - 1916, the GOP victory margins averaged just fifty-four percent.

Gabriel Kolko has said modern America can "be understood as a class structure without decisive class conflict, a society that had limited conflict to smaller issues that were not crucial to the existing order".⁵² Though this description is much too rigid to apply to all twentieth century American history, it definitely fits Flint in the era known as normalcy.

III. In the Absence of Class Conflict: Industrial Relations in the 1920s

In Flint, the automobile boom was an era of unusual industrial peace. A large traditional industry, carriage and wagon-making, completely disappeared and, in its place, a new automobile industry which employed over 50,000 people in highly rationalized mechanized factories was created. Yet, throughout the period, there were no serious strikes or incidents of industrial protest. In addition, every attempt to establish an auto workers union in Flint ended in dismal failure.

There is no simple explanation for the absence of industrial hostilities during so many years of economic and social change. Of course, the way that high wages and the prospect of improving individual material living standards (and the emergence of truly mass-oriented consumer businesses) encouraged workers to embrace an instrumental view of their jobs is an important part of the answer. But it does not tell the whole story. Welfare capitalism also contributed to local industrial peace, though other things surely overshadowed its impact. As Sidney Fine has noted,

Welfare programs, at best, were of far less significance in determining the attitude of the GM worker toward his job than

⁵² "The Decline of American Radicalism in the Twentieth Century," in For a New America, p. 208.

the wages he received, the hours he toiled, the security of his position, and the conditions under which he labored.⁵³

Therefore, to understand the political culture of normalcy fully, and the apparent contradiction between the transformation of industry in Flint and the tranquility of its industrial relations, the terms of employment and conditions of work in the city's automobile plants must be examined more closely.

For fifty years, descriptions of work in the pre-Depression automobile industry have largely rested on observations originally made by officials and supporters of Detroit's unsuccessful, communist-led Auto Workers Union. From the publications, correspondence, and records of this ill-fated organization, a stark picture of workers exploited by low wages, a lack of job security, the speedup, and dangerous conditions emerges. The perceptions of Auto Workers Union stalwarts have been compressed and analyzed in more scholarly studies since Robert Dunn first published his Labor and Automobiles in 1929, but as a recent discussion shows, their fundamental critique of "the plight of the auto workers" is still readily accepted as accurate and compelling.⁵⁴

Unfortunately, the Auto Workers Union description never reflected the experiences or perceptions of most auto workers; that is why the organization consistently failed to enlist the allegiance of any significant group of workers. Throughout the 1920s, it remained a tiny band of class-conscious activists who had no regular contact with workers

⁵³ Sit Down: The General Motors Strike of 1936-37 (Ann Arbor, 1969), p. 27.

⁵⁴ Roger Keeran, "Communist Influence in the Automobile Industry, 1920-1933: Paving the Way for an Industrial Union," Labor History, XX, 20, Spring 1979, p. 190.

outside a few plants in Detroit.⁵⁵ More importantly, Auto Workers Union members and correspondents did not share the same values as most working people in the automotive production centers. They were a small island of committed union men and Marxists amid a sea of migrants who generally felt that moving to the city and taking a job in an automobile factory had improved their lives. For these reasons, the Auto Workers Union description of "the manifold grievances of the workers in the shops" must be treated with skepticism.⁵⁶

In Flint, where the Auto Workers Union unsuccessfully sought new members on several occasions during the 1920s, workers had no 'manifold grievances' against the company. There was no common sense of exploitation. Pay scales were kept high enough to attract needed labor; and though earnings fluctuated, in general material standards steadily improved during the decade.⁵⁷ Uncertainty about employment and earnings which stemmed from the cyclical character of the automotive market undoubtedly imposed hardships, especially in the early 1920s. "You can't ever tell how long the work will last in Flint," commented one married woman who was out looking for a job in 1925.⁵⁸ But this underlying sense of insecurity seems to have dramatically diminished in the later 1920s as the industry's business cycle stabilized and as the workers became more accustomed to that cycle.

⁵⁵ The AUW predecessor, the United Automobile, Aircraft, and Vehicle Workers Union, did claim as many as 45,000 members in 1920 (mostly in small shops among skilled workers). It completely collapsed in 1921-22, and was taken over and reorganized by communists in 1923-24. See Jack Skeels, "Early Carriage and Auto Unions: The Impact of Industrialization and Rival Unionism," Industrial and Labor Relations Review, XVII, 4, July, 1964.

⁵⁶ Keeran, "Communist Influence," p. 225.

⁵⁷ See Chapter Four, section IV for details.

⁵⁸ Women Workers in Flint, p. 21.

While a very small, class-conscious minority openly complained about the inherent insecurity of automobile work, in Flint, most workers accepted the seasonal rhythms of the industry. These working people ultimately viewed the annual layoff for model changeovers and periodic reductions in production schedules as a normal feature of full-time employment. The notion of "steady work" which cropped up throughout the National Recovery Administration's hearings in Flint in 1934 reveals how something described as a grievance by the Auto Workers Union had actually been deemed acceptable by most auto workers. "I never had a layoff until 1931," explained a machine operator who had started in Flint in 1924, and was the first witness to appear before the NRA committee.⁵⁹ Others, including two men whose experience predated World War I, noted in a very matter-of-fact way that they too had "always worked steady" until the Great Depression. Of course, these workers did not mean they had worked 50-52 weeks a year during the automobile boom. Instead, as further questioning showed, the prevailing definition of "steady work" had come to include regular layoffs and slack time.⁶⁰

By the mid-1920s, when the automobile boom was slowing down, most auto workers averaged 50 hours in a five and half day week, with weeks in excess of 60 hours not uncommon during peak production periods.⁶¹

⁵⁹ Interview with John Tischler, I, p. 6.

⁶⁰ See interviews with Edwin Meyers, Erwin Kiser, Rheinhold Draheim (NRA Hearings, I); and with Frank Davidson, George Langley, Lauri Nieminen, Carl Michael, Jasper Matthews (NRA Hearings, II) for variations on this theme.

⁶¹ Woman Workers in Flint, p. 17. In the auto plants, women workers put in slightly fewer hours than the men. The 48-50 hour week was most common. See "Women's Bureau Survey Material," RG 86, Bulletin 67 in the National Archives.

Though some skilled workers were employed year round, the production workforce was usually laid off for two months or more in the fall as factories retooled for the new model year. Looking back on the fluctuating pattern of auto work, labor historians have generally been quick to assume that uncertainty must have plagued auto workers throughout the 1920s, but this assumption may not be correct. In Flint at least, as annual earnings rose and industry production schedules were regularized, working people learned to plan ahead, drawing on savings, interest, and occasionally, the expanding pool of consumer credit to cushion temporary unemployment. In some families, the second income of a wife or older child would ease the economic burden of these anticipated layoffs.⁶² Hence, as the boom continued in the mid and later 1920s, layoffs did not automatically translate into a threat to family survival (as they often had in older, nineteenth century cities). Long periods without a paycheck surely caused hardships for some working people, especially those who were recent arrivals. Yet, others learned to use the released time to make repairs on the house, visit friends and relatives, and pursue leisure-time activities like hunting, fishing, and the family picnic. In fact, it seems likely that the opportunity to engage in outdoor sports and make trips back to the country eased the psychological strain of moving from a rural to an urban life. Certainly, routine layoffs provided periods of release from the tension of the factory.

The pace and discipline of work in the big, noisy plants could be

⁶² Though layoffs were not quite predictable, workers learned to expect them. Disgruntled workers often used layoffs to search for different jobs. See Chalmers, "Labor in the Automobile Industry," pp. 140-3.

oppressive, but auto workers who settled in Flint accepted these things as a necessary trade-off for being part of the emerging consumer society. Moreover, for several reasons, the detrimental aspects of mechanization and rationalization were not as severe as some union organizers and academic observers imagined at the time. First, despite the stereotype, less than one-fourth the labor force in most automobile factories were assigned to actual assembly line operations in the 1920s, a distribution that still held true a half century later.⁶³ Assembly groups and machine operators paid on a piece work plus bonus system were most numerous. Bench work remained important; however, it declined significantly between 1922 and 1930.⁶⁴ Piece work pay replaced day work after the recession of 1920-21. It had obvious drawbacks, yet high rates, some control over speed, and the social interaction among fellow workers made it bearable. Everett Francis, a Fisher Body trimmer later recalled, "Working in a body plant in the automobile industry up to and through 1929, I would say they could be called good working conditions."⁶⁵ The same thing could be said of most other auto plants in Flint. As long as workers reached their daily piece rate quotas, they were not pressed unmercifully by their supervisors. In fact, by switching to the group piece

⁶³ Fine, Sit Down, p. 54; and B.J. Widick, "Work in the Auto Plants: Then and Now" in Auto Work and its Discontents, edited by B.J. Widick (Baltimore, 1976).

⁶⁴ "The Effects of Technological Changes Upon Occupations in the Motor Vehicle Industry," Monthly Labor Review, XXXIV, February 1932, pp. 248-52; and Charles Reitell, "Machinery and its Effect Upon Workers in the Automotive Industry," Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science, CXVI, November 1924, p. 40.

⁶⁵ UAW Oral History Project Interview, October 13, 1961, p. 4. Also see Joyce Shaw Peterson, "Auto Workers and their Work, 1920-1933," Labor History XXII, 2, Spring 1981.

work plus bonus system, management had shifted much of the burden of pace determination and discipline to experienced lead workers.

The heavy flow of new workers into Flint throughout the automobile boom also lessened the impact of rationalization on a traditionally volatile segment of the labor force, the skilled workers. Simultaneous expansion and rationalization allowed General Motors to preserve the special status of its skilled workers while filling new, lesser skilled jobs with inexperienced workers. A contemporary student of this pattern observed,

the average wage earner with latent ability but no training is employed and taught some one operation, and in the repeated performance of this operation he becomes an expert. Employers assert that this does not remove the necessity for ability but encourages specialization in the individual.⁶⁶

Over the long run, plant managers in Flint were able to build up a young group of production workers who 'naturally' associated industrial work with Taylorism; it was all they had ever known. For them, rationalized work could be hard and monotonous, but it was not experienced as a degradation of craft skills. Consequently, the kind of serious labor disputes which often occurred when skilled workers were squeezed into lesser skilled jobs were avoided in Flint and many other automobile production centers.⁶⁷

⁶⁶ Mortimer LaFever, "Workers, Machinery, and Production in the Automobile Industry," Monthly Labor Review, XIX, 4, October 1924, p. 26.

⁶⁷ Chalmers found a general policy of hiring only young workers for production lines had emerged by the late 1920s ("Labor in the Automobile Industry," p. 144). He also reported that monotony was not a serious grievance among such workers (pp. 85-92); and that he was unable to uncover any strikes "by the really skilled men" in the years immediately preceding the Great Depression (p. 227).

Boom conditions diminished the chance of shopfloor labor disputes in another way too. The general availability of work in the Great Lakes region permitted workers who had grievances about conditions or discipline to 'strike with their feet' when problems arose. Young men with their own automobiles were particularly mobile. Throughout the 1920s, it was not uncommon for a dissatisfied auto worker (or a fired one) to simply pack up and move on to find another job in another automotive production center.⁶⁸ In this era, General Motors did not circulate blacklists or coordinate employee record-keeping among its divisions. Neither did the local Manufacturers Association. Thus, Flint's auto workers discovered they could change jobs easily, even if they had been fired after a serious dispute with management.⁶⁹ As a result, prior to the Great Depression, grievances seldom accumulated in a plant. Those which could not be settled individually by a worker and his immediate supervisors usually disappeared when that worker decided to quit or was fired.

On the shopfloor, there were additional reasons why rationalization seldom provoked industrial hostilities. Though production workers would

⁶⁸ Descriptions of this kind of mobility abound in the UAW Oral History Project. The background of Herbert Richardson, a union activist in the 1930s, was not uncommon. Born in Saginaw in 1898, Richardson moved to Flint when he finished high school. He took his first job at Chevrolet in 1917, quit and moved to another job at the Republic Truck factory in Alma, Michigan. In 1920, Richardson returned to Flint where he learned a trimmer's skills at Buick. In the next five years, he worked in Lansing, Grand Rapids, and Ionia, Michigan before taking a job at Flint's Fisher Body 2 in 1925. In 1927, Richardson moved over to Fisher Body 1 and remained there until fired for strike activity in 1930.

⁶⁹ For example, in July 1930, when twenty-three workers at Fisher Body 1 were fired for participation in the first plantwide shutdown in industry history, all twenty-three simply crossed town and got jobs at Fisher Body 2. In fact, when the UAW was recognized in 1937, twenty-two of these workers asked for and got reinstatement at Fisher Body 1. Interview with Herbert Richardson, July 10, 1960, UAW Oral History Project, pp. 4-6.

not strike at the sight of a time-study man in their midst, they could confuse the efficiency experts by holding down outputs to keep a job within their physical and mental limits. Most commonly, groups of workers agreed on a pace and ways to avoid ever appearing idle. As William Chalmers concluded after years of study and actual factory work experience in the later 1920s, "There is no doubt that the workers in the automobile industry as elsewhere attempt to regulate the speed at which they work."⁷⁰

Foremen tried to subvert these worker strategies by appointing people they trusted to the crucial "lead man" position. The tensions on the shopfloor were real, but mitigated by the diffused, personal character of management authority in personnel matters. In most auto plants, including those in Flint, foremen had the power to adjust piece rates, set quotas, improve conditions, and hear grievances. Moreover, as long as the boom endured, lower echelon management's principal personnel problem was turnover, not efficiency.⁷¹ Top management urged supervisors and managers to win the loyalty of their employees instead of driving them away with a relentless speedup.

The factory manager's most important duty then, is training the average workman to realize the importance of his position and the vital part he plays in the manufacture of the article, explained Chevrolet's general factory manager in the inaugural volume of the management-oriented Chevrolet Review.⁷²

⁷⁰ "Labor in the Automobile Industry," p. 160.

⁷¹ Turnover remained a significant problem in Flint as late as 1928. For figures see: O.W. Blackett, "Factory Labor Turnover in Michigan," Michigan Business Studies, II, 1, November 1928, pp. 13 and 30.

⁷² F.W. Hohensee, "Our Men and Our Methods," Chevrolet Review, I, 3, June 1917, p. 7 (in the Sloan Museum).

During the 1920s in Flint, plant managers tried to earn worker loyalty by promoting a sense of community among their employees. Building on the paternalistic traditions of local industry, General Motors' officials organized company bands and sports teams which participated in citywide competitions, and intramural leagues for the less talented. Shop newspapers, like The Buick News: Published in the Interest of the Entire Buick Family and Chevrolet's Accelerator: For Our Mutual Betterment, publicized these activities, news about welfare and safety programs, and an endless stream of articles extolling the need for greater cooperation in the factory. In addition, companies sponsored special events such as picnics and patriotic displays. One such affair, a "Defense Day" parade in September 1924, drew 60,000 marchers, 15,000 from Buick alone, who were solicited by volunteers in the plants.⁷³

Managers also tried to minimize uncertainty about layoffs and rationalization. At the shopfloor level, supervisors and foremen could be arbitrary about whom to layoff and rehire, but it seems that informal seniority existed in most plants, except where men advancing in age were deemed unfit for work on the line.⁷⁴ In the 1920s, length of service raised wage rates and earnings too. Of course, under the piece work system, earnings improved as a worker became more proficient at a job. But, in addition, base rates for experienced workers were raised throughout

⁷³ Buick News, October 19, 1924, p. 1. The accompanying article stated the primary purpose of the demonstration was "showing the whole world that Uncle Sam still had the man power and spirit to back American policies and American traditions."

⁷⁴ Even then, older men were not necessarily fired; often they were shifted to jobs requiring less speed, agility, and strength. See Chalmers, "Labor in the Automobile Industry," pp. 140ff.

the decade. By 1928-29, piece rates for experienced semi-skilled workers in Flint were calculated on a base pay as high as \$1.00 to \$1.10 per hour.⁷⁵ This trend followed corporate policy. As part of his initial reforms in the early 1920s, GM president Alfred Sloan told his managers to create pay systems which tied wage increases to productivity gains.⁷⁶ In Flint, this policy was implemented by expanding piece work to cover all but the highest and lowest skilled categories of labor. Under that system, as long as the automobile boom lasted, most workers received considerable material incentive to cooperate with management's continuing effort to rationalize production.

Improving earnings, welfare capitalism, individual geographic mobility, increasingly "steady work", and a general feeling that working conditions were satisfactory prevented the growth of any widespread labor discontent in Flint's automobile industry prior to 1930.⁷⁷ However, on occasions when changing economic activity put pressure on management to hold down labor costs, piece work disputes did break out in a few departments in the big plants. This kind of problem most often occurred in the body shops where the tradition of vehicle-building was strongest, and thus, where the impact of rationalization was perceived

⁷⁵ The U.S. Department of Labor's study, Women Workers in Flint, done in 1925, clearly shows that longer service increased earnings. At the time, a sample of workers with less than one year experience earned just over half the weekly wage of workers in the same category who had more than five years on the job (p. 22). Base rate figures from interview with Fisher Body trimmer Everett Francis, UAW Oral History Project, p. 4. Francis' recollection is supported by evidence from NRA Hearings which is summarized in "Exhibit 19: Preliminary Report" previously cited.

⁷⁶ Adventures of a White Collar Man, p. 144.

⁷⁷ Working conditions were never a major grievance, even among Auto Workers Union organizers. When Department of Labor investigators surveyed conditions in all of Flint's major factories in late 1925, they

as an attack on skill and status as well as a speedup.⁷⁸ Yet, GM management contained all of these disputes, even when workers received help from union organizers.

The first fifteen years of the automobile boom in Flint were virtually free of strikes and union activity. In 1911, when the A.F. of L.'s old Carriage and Wagon Workers Union reorganized itself to penetrate the newest vehicle industry, a few veteran skilled workers expressed an interest in setting up a Flint local, but nothing ever came of it. During the war boom, though living conditions deteriorated, Flint workers apparently had few grievances about the demands made on them in the factories. The files of the National War Labor Board contain just a single letter of protest about low wages for skilled workers and women at Buick, and there is no record of any strikes.⁷⁹

In the immediate aftermath of the war, an auto workers' union did manage to gain a foothold in the Buick body shops. Local 9 of United Automobile, Aircraft, and Vehicle Workers of America had been established in April 1919 with thirty-three charter members, mostly skilled topmakers.⁸⁰

found the lighting, heat, and first aid facilities generally satisfactory. Their biggest complaint concerned dirty washtooms and unsanitary drinking fountains (Women Workers in Flint, pp. 35 - 9). Other data indicates that while auto work was undeniably dangerous, it was less so than most manufacturing industries, and that its dangers were being significantly reduced in Flint during the 1920s. (Flint Weekly Review, Labor Day Edition 1923, section 3, p. 7).

⁷⁸ In Flint, four of the five recorded strikes during the 1920s involved piece work disputes in a body shop. Information reported to the Auto Workers Union shows 10 of the 26 strikes in the industry between 1926 and 1928 occurred in body plants. See Henry Kraus Collection, Box I "Pre AFL Period," WSU.

⁷⁹ Case File 406, Washington National Records Center, Suitland, Maryland (hereafter cited as NRC).

⁸⁰ The Auto Worker: Official Journal of the United Automobile, Aircraft, and Vehicle Workers of America, I, 2, June 1919, p. 4. The

For the next ten months, union organizers found recruiting difficult. At its peak, in the summer of 1919, Local 9 appears to have had about five hundred active members. In part, workers resisted the opportunity because shop newspapers made it clear that management would not deal with the union. Moreover, information circulated slowly. Both major newspapers, including the Federation of Labor's Flint Weekly Review, would not carry UAAVWA announcements, and local police harassed union members who tried to sell the Detroit based Auto Worker on the streets.⁸¹ By early 1920, as the postwar boom continued, Local 9 was losing ground. Remaining members hoped to revive the organization and gain an anti-inflationary wage increase by threatening a strike. Against the wishes of union leaders, about one hundred workers struck on February 2, 1920 when supervisors upped minimum production standards. For two weeks, the strike remained solid. However, it was broken after personal visits by their foremen convinced about two dozen rough-stuff rubbers and backhangers to return to work. In the wake of this disappointment, the UAAVWA collapsed in Flint. As the national roganization reported in June 1920, "many of the most active members of Local No. 9 of Flint, Michigan have left the city, rather than work for automobile concerns that are unfair to their workers."⁸²

UAAVWA had been formed out of the old Carriage and Wagon Workers Union after that organization was expelled from the A. F. of L. for insisting on its right to set up an industrial auto workers union.

⁸¹ The Auto Worker I, 3, July 1919, p. 14 and I, 5, p. 13. Police harassment reported in "Notes from the Auto Workers News," Box 1, Edward Levinson Collection, WSU.

⁸² The Auto Worker, II, 6, p. 14. President W.A. Logan told delegates to the union's Cleveland convention in September 1920 that "practically ninety percent" of the strikers had left Flint. See "Convention Proceedings of the 6th Biennial Convention," p. 16-24, WSU.

For the next seven years, not even a token organizational effort was made among the auto workers of Flint. The open shop prevailed throughout the Vehicle City. Alexander Cook, who arrived at Fisher Body 1 in 1926, recalled,

There were no union men in the plant at that time. There were occasionally a few building tradesmen, but there was no agreement. There was not much talk about the need for a union at that time.⁸³

As Cook's comments reveal, the mid-1920s, a period of improving economic conditions, expanded welfare capitalism, and continued public discussion of 'Americanization', was no time to organize a union. Thus, it is not surprising that the only mass job action of the era had nothing to do with union activity.

This remarkable event occurred on Armistice Day, 1925. It had a lot more in common with the "Defense Day" celebration (which had been held two months earlier) than a genuine strike. It began early in the morning when several Chevrolet workers carrying two large flags and snare drums marched through the factory, encouraging some workers to drop their tools. Marchers then continued onto Buick and A.C. Sparkplug. Police were warned that a riot was imminent, but company officials got on the phones, shut all the plants, and rapidly organized a patriotic parade and demonstration downtown. Stopping at City Hall, the marchers were addressed by Mayor Transue. Led by I.M.A. director William Power, what was by then a very large crowd, moved over to Athletic Park for more speeches and the singing of patriotic anthems. The day ended with the circulation of petitions to Congress to have November 11th declared a national holiday. It was a labor demonstration even the staunchly anti-labor Flint Daily Journal

⁸³ UAW Oral History Project interview, August 31, 1960, p. 1, emphasis added.

could praise.⁸⁴

By the end of the decade, the leveling off of automobile sales began to affect local industrial relations. In 1928, brief job actions by Fisher Body 1 metal finishers in January, and semi-skilled machine operators at AC in March broke the city's long industrial peace. These limited work stoppages blocked management attempts to cut wages and raise production through piece rate adjustments. As such, they were the first sign that workers would resist efforts to adapt the workshop to the saturation of the new car market if it meant lower earnings and a speedup.⁸⁵

A more serious strike by 200 Buick oil sanders erupted in July 1928. On this occasion, piece rate cuts and a degradation of materials (oil and sandpaper) prompted these semi-skilled workers to walk off the job, put out a picket line, and send to Detroit for help from the Auto Workers Union. Strike leaders also tried to get advice from local Federation of Labor officials, but they were turned away because the officials believed that the walkout "was caused and conducted by a group of Communists."⁸⁶ For twelve days of the strike, the National Conciliation Service officer on the scene accepted this judgement and also refused to speak directly with strike leaders. Conciliation Commissioner Marchman wrote his superiors,

I felt that if these men were recognized by a representative

⁸⁴ Flint Daily Journal, November 11, 1925, p. 1ff; and UAW Oral History Project interview with Ted LaDuke, p. 2.

⁸⁵ Clippings from the Auto Workers News, Box 1, Henry Kraus Collection; and Box 1, Robert Dunn Collection, WSU. Also see Flint, Car Culture, pp. 161-8.

⁸⁶ B.M. Marshman to Hugh L. Kerwin, Director of Conciliation, July 23, 1928 in Records of the National Conciliation Service, Case No. 170-4544, NRC.

of the Department they might possibly use it to intimidate others and probably do more harm than good.⁸⁷

In the meantime, Auto Workers Union organizers who had rushed to Flint, used the occasion to hold meetings, distribute literature, and establish a small group of members. Fearing a spread of the strike (which after all involved just four-tenths of one percent of GM's labor force in the city), management gave in to the oil sanders' demand.⁸⁸ For a few months after this dispute, AWU organizers continued to make appearances in Flint, but the union's members never formed a functional local. By year's end, despite the official AWU claim that they were "carrying on a quiet campaign to build up the Flint Local," the Auto Workers Union had disappeared from the Vehicle City.⁸⁹

In May 1929, another piece rate dispute led to a spontaneous walkout by Fisher Body 1 sanders. But whereas the job actions and strike of 1928 had won concessions from surprised supervisors, in 1929, Fisher Body's plant manager overruled his foreman (who was ready to give in and restore the status quo), telling dissident workers he would rather fire them and rely on inventories than settle on their terms.⁹⁰ This display of firmness was effective. It ended the strike on management's terms. It also presaged the company's position in the Great Depression which was about to descend on the city. Yet until that time, there were no more departmental strikes in Flint.

⁸⁷ Marshman to Kerwin.

⁸⁸ Auto Workers News, August 1928, p. 1-2, (WSU); and Case No. 170 - 4544.

⁸⁹ "Report of the General Executive Secretary, UAAVWA, 1928" in Box 2, Dunn Collection, WSU.

⁹⁰ Auto Workers News, June. 1929.

The small, widely scattered labor disputes which punctuate the history of industrial relations in Flint during the 1920s do not give credence to the notion that pre-Depression auto workers shared a common set of grievances. Though it is tempting to see a trend in these minor incidents, they cannot be called forerunners of the massive labor conflicts of the Depression era. The few hundred semi-skilled workers, who at one time or another, dared to slow down the pace of rationalization hardly represented 'a revolt from below'. Tens of thousands of other workers never showed the slightest public inclination to join a union or go out on strike. In other words, it was the general absence of working class-consciousness and class conflict, not a few isolated piece work disputes, which defined the character of industrial relations in years of normalcy.

However, something more must be said to fill the void left by the negative description, "absence of working class-consciousness." Among the working people who never struck or joined a union were many workers who did turn out for patriotic parades and demonstrations, and company celebrations like Buick's 25th anniversary, and event which attracted 125,000 people to Flint's Kearsley Park just two weeks after the strike by 200 oil snaders. If sheer numbers are representative, then events like these are a far better measure of the consciousness of Flint's working people than the history recorded by the Auto Workers Union..

Clearly, the improving circumstances of everyday life during the automobile boom provided the foundation for normalcy in both politics and industrial relations. Once the Great Depression undercut those improvements, normalcy was shattered by real class conflict. However,

Flint's working people did not simply forget their everyday experience of normalcy when the 'steady work,' high wages, and decent working conditions upon which they had based hopes were stripped from them in the hard years 1930-1933. Instead, in the factories, individual recollections of life prior to the Great Depression coalesced into a kind of collective memory which energized and gave direction to the growth of local working class consciousness and labor militance.

CHAPTER SIX

THE DELUGE: THE BREAKDOWN OF NORMALCY IN FLINT DURING THE GREAT DERRESSION

The Buick automobile company is the backbone of the industrial life of Flint . . . In August, the Buick factory closed down completely. City officials do not know when part-time operations will be resumed.

--Official request by State of
Michigan for an emergency RFC
loan for Flint, September 1932

I. A Sign of Things to Come: the Fisher Body Strike of 1930

The Great Depression quickly undermined the economic foundations of normalcy in Flint. As a major automotive production center, the city was extremely vulnerable to the collapse of consumer buying power which followed the panic of 1929-30. Falling demand for cars forced local employers to cut the size of their workforces during the annual model change, and put other workers on extended layoff. In the big factories, rationalization of production was pursued with unprecedented vigor. At the same time, wages were cut. Everett Francis, the Fisher Body 1 trimmer, recalled,

The effects of the depression . . . were felt in our plant early in 1930, when apparently the corporation anticipated less business because of the stock market crash and tried to compensate for their loss by cutting the piecework rates of employees and notifying them that they must increase

their pace to maintain their earnings.¹

In practice, it proved virtually impossible to keep wages up to pre-Depression standards because management constantly adjusted base rates and work process to achieve lower labor costs. So whether they worked or lost their jobs, the industrial working people of Flint almost immediately felt the economic collapse destroy the hopes for a better material life which they had nurtured in the 1920s.

The critical everyday problems which plagued auto workers during the early years of the Great Depression--unemployment and insecurity, declining earnings, and the notorious speedup--also destroyed the deferential social order of normalcy. In Flint (and many other industrial cities across the Midwest), the most significant Depression era political development was the organization of a working class strong enough to threaten the business class monopoly over economic and political decision-making, and cohesive enough to institutionalize its presence in society. The fact that this working class and the New Deal it helped to foster proved to be neither revolutionary nor socialist, should not obscure its historical significance. Out of the bitterness and violence that marked so many local confrontations during those turbulent years, a new kind of political-economy (in which the Federal government and organized labor played much bigger roles) emerged.

In Flint, angry, disillusioned working people first appeared on the streets in the spring of 1930. Local unemployment rose very quickly during the winter, especially at Buick. The venerable division's sales

¹ UAW Oral History project interview with Everett Francis, p. 5.

had been falling slowly since 1926, and very rapidly after the stock market crash.² During its model change, many workers were simply released unconditionally. Similar cuts took place at other General Motors divisions. Officially, unemployment in the local automobile industry swelled to eleven percent by census-taking time. In the hard hit construction industry, it topped twenty-five percent of the local labor force.³ From Detroit, the communist leaders of the Auto Workers Union saw a new opportunity for working class organization in these figures. Even though it had no regular membership in Flint, the AWU included the city on the list of places where it sponsored unemployment protest marches on March 6th. Led by AWU president Phil Raymond, a crowd of 15,000 people walked from Chevrolet to City Hall under banners proclaiming, "Don't Starve - Fight" and "Work or Wages". Local authorities, shocked by the sudden demonstration of mass dissent, cracked down instantly. Police dispersed the crowd, arrested all six known AWU members, and held them without formal charges.⁴ The open display of force, heartily

² By 1929, Buick sales were off 29% from the 1926 peak of 268,000 units. One year later, they had fallen to just 122,000 vehicles, a decline of 56% from the pre-Depression peak. See Alfred P. Sloan, My Years with General Motors, pp. 446-7.

³ All totaled more than 7000 Flint workers were unemployed in 1930. See Fifteenth Census of the United States: 1930: Unemployment Volume I (GPO, 1931), pp. 500 and 518.

⁴ When questioned about these arrests at a Congressional hearing, Police Chief Caesar Scarvarda, a veteran of the State Police intervention in the copper strikes of 1913 and a close political ally of William McKeighan, answered frankly, "There is not any particular law that we can act on... it was just simply a matter of preventing disorder which would naturally have resulted." Investigation of Communist Propaganda: Hearings before a Special Committee to Investigate Communist Activity in the United States - Pursuant to H. Res. 220, IV, 1, July 25 and 26, 1930, pp. 1 - 3. Also see Keeran, "Communist Influence in the Automobile Industry," p. 225.

endorsed by the local press, seemed to have the desired effect. The Auto Workers Union was unable to set up a local in Flint. Moreover, the next hunger march on May 1, 1930 drew only twenty-five participants, and again, police arrested all of its AWU organizers arbitrarily.⁵ Without testing any other alternatives, a predilection for answering mass protest with repression had been established. Just two months later, it would be confirmed in the first serious strike of the decade.

At nine o'clock in the morning of July 1, 1930, several hundred semi-skilled auto workers in Flint's Fisher Body 1 metal finishing and trim departments walked off their jobs. Just a week earlier, management had announced the start of plantwide piece work revisions which raised production quotas and lowered base rates. As Buick's body supplier, Fisher Body 1 was being forced to retrench right along with the car division. Plant manager R.J. Whiting described the program as "wage readjustments required by changes in the models in production."⁶ Workers called it a speedup. Throughout the plant, they were ordered to produce more per day for less pay. Metal finishers and trimmers, two of the highest paid groups of production workers, tried the new system, but could not earn the one dollar plus per hour which had been customary. Supervisors ignored their complaints. A few days after the new rates took effect, workers in both departments spontaneously struck to protest the change.

The huge plant remained open that first morning of the strike.

⁵ Testimony of Police Chief Scarvarda, Investigation of Communist Propaganda, p. 3. Federation of Labor leader Starkweather praised police intervention in the first hunger march, editorializing, "Why, if they are not allowed to hold protest meetings in Russia are they sent over here to stir us up?" Flint Weekly Review, March 14, 1930, p. 2.

⁶ New York Times, July 4, 1930, p. 2.

Excited metal finishers and trimmers met a short distance away at the Dixie Dance Hall, and attempted to get organized. Help came from the outside in a hurry. At the start of the strike, someone had instantly notified the Auto Workers Union in Detroit. Within two hours, a delegation led by Phil Raymond, the union's president, arrived at the hall ready to offer advice and recruit new members.⁷ Through their hastily selected spokesman, Cecil Comstock, the strikers had already announced that they wanted the piece rate cuts rolled back, but they had no plan of action. Raymond and his fellow AWU organizers provided temporary leadership which quickly escalated this departmental walkout into the industry's first-ever plantwide strike.

Shortly after noon, the strikers moved back to Fisher Body 1. Urged on by Raymond and Comstock, they entered the factory and marched from one department to another inviting other workers to join them. The speed-up had already disaffected a large part of this predominantly young workforce, so the strikers received an enthusiastic response to their call for solidarity.⁸ In the uproar, most of the first shift joined the walkout. Plant manager Whiting locked out the rest, and closed the plant to the second shift. At least 3600 workers had struck Fisher Body 1. All

⁷ Raymond had been elected president in May after the AWU was re-organized and affiliated with the Trade Union Unity League.

⁸ As the last major plant to open in the city before the Great Depression, Fisher Body 1's workforce best reflected GM's increasing emphasis on recruiting youthful workers. Police Chief Scarvarda testified that the strikers "forced everyone to cease working." He also claimed workers deliberately scratched car bodies and threw tools at the unsympathetic. (Investigation of Communist Propaganda, pp. 4-5). No other contemporary account corroborates the Police Chief's testimony on this point. It seems likely that Chief Scarvarda embellished his recollections of the strike to appeal to the obvious anti-radical prejudices of the House Committee.

totaled, the combined strike-lockout idled more than 7500 persons.⁹

That afternoon, while supervisors shut down the plant, a large crowd gathered outside Fisher Body 1. Once assembled, they paraded across town to the Buick plant where Auto Workers Union organizers hoped to spread the strike. A caravan of automobiles preceded the strikers and their supporters, attracting more people to the demonstration at Buick. By the time the marchers reached the gates of the giant complex, the crowd had swelled to more than 15,000 demonstrators. At this point, during the Buick shift change, Flint police intervened, arresting three AWU officials and "a few local boys" who tried to protect them.¹⁰ To avoid a confrontation which could break the strike before it was organized, Comstock and Raymond encouraged the strikers to disperse and reassemble at the Dixie Dance Hall for a mass meeting. The hall was just across the city limits, making it a temporary refuge from expected police interference.

This first mass meeting was well attended. AWU organizers circulated through the group, signing up hundreds of new members. AWU radicals also dominated the proceedings, offering advice based on prior experience and preparation. A large strike committee of 120 workers and union officials was elected. The whole process of organizing the strike along democratic lines inspired optimism and a willingness to follow up other suggestions made by the tiny band of union representatives. F.R. Palmer, a young

⁹ Whiting admitted to 3600 strikers ("Federated Press Central Bureau, Sheet 2, 0707, Box 1, William Ellison Chalmers Collection, WSU). Cecil Comstock claimed 4500 (New York Times, July 4).

¹⁰ Testimony of Police Chief Scarvarda, p. 6; and Flint Daily Journal, July 2, 1930, p. 1.

worker who had been laid off more than four months during the 1930 model change remembered,

I was very naive and knew nothing about unionism or unions . . . we had a meeting and elected a committee and did everything very democratically and we felt very confident.¹¹

Cecil Comstock, a moderate who would not join the communist-dominated Auto Workers, was elected strike committee chairman, but initially, union officials exercised greater influence.

On the second day of the strike, Wednesday July 2nd, the groundwork for confrontation was laid. The strike committee issued an expanded list of demands which conformed closely to the official AWU platform. In addition to rolling back piece rate cuts, the strikers now asked management for guaranteed minimum wages for men and women, equal pay for equal work, a guaranteed forty hour week, and improvements in conditions.¹² The prominence of women workers' demands here reflected both an Auto Workers Union commitment and the fact that women from the upholstery shops had been active in the strike since the first spontaneous walkout. In an attempt to broaden their base of support, moderates on the strike committee solicited assistance from the Flint Federation of Labor, but they were rebuffed. Local A.F. of L. officials refused to step into the conflict unless the strikers broke all contact with the Auto Workers Union. A friend of George Starkweather who was involved in this appeal

¹¹ UAW Oral History Project interview with F.R. "Jack" Palmer, July 23, 1960, p. 4. The Creation of a large strike committee in which their members were a minority was the favored tactic of AWU leaders. See James R. Prickett, "Communists and the Automobile Industry in Detroit before 1935," Michigan History, LVII, 3, Fall, 1973, p. 193.

¹² Strike demands are listed in "Federated Press Central Bureau," Sheet 2, 0708. The AWU platform is described in "Application for Membership," Investigation of Communist Propaganda, p. 8.

recollected,

He [Starkweather] gave me advice. He did not give me any help. He advised me, some of the building tradesman did too, that it [the AWU] was a left-wing outfit and so on and so forth.¹³

Publicly, Starkweather denounced Raymond and the other AWU organizers as "Russians, Bulgarians, and Whatnots . . . a bunch of howling REDS that can't even talk United States good enough so that the average man can understand them."¹⁴

The rabid anti-communism displayed by Flint's business-unionists was not unusual. Rather it represented the official response of all elements of the local establishment to the Fisher Body strike. Plant manager R.J. Whiting refused to meet with representatives of the strikers claiming "this entire trouble had developed from the activities of foreign agitators and communists from Detroit, Pontiac, and Chicago."¹⁵ He announced that the plant would reopen on Friday, July 3rd. The strike committee called for mass picketing to block the plant's entrances in the morning. Police Chief Scarvarda readied his men, and notified the State Police that they might need additional manpower. At five a.m. on July 3rd, when approximately 1500 pickets turned out at Fisher Body 1, thirty-five State troopers reinforced the local police on the scene. In addition, Governor Green was asked to put the local National Guard on alert.¹⁶ A decision to break an auto workers strike with force, something that had never happened before in Flint, was made.

¹³ UAW Oral History interview with Alexander Cook, August 31, 1960, p. 7.

¹⁴ Frontpage editorial, Flint Weekly Review, July 4, 1930.

¹⁵ Flint Daily Journal, July 2, p. 1.

¹⁶ Testimony of Chief Scarvarda, p. 9; Flint Daily Journal, July 3, p. 1; New York Times, July 4, p. 2.

Striking women workers led the long picket line towards Fisher Body 1 shortly after dawn on July 3rd. Club-wielding state and local police took up positions to deny the pickets access to the plant gates. At this point, men replaced the women at the front of the picket line, and attempted to move ahead. A scuffle erupted, breaking the tension. The police began to use their clubs freely, and the strikers scattered. About twenty persons, including Phil Raymond and Louise Morrison of the Auto Workers Union, were arrested. Fisher Body 1 opened, but of the 1200 people who reported for work that day, just seventy were production line workers.¹⁷ The violence of the morning raised questions about continued AWU leadership among moderates on the strike committee, but the strike continued. Indeed, a combined mass meeting and picnic was scheduled for Sunday, July 6th. However, while the plant was closed for the holiday weekend, more repressive measures were used to shatter the strikers' already fragile unity.

Most importantly, Flint police selectively terrorized AWU organizers and their supporters. At four a.m. on July 4th, the home of AWU sympathizer John Werner was raided. Policemen arrested Werner and two eighteen year old members of the Communist Party's Young Pioneers who were part of the Auto Workers' organizing team in Flint. A pistol, mimeograph machine and AWU records and literature were seized. At police headquarters, Chief Scarvarda selected fifty names at random from the 581 union membership cards taken in the raid. These people were picked up and brought downtown for questioning. A U.S. Immigration Service inspector was even called on to search the seized records for the names of those whom the

¹⁷ Flint Daily Journal, July 3, p. 1. Contemporary accounts vary on the number of arrested. The New York Times reported a total of twenty-five; the Flint Daily Journal claimed just nineteen.

the Flint Daily Journal described an "non-citizen strike agitators."¹⁸

Police-state tactics and the press reports which continued to brand the strike "RED" confused and demoralized many workers. F.R. ('Jack') Palmer, the South Dakota-born production worker who was just twenty-two at the time recollected,

It flabbergasted me as a kid because everything I read in the papers stated we were communists or something. I didn't even know what a communist was then.¹⁹

Cecil Comstock, leader of the initial 'spontaneous' strike, was also troubled by the new turn of events. Flint Federation of Labor leaders had told him that the company might meet with a delegation of strikers if they renounced the Auto Workers Union and expelled its official committee. However, if the AWU remained, there was absolutely no chance for negotiation.²⁰ On Saturday July 5th, Comstock ruptured the solidarity of the strike by publicly repudiating the Auto Workers Union while he announced the formation of an Automobile Workers Association of Flint. A new executive committee of ten men and one woman was elected at a hastily arranged meeting at the Dixie Dance Hall. One member explained that the AWU organizers had been sent back to Detroit because, "They showed us how to organize ourselves and that is the only use we had for them." Of course, by this time, most of the union's strike contingent had not retreated to Detroit; they were in the Flint city jail.²¹

¹⁸ July 7, 1930, p. 3; testimony of Chief Scarvarda, pp. 9-12.

¹⁹ AWU Oral History Project Interview, p. 4.

²⁰ On July 3rd, F.F.L. officials also took it upon themselves to advise National Conciliation officer Marshman that he need not come to Flint because the strike was communist-led and was under control. These matters revealed in Case No. 170-5721, Records of the National Conciliation Service.

²¹ Flint Daily Journal, July 5, p. 2. On July 5th, Flint police were holding twenty-three organizers and strikers without charges.

AWU leaders later denounced Comstock's actions as treachery and "the social fascist policy," but he seems to have had the support of the majority of the strikers.²² The spontaneous character of the original walkout now resurfaced. At the inaugural meeting of their shortlived independent association, the strikers scaled down their demands to a single idea; a "living wage". Essentially their definition of a living wage recalled the everyday material expectations of normalcy. They described it as,

such wage as will support a family in reasonable circumstances, allowing for schooling of children, paying for homes, life insurance, medical and dental services, and pay for their bills contracted for food, clothing, and other necessities.²³

For this living wage--a demand which reflected a basic willingness to live within the system if it delivered an 'American standard of living'--most of the strikers resolved to continue their protest. Official Flint responded with an offer, and more force.

Strike committee members met with plant manager Whiting at police headquarters on the afternoon of July 5th. Mr. Whiting offered to guarantee daily earnings at 1929 rates for six months but only if workers accepted the increased speed of production. He refused to put anything in writing, or spell out the particulars of the proposed piece rate scale. The strike committee reiterated its demands, this time with specifics about the rates and hours they expected for various categories of work. The parties reached no agreement, nor did they make any further

²² Jack Stachel, "Coming Struggles and Strike Strategy," The Communist, X, 3, March 1931, pp. 211-2. UAW Oral History Project interview with Philip Raymond, January 14, 1960, is flawed by factual confusion and obvious bitterness towards Chief Scarvarda.

²³ Statement of the executive committee, Flint Daily Journal, July 5, p. 2.

plans to seek one.²⁴

The next day, Sunday, July 6th, state and local police descended on the Dixie Dance Hall, breaking up a mass meeting which was scheduled to follow the strikers' holiday picnic. Fleeing workers were pursued relentlessly by state troopers who refused to let them stop and gather.. Additional arrest were made. The last remnants of the group were actually chased across the Oakland Country line, eighteen miles from Flint.²⁵

Monday morning when Fisher Body 1 reopened, police patrolled the streets around the plant preventing attempts to establish a picket line. Ten more dissident workers were arrested on the official pretext that "all gatherings of the strikers were regarded as 'unlawful assemblies' and were subject to police discipline."²⁶ About 3100 workers returned to work on July 7th. R.J. Whiting proclaimed the strike over. Strikers were told they could report for work, but some would be called in for "personal interviews". To encourage them, Whiting also ordered his personnel director to start taking applications from the unemployed.²⁷

This last pressure tactic, a weapon management would be able to use against dissidents throughout the 1930s, finally broke the strike. On Tuesday, July 8th, more than 5000 workers returned to their jobs, and no

²⁴ These particulars are recorded in the July 6th Flint Daily Journal under the banner headline "Strike Leaders Oppose Peace Plan." In his UAW Oral History Project interview, Al Cook described brief additional meetings between strike representatives and Governor Green and Edward and Laurence Fisher (pp. 3-4). These meetings are not mentioned in other accounts of the strike.

²⁵ Testimony of Chief Scarvarda, p. 11; and Flint Daily Journal, July 7, p. 1

²⁶ Flint Daily Journal, July 7, p. 3 All totaled, at least forty-nine people were arrested and held during the strike without being formally charged.

²⁷ Flint Daily Journal, July 8, p. 1.

pickets appeared outside the plant. The next day, Fisher Body 1 resumed completely normal operations. Workers found the same conditions they had left. Settlement of grievances was left up to departmental supervisors. Twenty-three strikers, including Cecil Comstock and several women from the upholstery shop, were dismissed. Comstock's association of Flint auto workers simply disintegrated, and Comstock himself left town after a short tenure at Fisher Body 2.²⁸ As a worker protest against Depression-inspired conditions, the strike had failed completely.

Since it produced neither a permanent auto workers union nor a long list of physical casualties, the Fisher Body strike of 1930 had long been overshadowed by the momentous General Motors sit-down strike which established the UAW-CIO six and a half years later. Given the traditional interest of labor historians in strikes which either made or broke workers' organizations, this neglect is understandable. Yet, when the lesser incident is considered from a different perspective as a public indication of how a Great Depression could change society, it takes on the significance of a 'watershed' event in local history. The Fisher Body strike dramatically marked the beginnings of an upheaval that would ultimately destroy normalcy and replace it with a political-economy which provided a place for organized labor and regulated class conflict.

The institutional dimensions of this turbulent transformation would not become clear for many years to come. Nonetheless, by the summer of 1930, something had changed. When the Great Depression began to undermine the essential economic underpinnings of normalcy, auto workers

²⁸ UAW Oral History Project interviews with Herbert Richardson (p. 4) and Al Cook (p. 5); and Flint Daily Journal, July 9, p. 1. Plant manager Whiting was transferred out of Flint soon after the strike ended.

forcefully demonstrated a willingness to act together to protect the quality of their lives. Resistance to the company's 'belt-tightening' policies came first at Fisher Body 1 because of the plant's economic vulnerability, and because its relatively new workforce had no close personal ties to management. As we have seen, from start to finish, the strike reflected an independent indigenous response to the Great Depression, not a commitment to the preformed ideologies of existing labor unions. Both radical and conservative union leaders gave advice and organizational assistance to the strikers, yet neither the communists of the AWU nor the business-unionists from the Federation of Labor could control the strike. Ultimately, each group was spurned by workers who were extremely militant, but distinctly non-radical. The unpredictable combination of industrial-based militance and non-radical political independence displayed by the Fisher Body strikers of 1930 previewed the kind of values which would soon unite auto workers all over the city in an effort establish a local auto workers union.

In 1930, company and city officials were unwilling (or perhaps in some cases unable) to distinguish between the limited material grievances of the strikers and the radical ideology of a few AWU organizers. They treated what remained essentially a limited piece-rate dispute as an event which threatened the entire social order. Heavy-handed official repression broke the strike, setting a precedent for its expanded use in later confrontations between workers and management. In this sense, the Fisher Body strike signalled an eventual escalation in the level of industrial violence in Flint.

The city's establishment rallied as a class around Fisher Body management during the dispute. Businessmen, municipal officials, the

local press, and even the Flint Federation of Labor denounced the strike, and worked together to crush it. To rationalize the repressive tactics used against strikers, Flint's elite revived nativism and red-baiting. This revival set worker against worker, accentuating the competition for already scarce jobs. By deliberately cultivating anti-communist hysteria during the strike, the city's business class also encouraged the public mockery of justice. As late as July 10th, two days after the strike had collapsed, Circuit Court judge Edward Black still refused to issue writs of habeas corpus for eighteen jailed strikers (some who had been held in custody at least five days without being charged with a crime). "I do not consider them the equal of any other criminal," the venerable local judge told ACLU lawyer Nicholas Olds, "and as far as I am concerned, they can rot in jail."²⁹ Some of the jailed strikers remained in custody for several additional days. On Friday, July 11th, the Flint Daily Journal reported two released "Red agitators" were kidnapped and beaten after leaving the city jail. The culprits were never found.

In the years preceding the U.A.W.-C.I.O.'s victory in the sit-down strike of 1936-37, Flint's establishment remained actively committed to the task of blocking the organization of dissident auto workers. Indiscriminate red-baiting and force temporarily secured business class dominance. However, as the Depression dragged on, that dominance rested more and more on working people's fears, instead of their deference. For a few years, constant economic insecurity and a systematic extension of General Motors' anti-union efforts prevented another major strike. Yet,

²⁹ Sworn and notarized deposition of N. Olds, dated July 11, 1930, attached to "Caroline Parker (chairman, executive board of the Detroit branch of the American Civil Liberties Union) to Hon. Edward Black, July 15, 1930," Edward Black Papers, MHC. Judge Black had owned a considerable block of General Motors stock since 1912. During the big General Motors

once all Flint workers had felt the daily degradation of life and work brought on by the Great Depression, efforts to organize a union to improve conditions gained widespread support. In the longer run, far from removing the 'threat from below', the predilection for repression established during the 1930 strike clarified the boundaries between 'above' and 'below' in Flint. As a sign of things to come, the Fisher Body 1 strike heralded the opening of a new era of increased class conflict in industrial relations and politics.

II. Economic Collapse

The mass market for automobiles disappeared during the Hoover years of the Great Depression. By 1932, the industry's total output had fallen to 1.3 million units, seventy-five percent fewer cars than it had produced in 1929. Many smaller automobile manufacturers and component makers were forced into bankruptcy. In fact, the Great Depression eventually strengthened the Big Three's hold on the car market.³⁰ But for a few years even the big firms had to fight for their survival. General Motors' sales plunged thirty-nine percent in 1930. The following year, GM's sales declined more slowly, although the Buick division's fortunes continued to plummet. General Motors sold seventy-two percent fewer vehicles in 1932 than it had in 1929. The two divisions with major production facilities in Flint were particularly hard hit. In 1932, the giant corporation's mainstay, Chevrolet, marketed only 384,000 cars and trucks, nearly one million units less than its pre-Depression peak. Buick fared

sit-down strike of 1936-37, the U.A.W. publicized Judge Black's interest in the company to discredit an injunction he issued against the union.

³⁰ The Big Three share of the domestic car market jumped from seventy-five to ninety percent in the 1930s. See Rae, American Automobile Manufacturers, pp. 191-2.

even worse. Its sales dropped to just 42,000 vehicles in 1933, an eighty-four percent decline from the division's best year, 1926.³¹

Declining sales of Buicks and Chevrolets created an economic disaster in Flint. To maintain profitable operations, General Motors' management pursued rigorous retrenchment policies designed to cut costs faster than revenues were falling. In Flint, the company reduced its production schedules and workforce while simultaneously raising the speed of production and the output expected from each worker. Throughout the early years of the Great Depression, substantial wage cuts and speedups (like those which had prompted the Fisher Body 1 strike) were pressed upon all of the company's remaining production workers.³²

Salaried workers also faced layoffs and pay reductions. In addition, some fringe benefits, including the savings and investment plan for blue-collar workers, were terminated.³³ Together, these cost-cutting measures kept General Motors out of the red during the Great Depression. The company even managed to show a small profit in 1932, a year of drastically reduced revenues. Beginning in 1933, General Motors' production, sales, and profits rose steadily, approaching record levels as early as 1936.³⁴

In Flint, General Motors' successful retrenchment policies produced a dramatic decline in local business activity, generally lower material

³¹ Sloan, My Years With General Motors, p. 447.

³² The speedup and wage cuts are discussed in detail in Chapter Seven below.

³³ These measures are described by Alfred Sloan in the Annual Report of the General Motors Corporation 1932.

³⁴ Net profits after taxes fell from \$296 million in 1929 to \$8 million in 1932. They then climbed steadily to \$240 million in 1936. GM's total American vehicle production topped the 1929 record in 1936 and 1937. See Alfred D. Chandler, Jr. Giant Enterprise: Ford, General

living standards, and longterm mass unemployment. Home building, the city's second biggest industry, was devastated by the collapse of the automobile boom. New construction had actually peaked in 1927, but until 1929, Flint builders put up an average of 2500 new housing units per year. In 1930, they built 360 homes. The following year, the total fell to only 128 new units. Things then went from bad to worse. During the next three years, from 1932 to 1934, just 45 new housing units were added to the city's housing stock even though "hundreds" of families still lived in what a contemporary Civil Works Administration survey termed "temporary" buildings.³⁵ Private construction activity increased slightly in subsequent years. However, as late as 1940, Flint's home building industry remained severely depressed.³⁶

Most other Flint businesses suffered as a result of the cutbacks in General Motors' local operations. The most dependent firms, including foundries, machine shops, and small parts makers, were forced to imitate the giant corporation's retrenchments efforts. Some of these companies failed to hold on long enough to see the renewal of local automobile production in 1934. Of course, wholesalers, retail businessmen, and transportation companies also fell victim to steadily declining demand during

Motors, and the Automobile Industry (New York, 1964), pp. 6-7; and Sloan, My Years, pp. 446-7.

³⁵ Quoted in A.C. Findlay, "The Housing Situation in Flint, Michigan" (Flint Institute of Research and Planning), February 1938, FPL. Statistics from "Confidential Report of a Survey," HOLC Division of Research and Statistics, July 27, 1937 in "File: Flint, Michigan, File #1," HOLC City Survey File, RG 195, Box 24.

³⁶ Just over 100 units were built in 1939 and 1940. See memorandum report: "Current Housing Situation in Flint, Michigan as of March 31, 1941," Division of Research and Statistics, Federal Housing Administration in Housing and Home Finance Agency, RG 207, Box 6, National Archives.

the years 1930-33. As the purchasing power of workers was eroded by wage cuts, short-time, and layoffs, many small businesses simply went under. Moreover, as increasing numbers of working people fell behind on the repayment of installment loans and home mortgages, several local financial institutions were driven to bankruptcy.³⁷

In Flint, the link between automotive retrenchment and the generalization of depression conditions was clear. The city's request for an emergency Reconstruction Finance Corporation loan in mid-1932 claimed, "With automobile production reduced by one-third in the last two years a similar reduction has taken place throughout other business operations of the city."³⁸ In August 1932 the Buick Motor Company, which had employed as many as 22,000 people just three years earlier, shut down completely. It was the final blow. Though Buick production and sales would be fully restored under the aggressive new management of H.H. Curtice by 1936-37, the company's closure in late 1932 brought economic activity in Flint to a near standstill. By the end of the year, for all practical purposes, Flint's industrial economy had collapsed.

During the Great Depression, virtually all of Flint's industrial workers endured periods of prolonged unemployment. In the early 1930s, extensions of the annual model change and unscheduled reductions in production affected everyone in the local automobile industry. Though most experienced workers did not actually lose their jobs between 1930 and 1933, with each passing year, they faced longer layoffs, more

³⁷ This summary based on a brief filed by the city and the state for emergency RFC funds. See 1932 Records Relating to Emergency Relief to the States, Reconstruction Finance Corporation, RG 234, Box 47, National Archives.

³⁸ 1932 Records Relating to Emergency Relief to the States.

short-time, and deeper wage cuts.³⁹ Under these circumstances, the high material living standards of Flint's permanent population of working people were quickly eroded. During the very worst years, 1932 and 1933, many Flint auto workers earned only a few hundred dollars. By 1934, when recovery had begun, NRA investigators found that the annual earnings of the bulk of the automotive workforce (skilled and semi-skilled) had fallen to less than half their 1929 levels.⁴⁰

Undoubtedly, falling prices helped to cushion the impact of drastically reduced earnings in the early 1930s, but it is clear that prices did not fall nearly enough to keep most of Flint's working people out of desperate financial trouble.⁴¹ During the first round of layoffs, many auto workers managed to preserve their living standards as they had learned to do in the 1920s. In March 1930, one local personal loan company discovered fully half its clients were unemployed auto workers. To secure these loans, the company promptly went out and found jobs for all but a handful of those workers.⁴² In a brief recession, such short-term

³⁹ This generalization is based on "Exhibit 19: Preliminary Report of Individual Conferences With Workers," in NRA Research and Planning Division's Preliminary Report, 1935; and on the actual testimony of affected workers given in Flint in December 1934. Figures released by Buick in March 1935 reveal the priority its supervisors placed on retention of experienced workers. In that month, eighty percent of its workers had been with the company at least five years; forty-four percent at least ten years. See General Motors Scrapbook, Buick Motor Division: Volume I, FPL.

⁴⁰ "Exhibit 19," pp. 4-5.

⁴¹ Specific data on local price deflation are hard to come by. My own calculations indicate food prices probably fell as much as forty percent from 1929 to 1933. The National Industrial Conference Board index of local rents indicates a decline of roughly twenty percent in the same period after a decade of near stability. See the FHA memorandum, "Current Housing Situation in Flint," p. 12.

⁴² Bernstein, Lean Years, p. 255.

measures would have solved most working people's difficulties, yet as the Depression deepened, increasing personal and corporate debt only made matters worse.

In 1931, more and more of Flint's permanent working people fell behind on their tax and mortgage payments. By 1932 many workers had lost their precious homes and all the money they had invested in them. Problems with house payments continued to plague underemployed auto workers in the early New Deal years. More than 1100 Flint residents forfeited their homes in 1933 and 1934, years when the foreclosure rate was already going down.⁴³ Automobiles, insurance policies, and other amenities of the consumer-oriented 'lifestyle' which had emerged during the 1920s were also sacrificed. In this sense, the early Great Depression seemed to turn back the clock, thrusting working people into everyday life conditions usually identified with an earlier, more 'primitive' stage of industrial capitalism. "In those days," Fisher Body's F.R. Palmer later recalled, "we did not worry about payday. We worried about our next meal. That was how hard up everybody was. We worked a few hours a week."⁴⁴

Actually, the industrial workers of Flint who held onto their jobs, even if they worked just a few hours a week, were relatively lucky. Many others were laid off and never rehired. Those with little experience, especially recent arrivals and very young workers, and those whom

⁴³ "Current Housing Situation in Flint, p. 4. Unfortunately FHA data do not cover the early 1930s. However, testimony given to NRA investigators in 1934 indicates that the foreclosure problem peaked in those years. Of the 105 auto workers who testified in Flint, twenty-nine voluntarily described problems with house payments and back taxes as a major concern.

⁴⁴ UAW Oral History Project interview with F.R. Palmer, p. 4.

management deemed to be "too old" were particularly vulnerable.⁴⁵ Their jobs were 'made redundant' in the early 1930s as hard-pressed plant managers permanently reduced labor force requirements. Every major auto factory in the city underwent this form of rationalization (through the introduction of new machinery and an increase in the pace of production). Overall, between 1930 and 1936, General Motors eliminated at least nine thousand blue-collar jobs in Flint without any loss in productive capacity. The most substantial reductions were made at the city's oldest auto plant, Buick, after H.H. Curtice took over its management. By 1940, when that venerable division exceeded its pre-Depression output record by fourteen percent, it employed fully one-third fewer workers than it had in the late 1920s.⁴⁶

Ironically, in Depression circumstances, what was good for General Motors was not necessarily good for Flint. Reductions in labor force requirements which increased productivity were an essential part of the corporation's successful recovery program, but clearly, they also created severe unemployment problems in the city. Not surprisingly, many workers chose to leave Flint when faced with the prospect of longterm joblessness. According to a Civil Works Administration estimate in 1934, the city lost thirteen percent of its total population during the first four desperate years of the Great Depression.⁴⁷ Recent arrivals left in the largest

⁴⁵ This generalization based on the NRA Hearings; the NRA Research and Planning Division's Preliminary Report, pp. 51-3; and State of Michigan, State Emergency Relief Commission, Michigan Census of Population and Unemployment, First Series (hereafter cited as Michigan Census), No. 9, "Age and Industry of Gainful Workers" (Lansing, 1937), pp. 6 and 12.

⁴⁶ Fine, Sit-Down, pp. 104-5; and Rodolph, "An Industrial History of Flint," pp. 275-6.

⁴⁷ Fine, Sit-Down, p. 104.

numbers. It seems likely that many of these people returned, at least temporarily, to some form of rural life. Large numbers of Southern-born working people (who formed the biggest group of out-migrants) went back home.⁴⁸ All over Michigan, unemployed industrial workers tried to find jobs in the farm labor force as soon as the Depression began. Near Flint, a considerable number of working people moved onto small-subsistence-sized farms in the semi-rural townships which surrounded the city.⁴⁹

In the later 1930s, as the local automobile industry recovered, the population of Flint's fringe area was augmented by a large in-migration of newcomers from other states and other parts of Michigan. By the end of the decade the outlying districts of Genessee County had grown nearly forty percent, while Flint's population remained below its pre-Depression peak. Still, the fringe area did not become a true suburb. Instead, prior to its industrialization during the 1940s (as part of wartime expansion), most of Flint's fringe retained the characteristics of 'underdeveloped' agrarian America.⁵⁰ On the fringe, "marginal" working people shaped individualistic responses to the Great Depression by combining the everyday life of rural tenants with occasional periods of regular

⁴⁸ Beynon, "The Southern White Laborer Migrates to Michigan," p. 337. Beynon reported that Flint's southern black population dropped nineteen percent and its southern white population declined thirty-five percent in this period.

⁴⁹ Schnore, "The Separation of Home and Work in Flint," p. 24. Michigan's farm labor supply jumped from 85 to 118 percent of "normal" between 1929 and 1930. See Blanche Bernstein's report, "The Labor Market in the Automobile Industry," dated January 1937, in Box 2, William E. Chalmers Collection, WSU.

⁵⁰ The increase in the fringe area topped 15,000 persons in the 1930s. In 1940 more than half the fringe area homes had no running water; three-quarters had no flush toilets. In addition, virtually all the land remained farmer-owned. For details see Hughes, "Local Government in the Fringe Area," pp. 1-11.

employment in the city's factories. Thus, on a personal level, Flint's fringe area continued to function as it had in the 1920s, providing a refuge for working people who were not ready to make a permanent commitment to urban-industrial life.⁵¹

Yet most working people could not simply leave Flint to escape the Great Depression. Tens of thousands had already forged strong personal ties to their homes in the city.⁵² Their commitment to urban-industrial life was permanently embodied in the lives they had made for themselves and their families during the automobile boom. Such longtime residents never entertained serious thoughts of leaving the city. As one unemployed Buick worker observed in 1934, "I have been in Flint about twenty years now and cannot go any other place."⁵³

In addition, many other formerly 'marginal' (one is tempted to use the term "migrant") industrial workers eventually settled down during the 1930s. They had very few alternatives. Though some working people could retreat from the industrial depression and find refuge with rural friends and family, a mass exodus back to the land had become impossible. Everywhere one looked in the early 1930s, agriculture was at least as depressed as manufacturing. Moreover, throughout the worst years of the crisis, before New Deal programs like Agricultural Adjustment and Rural

⁵¹ Recent studies of the industrial labor forces in not yet fully industrialized societies like Italy have identified similar groups of "marginal" or "peasant" workers. For example, see Charles Sabel, "Marginal Work and Marginal Workers in Industrial Society" in Michael Piore (ed.), Institutionalist and Structuralist Views of Unemployment and Inflation (Boston, 1980).

⁵² According to a Civil Works Administration census conducted in early 1934, 55,000 Flint residents (nearly forty percent of the total population) had lived in the same place for at least five years. See Beynon, p. 340.

⁵³ Interview with Keleman Sajko, NRA Hearings, I, p. 160.

Electrification took hold, material conditions in rural America remained more primitive, and therefore less attractive, than in the cities. Most importantly, the chance of finding any kind of effective emergency relief programs in the countryside was just about nil. At the same time, flight to other cities offered no real hope for economic improvement either. Transient workers discovered all the previously booming industrial centers of the Midwest suffered from mass unemployment and widespread underemployment during the early Depression; and not all of them recovered as quickly as Flint. Consequently, when workers were lucky enough to secure automotive employment, they held onto it, even if the jobs were uncertain, irregular, and degrading.

In Flint, residential turnover remained very high between 1930 and 1940. However, once the local automobile industry started its vigorous recovery, the city's population began to settle down and stabilize.⁵⁴ The main reason behind this important demographic change is clear. Industrial workers discontent with local conditions learned that they could no longer 'strike with their feet' as they had done during the automobile boom. Instead, Depression circumstances forced workers to endure what they formerly would have rejected. When questioned by NRA investigators about the effects of the stepped up pace of production, one thirteen year veteran of Flint's auto shops described the new

⁵⁴ Beynon reported, "From 1930 through 1933, the total number of migrants both entering and leaving Flint was 49,135, a number equal to 34.0 percent of the total population in 1934," (p. 337, emphasis added). These figures, taken from the CWA census done between January and March 1934 do not reflect the impact of General Motors recovery on the city's demography. Rather, they illustrate the unsettling impact of economic collapse and mass unemployment. The Michigan Census (No. 8, "Geographic and Occupational Mobility of Gainful Workers," Lansing, April 1937, p. 5) and 1940 U.S. Census figures illustrate the stabilization which occurred in the later 1930s.

attitude perfectly. "Of course in normal times [referring to the 1920s] that resentment against the the speedup takes care of itself," explained James Pipes in December 1934, "but today the men will drop dead before they quit their jobs."⁵⁵

The Great Depression trapped many 'marginal' working people, compelling them to make a more permanent commitment to industrial life in Flint. On an even wider scale, the Depression destroyed industrial workers' faith in individual geographic mobility. In this sense, economic collapse was an essential prerequisite for the organization of an industrial working class in Flint. For it not only intensified and generalized the very worst problems of everyday life and work in an automotive production center; the Great Depression also closed a 'safety valve' which had previously allowed auto workers to devise their own, individualistic solutions to those problems.

During the Hoover years, when long layoffs, increased short-time, and falling earnings affected everyone in Flint, many working people despaired. In the poorest parts of the city, economic troubles undermined family unity, giving rise to an alarming growth in juvenile crime.⁵⁶ Elsewhere, auto workers who had labored long and hard to establish themselves as property-owners experienced severe emotional stress when forced to give up their homes and savings. NRA investigators commenting on the hearings held in Flint in December 1934 could not help but note

⁵⁵ NRA Hearings, II, p. 452. Pipes' use of the boom period as a standard for making comparisons with Depression conditions was typical, and extremely important. See Chapter Seven below for a complete discussion of this point.

⁵⁶ These family problems are examined fully in Minna Faust, "Juvenile Delinquency in Flint in Light of Social, Economic, and Cultural Factors," an unpublished report done for the Michigan Juvenile Delinquency Information Service (University of Michigan 1935), in the FPL.

how deeply some workers had been scarred by their losses. "So often did it occur, that it should be here recorded," they wrote in their preliminary report,

that witnesses, whose economic plight was tragic, need must be interrupted by us so as to stay the well of tears that surged within them.⁵⁷

Nevertheless, it would be wrong to assume all hope was lost. Without any bargaining power on the job, and with the memory of the repression of 1930 still fresh in their minds, there was not much resident auto workers and their families could do in those terrible years except tighten the household budget and look for new sources of assistance. As a matter of fact, far from becoming apolitical, most working people in Flint focused their attention on relief problems and politics when their economic situation deteriorated.

III. The Relief Crisis and Political Realignment

Despite the extraordinary prior development of local welfare capitalist services, Flint did not escape the relief crisis which afflicted virtually every city in the nation during the Hoover years. Indeed, welfare capitalism was one of the casualties of the Great Depression in Flint. In 1930-31, the Industrial Mutual Association provided food and coal allowances for at least 1200 workers and their families, but its benefits were meager and often lasted just one week.⁵⁸

⁵⁷ "Exhibit 19," p. 4.

⁵⁸ In recognition for its services in the winter of 1930-31, the city council exempted IMA stores from the tax rolls. The stores were restored to the rolls in 1935 after merchant protests were heard by the state tax commission. See Rodolph, "An Industrial History of Flint," p. 516. A description of IMA benefits may be found in the testimony of Wilbert Hill, NRA Hearings, I, pp. 32-5.

As economic conditions worsened, IMA resources ran short, forcing the organization to curtail its relief effort in 1932, about the same time General Motors suspended payments to workers enrolled in its blue-collar savings and investment plan.⁵⁹ Contributions to the IMA remained mandatory for all GM workers throughout the mid-1930s. In addition, many supervisors required workers to continue the traditional five dollar donation to the Community Chest. Both practices were bitterly resented by some workers. After the establishment of the United Automobile Workers Union in 1937, these collections ceased. As a result, the IMA had to drop its newspaper and sell off its clubrooms and recreational facilities in 1939.⁶⁰ By that time, union-sponsored newspapers, social events, and recreational activities had already replaced welfare capitalism in many workers' lives.

Just one local philanthropic organization, the Mott Foundation, expanded in the face of Depression difficulties. It managed this feat by avoiding direct relief efforts, and by opening itself up to new ideas. At the urging of Frank Manley, a former Minnesota high school gym teacher, the foundation created an ambitious citywide recreation program to control the worst effects of youth unemployment and juvenile delinquency. During the New Deal years, Manley's influence within the foundation grew, until

⁵⁹ It is interesting to note that Alfred Sloan later claimed that the savings and investment plan was suspended in 1935, after the passage of the Social Security Act had rendered it obsolete. (My Years With General Motors, p. 391) The Annual Report of the General Motors Corporation 1932 very clearly states the plan was suspended in that year for financial reasons.

⁶⁰ Rodolph, "Industrial History," p. 517. For examples of worker complaints about the IMA see NRA Hearings, testimony of William Connors (I, pp. 15-20), Vera Hobson (I, pp. 86-7), Ervin Latuck (II, pp. 297-300), Dow Kehler (II, pp. 399-400), Arnold Seyfarth (II, pp. 494-500), and Walter Nugent (II, pp. 579-82).

he was finally made its director, In cooperation with local government and several Federal agencies, Manley pushed the foundation into the fields of health and adult education. These recreational and educational initiatives broke with the strictly private philosophy of traditional welfare capitalism and philanthropy. In fact, they were quite similar to proposals originally made by the city's Socialists before World War I. Then C. S. Mott had opposed them as radical, but in the very different circumstances of the 1930s, he recognized the need for change. Yet the results of this change were hardly socialistic. Through the Manley programs, Mott's foundation actually embraced the public sector to put the resources of the school system and the Federal government to work under its auspices.⁶¹ After World War II, this achievement gained national recognition for the foundation, establishing its programs as models for a new kind of post-New Deal community action 'from above'. By innovating in response to the Great Depression, the Mott Foundation thus became the most significant survivor of Flint's welfare capitalist era.

Unfortunately for the people of Flint, when the Depression reached its nadir, local charity and welfare capitalism failed to meet even the most basic needs of the unemployed. Private contributions to the city's welfare efforts all but dried up during the Hoover years. In

⁶¹ Manley's initial programs received help from the Federal Emergency Relief Administration, Works Progress Administration, and the National Youth Administration. See Young and Quinn, Foundation for Living, pp. 115-50. Considering the assistance his foundation got from the New Deal, Mott's later recollection of Franklin Roosevelt as "the great destroyer" seems particularly unbalanced. See Studs Terkel, Hard Times (New York, 1970), p. 163.

1932, only seven percent of the nearly \$1.2 million spent on relief in Flint came from private sources.⁶² However, like local governments all across the country, the city of Flint was not equipped to shoulder the burden of relief alone. By 1932, it desperately needed outside assistance.

Flint had received lots of advice from the Federal and state governments, but until the winter of 1932-33, no direct tangible aid.⁶³ As a result, the city's relief problems degenerated into a serious local financial crisis. Squeezed by the rising demand for welfare and work relief, and rapidly falling tax receipts, Flint's municipal government teetered on the edge of bankruptcy throughout Herbert Hoover's last year in the White House.⁶⁴ Both of the perennially feuding factions who alternately controlled the new non-partisan city commission were forced to authorize drastic cuts in regular services and the city's payroll. Yet, neither William McKeighan's "Green Slate" (in power from April 1931 to May 1932) nor the automotive executives who dominated the vehemently

⁶² Michigan Council on Governmental Expenditures, "Relief Expenditures in Michigan Cities in 1931 and 1932: Material for Independent Study and Application" (2pp. pamphlet), in the Michigan State University Research Library.

⁶³ In late 1931, Flint established a citywide Relief Commission to comply with a request from the President's Organization on Unemployment Relief. A few months later, following guidelines set by the state's Unemployment Commission, a Genessee County Emergency Relief Committee was formed. Each of these quasi-public bodies was composed of prominent citizens, especially businessmen and clergy. They were charged with coordinating local welfare efforts, promoting work-spreading, and creating work relief by starting public works and neighborhood cleanup and repair campaigns. In two years, they supervised the spending of nearly two million dollars.

⁶⁴ In fiscal year 1931-32, Flint collected just fifty-six percent of the taxes owed it while relief expenditures rose from \$3.9 to \$7.3 per capita.

anti-McKeighan Civic League (in power in 1930 and most of 1932) could bring the crisis under control. In April 1932, the city had to borrow \$100,000 from local banks to meet its current obligations. In June, it defaulted. Local bankers again came to the rescue, but now, they demanded and got full control of the city's finances. Deeper budget cuts followed, and still the crisis worsened.⁶⁵

When Buick shut down in August, Flint faced imminent financial collapse for the third time in six months, and this time, even the local banks could not help. Luckily, beleaguered city officials and bankers finally had somewhere to turn for outside assistance. Under intense pressure from the public, the President and the Congress had begun to retreat from their defense of local responsibility for relief. In July 1932, they had created the Reconstruction Finance Corporation to pump new money into the banking system and the states where relief problems were most severe. RFC loans bailed Flint out of its immediate troubles in the fall of 1932. The following spring, Franklin Roosevelt's new administration initiated a series of federal emergency relief, work relief, and welfare programs which lifted the financial burden of unemployment relief from local governments. In Flint, and the nation as a whole, the implementation of these most effective parts of Roosevelt's New Deal ended the relief crisis.⁶⁶

In November 1932, America's working people demanded increased

⁶⁵ This summary based on Sylvester, "City Management: the Flint Experiment," pp. 70-99; and William H. Chafe, "Flint and the Great Depression," Michigan History, LIII, 3, Fall 1969, pp. 228-30.

⁶⁶ For details see Chafe, "Flint and the Great Depression," pp. 230-7.

federal relief and recovery efforts by voting Democratic in record numbers. In this sense, the so-called "New Deal realignment" of the country's political balance -- a shift from Republican to Democratic dominance of the federal government -- seems to have preceded anything Franklin Roosevelt and the Democrats did in office.⁶⁷ Certainly, this was true in Flint. There, high unemployment and drastic declines in material living standards sparked a new interest in politics during the Hoover years. As it developed, rising concern about political-economic problems led Flint's workers in two basic directions. On one hand, a tiny, but quite vocal, minority were radicalized by the Great Depression. On the other hand, the vast majority of the city's working people simply turned to the ballot box and the alternative to Hoover Republicanism offered by the Democratic Party. For the most part, throughout the 1930s and early 1940s, there was no tension between these two movements. In fact, most of the time, the local radicals who played a very big role in the organization of the U.A.W. fully supported the Democrats at the polls.

In the early years of the Great Depression, informal discussions of politics increased workers' awareness of political issues and their electoral participation. By 1932, even radical political ideas were being examined wherever working people gathered. "They were living hand-to-mouth,"

⁶⁷ Bernstein details the nationwide voting shift in The Lean Years (pp. 508-12). Frances Fox Piven and Richard A. Cloward clearly identify Roosevelt's strong stand on federal responsibility for relief as essential to the Democratic victory in 1932. See Regulating the Poor: the Functions of Public Welfare (New York, 1972), pp. 69-72. Walter Dean Burnham puts the realignment in a longterm perspective in "The Changing Shape of the American Political Universe," American Political Science Review, LIX, 1, March 1965.

recalled Al Cook, a conservative, Colorado-born Fisher Body 1 worker,

and it was getting worse and worse down the line . . . there was a lot of discussion in cardrooms and certain places that the country is going to have to change its form of government.⁶⁸

Although this kind of informal examination of radicalism undoubtedly helped to politicize many of Flint's working people, it did not lead to a massive upsurge of support for actual radical parties. Nevertheless, small groups of Communists and Socialists were formed in Flint during the first half of the Depression decade.

The exact origins of Flint's radical groups, and their numerical strength at any given moment remain shrouded in mystery and factional controversy. However, it is clear that an active cell of the Communist Party was established at the Buick plant by late 1934, and that it expanded its recruiting efforts among workers at the city's other auto plants in 1935. By May 1935, local communists felt bold enough to challenge Flint Weekly Review publisher George Starkweather to a public debate over the policies of the A. F. of L. in the automobile industry. In July, Max Salzman of the "Communist Party, Flint section" repeated the challenge. Of course, Starkweather refused, and used the invitations as excuses for running a series of page one attacks on the Communist "vipers" who were undermining A. F. of L. organizing efforts.⁶⁹ Flint Socialists were less visible in this period, though it appears their

⁶⁸ UAW Oral History Project interview, p. 6.

⁶⁹ The recruiting efforts of Flint's Communists are highlighted by a collection of handbills signed variously by "the Buick unit of the Communist Party" and "the Communist Party, Flint section." These handbills date from 1934-35, and are located in the Garman Collection, Box 4. Also see the Flint Weekly Review, July 5th, 12th, and 26th, 1935.

numbers grew, in part, through the efforts of Roy Reuther, who set up a F.E.R.A. workers' education project in Flint in the fall of 1934. Among those who eventually assisted the dynamic Reuther were a Chevrolet worker, Kermit Johnson, and his wife Genora. During the Great sit-down strike of 1936-37, all three would play vital organizing roles. As early as January 1936, Flint's Socialists felt secure enough to host a three day meeting of the state's tiny Socialist Party. This meeting gave local Socialists greater visibility, but the party's influence over electoral matters remained minimal.⁷⁰

The Communists and Socialists were not the only groups of politically active workers to organize in Flint in this period. A "Trade Unionists' Progressive Club," similar to organizations in Detroit, Lansing, and Toledo, was also formed in 1935. It consisted of a few dozen non-radical union men, most of whom had been active in the A. F. of L. 's big automotive organizing drive of 1933-34.⁷¹ This group was initially dedicated to keeping the A. F. of L. alive in the auto plants after it had lost worker support in early 1934. In December 1935, this Progressive Club voted to contact John L. Lewis and the then Committee for Industrial Organization. It continued to meet through 1936, discussing various union organizing strategies and political issues. The club was important because it channeled C.I.O. pamphlets and information to interested groups of auto workers in the plants. However, for the most part, these "progressive"

⁷⁰ Victor G. Reuther, The Brothers Reuther and the Story of the UAW: A Memoir (Boston 1976), p. 125. Also the Flint Weekly Review, October 26, 1934.

⁷¹ This drive, and all the other events involved in the organization of the U.A.W. in Flint are discussed in detail in Chapter Seven below.

unionists made little or no effort to influence elections.⁷²

The long struggle to organize the industrial workers of Flint and the factional disputes which raged within the auto workers union until 1950 provided Flint's most politicized workers with a kind of self-contained political universe in which to develop their ideas and expend their energies. Throughout the 1930s and early 1940s, many of the leaders of Flint's emerging industrial working class were drawn from the small groups of politically active workers described above. Generally, these leaders did not immerse themselves in specific election campaigns. Like the bulk of the rank-and-file, local union leaders, whether they were Communist, Socialist, Progressive, or unaffiliated, usually supported the candidates of the Democratic Party because they perceived the Democrats to be 'a friend of labor' who would allow workers to solve their own problems through the union movement. In retrospect, this faith in the Democratic Party may seem misguided. Yet, historically, the reasons why it developed are clear.

In Flint, as quickly as economic conditions deteriorated, voter registrations and participation soared. The surge of new and previously marginal voters to the polls actually started in 1930. In March, a record 25,000 citizens voted in the city's first nonpartisan primary. A month later, an even larger number turned out to give the automotive establishment's Civic League a seven-to-two margin on the new city commission.⁷³ Finally, in November, unusually heavy participation in the

⁷² Minutes of the Flint Trade Unionists Progressive Club, Homer Martin Collection, Box 2, WSU.

⁷³ The connections between the automobile companies and the Civic League were explicit. Six of the League's first seven commissioners were either active or retired automotive officials. See Sylvester, "City Management," p. 49.

off-year general elections cut deeply into the 'normal' Republican landslide margins in several key races.⁷⁴ In Flint, at least, two major aspects of the New Deal realignment--increased voter turnout and a swing towards a Democratic majority--were already apparent in 1930, long before anyone had heard of the New Deal.

Despite a steadily declining population and the formally nonpartisan character of municipal elections, local contests continued to draw more people into the electoral process during 1931 and 1932. In the absence of any effective relief policy, the relief crisis focused public attention on the problems of local government. It thus breathed new, but very temporary life, into the old rivalry between the automotive elite and William McKeighan. Rising concern over the administration of emergency relief and the city's budget complicated the already heated controversy between Civic League supporters of the new charter and "Green Slate" proponents of a return to the old mayoral system. Another record turnout was set in April 1931 when new voters swept the "Green Slate" into power on the city commission. After this stunning reversal both the appointed city manager and the Civic League's mayor-commissioner resigned. "Green Slate" leader McKeighan, who had reached out for working people's votes, billing himself as "Flint's Friend of All Classes and Creeds," seized the opportunity to reestablish a strong mayor-council system which he could dominate.⁷⁵

⁷⁴ For details see Richard T. Ortquist, "Depression Politics in Michigan" (unpublished PhD. dissertation, University of Michigan, 1968), pp. 11-4 and 258.

⁷⁵ Sylvester, "City Management," pp. 72-7. Also see Carol Ernst, "Newspaper Coverage of the Major Local Political Issues in the Thirties," unpublished paper dated November 30, 1971, FPL.

McKeighan tried to run the city without regard for the new charter. Once the "Green Slate" commissioners had elected him mayor, and approved his appointment of Police Chief Caesar Scarvarda as "acting city manager without pay," McKeighan simply assumed the powers of a strong mayor. A "Green Slate" charter restoring the mayor-council system was prepared to legitimize this coup, but before it could be submitted to the voters, McKeighan had to prove that he could handle the city's relief and fiscal problems more effectively than Civic League city management had. It was an impossible task, especially for a politician committed to expanding municipal work relief and welfare to secure the electoral support of disadvantaged blue-collar voters.⁷⁶

By early 1932, McKeighan and the "Green Slate" were under heavy attack in both local newspapers for driving the city to the brink of bankruptcy. Civic League supporters received a big boost in February, when the mayor, Chief Scarvarda, and ten others were indicted for conspiring to violate prohibition. Although everyone involved was exonerated by a federal jury, the "Green Slate" could not recover from the negative publicity in time for the annual municipal elections. In April, all of the vulnerable "Green Slate" commissioners except McKeighan lost to the Civic League after a bitter campaign which drew more than 40,000 people to the polls (a record for municipal elections that stood for many years). A few weeks later, when the city ran out of cash, local bankers made the firing of all "Green Slate" appointees a precondition for their first

⁷⁶ Under McKeighan, relief expenditures per capita nearly doubled, even though rising unemployment forced reductions in average family benefits beginning in January 1932. McKeighan's most controversial welfare grant, \$35,000 to the Negro Community House, may have cost the "Green Slate" some white backlash votes in April 1932. See Sylvester, pp. 82-3.

emergency loan to the city. During the bankers' interregnum, the Civic League finally won control of the city's government, but it took a charter referendum (which led to a revision of the system restoring the wards and making elections biennial), several recall petitions, and special local elections in November to settle the issue.⁷⁷

The Civic League's final triumph over William McKeighan was a hollow victory. By autumn 1932, the old deferential politics was breaking down in Flint. As the Depression grew more severe, political 'apathy' disappeared. The number of registered voters and voter participation rates had doubled since the late 1920s. Most of the newly activated citizens were working people anxious to find solutions to the relief crisis and the depression at the ballot box.⁷⁸ For three years, they had tested the alternatives offered in municipal elections, and found that neither city management nor 'the machine' could overcome the problems created by a national economic collapse. In November 1932, the new voters of Flint opted for dramatically expanding federal responsibility for relief and economic recovery. A remarkable 50,000 citizens went

⁷⁷ The most prominent "Green Slate" commissioners were recalled by a two-to-one margin in November, while the Citizens League members were retained by nearly the same margin. For details see Sylvester, "City Management," pp. 90-108.

⁷⁸ There were just 33,000 registered voters in 1927, and at least 60,000 by 1932. Voter participation in the general elections climbed from thirty-seven percent in 1928 to eighty-five percent in 1932. Given the overwhelmingly blue-collar character of the city (eighty-six percent wage earners, two-thirds industrial workers in the labor force in 1934), it seems fair to assume the new voters were working people. See Flint Daily Journal, March 8, 1927, p. 1.; Max Heavenrich Jr., "The Participation of Flint Citizens in Elections," in Studies Prepared by the Governmental Research Division of the Flint Institute of Research and Planning, 1938-9, FPL; Chafe, "Flint and the Great Depression," p. 227, and Michigan Census, No. 4, "Social-Economic Occupational Classification of Workers in Selected Industries," p. 12.

to the polls (more than twice as many as in 1928), and they voted heavily for the Democratic ticket headed by Franklin Roosevelt.⁷⁹ For the first time in memory, the city's voters had cast a majority of their ballots for Democrats in the races for the Presidency and Congress. A long era of one-party Republican politics in Flint was over. After 1932, political attention in Flint would focus on national issues, not local personalities, and it would involve genuine two-party competition.

During the next four years, the tangible accomplishments of the New Deal in Flint earned Franklin Roosevelt and the Democratic Party the electoral loyalty of the vast majority of Flint's working people. The new Democratic voters of 1932 had expected Roosevelt's election to produce vigorous and effective relief and recovery policies, and it did. Within a few months of its inauguration, the new federal administration had taken over the city's relief problems and solved them.⁸⁰ Within a few years, New Deal welfare programs and federally sponsored public works recreation programs, and housing reforms had vastly improved the quality of life in the city. Of course, all the improvements could not be traced directly to Roosevelt's New Deal. A slowly recovering automobile market allowed General Motors to start calling back its laid off workers in 1933.⁸¹ Nonetheless, in the judgement of one student of the period, by 1936 the New Deal had created "a striking improvement in public health" and the "achievement of civic improvements which five years before would

⁷⁹ Heavenrich, "Participation of Flint Citizens," p. 3.

⁸⁰ Chafe found "the order of federal bureaucracy replaced the confusion of local voluntarism" as soon as a County Emergency Relief Administration was set up in 1933. See "Flint and the Great Depression," p. 231.

⁸¹ Local General Motors employment reached 47,000 by December 1937. See Fine, Sit Down, p. 105.

have been unthinkable."⁸²

It is hard for any Americans born in the last half century to imagine the impression Roosevelt and the Democrats made in those first four years of the New Deal. We have experienced nothing like it. In Flint, working people who had often voted Republican, or not at all, quickly learned to admire and support Franklin Roosevelt and his party. As early as October 1934, shortly after the local Federation of Labor had voted to endorse a straight Democratic ticket despite his best efforts to persuade them otherwise, a bitter George Starkweather editorialized,

The working people have it so firmly impressed on their minds that President Roosevelt and the Democratic Administration is for them that you cannot convince them otherwise.⁸³

Ironically, throughout 1933 and most of 1934, Starkweather had contributed to this 'Roosevelt revolution' in public opinion by featuring long excerpts from the speeches of A. F. of L. leaders who praised the President in the Flint Weekly Review. In January 1935, George Starkweather finally succumbed to changes in the political climate. After two decades as the president of the local labor federation, he was forced to withdraw from office by a membership which had abandoned both Republicanism and business-unionism.⁸⁴ It was a sign of the times.

⁸² Chafe, "Flint and the Great Depression," pp. 232-3. Under the Civil Works Administration and the Works Progress Administration, Flint workers built the city's three-runway Bishop Airport, paved and repaired hundreds of streets, laid much needed sewers and drains, and conducted traffic, land-use, and zoning surveys. For additional details see "Appraisal File Report - Michigan," Records of the Works Progress Administration, RG 69, Box 195, National Archives.

⁸³ Flint Weekly Review, October 26, 1934, p. 1.

⁸⁴ Starkweather's replacement was Robert Passage, a militant Teamsters' business agent who had arrived in the city in 1933 determined to organize local coal haulers. In 1934, he succeeded by leading two strikes which forced employers to sign written contracts with their drivers. See the Flint Weekly Review, January 25, 1935.

Of course, the Roosevelt administration gained additional political support among workers by endorsing changes in federal labor laws which established the right to organize unions and bargain collectively with employers. Section 7(a) of the National Industrial Recovery Act and the Wagner Act (which Roosevelt finally endorsed with some reluctance in 1935) were especially important to Flint's automobile workers because they were struggling to establish a union of their own in these years. From 1933 to 1937, union leaders (first from the A.F. of L. and then from the C.I.O.) who spoke in Flint never missed a chance to remind the city's workers that the President was on their side in the fight for a union. Though not always satisfied with his performance, clearly Flint's automobile workers generally accepted the idea that Roosevelt was a 'pro-labor' President. During the campaign of 1936, this perception was sharpened by the actions of General Motors management and the U.A.W.-C.I.O. organizers who were in town trying to revive the struggle against G.M. In October, when company officials on the shopfloors suddenly sprouted Kansas-sunflower-"Vote for Landon" buttons, the union representatives started their own campaign for Roosevelt, claiming his re-election would mean "the preservation of a democratic government, under which labor will be permitted to work out its own salvation."⁸⁵ Roosevelt himself made a dramatic last minute campaign stop in Flint to bolster his 'pro-labor' image and bring out the blue-collar vote. It worked. His motorcade through the city's streets drew the biggest, most enthusiastic crowd ever seen in the downtown area. And, on election day, less than two months before labor-

⁸⁵ Mimeographed flyer dated October 15, 1936, (one of several dealing with the upcoming election) in the Kraus Collection, Box 8.

management tensions exploded in the union-making General Motors sit-down strike, the largest turnout in Flint history (53,000 voters) gave the Roosevelt-led Democratic ticket an overwhelming vote of confidence.⁸⁶ In terms of participation, and as a spontaneous measure of the expanded electorate's support for the New Deal, the 1936 election marked the high point of the local political realignment.

Institutionalization of the New Deal realignment in Flint proceeded more slowly. Before it could happen, stable unions capable of running effective political campaigns had to be established; and this, as we shall see in the next chapter, was no easy task. Still, a clear pattern of increasingly organized working class political activity began to emerge in the mid-1930s. In other words, the class-conscious impulses that led workers to fight for unions, also led them to try to exert influence over the election process once their unions were organized. As unionization proceeded in Flint, so did the effort to increase the power of working people in local politics and insure the election of pro-labor New Deal Democrats to state and national offices.

Almost immediately after he won the presidency of the Flint Federation of Labor from George Starkweather in 1935, Teamsters' business agent Robert Passage tried to push the traditionally conservative central labor union into liberal-Democratic politics. This change of policy was announced by the organization's Political Action Committee during the March campaign for circuit court judgeships in which they backed three Democrats and a Farmer-Labor candidate. A circular issued by Passage explained,

⁸⁶ Heavenrich, "Participation," pp. 3ff.

In the past, the Political Action Committee has thought it their duty to endorse candidates for their various offices and go no farther . . . It is the duty of the newly formed Political Action Committee to endorse their candidates by getting behind the aforementioned candidates . . . We are asking the help and support of every member carrying a Union card.⁸⁷

The P.A.C.'s political efforts did not have much impact in 1935. George Starkweather still controlled the Flint Weekly Review, and he invariably supported Republican candidates. Moreover, some of Starkweather's long-time business-unionist supporters on the F.F.L. refused to follow through with the new political action committee's request to take an active part in the campaign. Instead, these older members seemed to concentrate their political energies on finding a way to discredit the Teamster's leader and have him removed from the local federation's top office.⁸⁸

Prior to the successful organization of the United Automobile Workers union in Flint in 1937, there was no consistent working class presence in local politics. Participation in local elections fell off drastically after the relief crisis of 1932, and this decline allowed the automotive establishment's Civic League to maintain its hold on City Hall.⁸⁹ However, the business class' continued dominance of municipal government in the period 1932-36 was not nearly as significant as

⁸⁷ "Announcement," dated March 13, 1935, Kraus Collection, Box 8.

⁸⁸ Passage was driven from office in 1936 by older F.F.L. members who charged him with diverting central labor union funds into his Teamsters' organizing drive. See "Wilbur S. Dean (Recording Secretary of the F.F.L.) to Frank Morrison (Secretary of the A.F. of L.), November 21, 1935," in "AFL Executive Correspondence to Flint Federation of Labor, October-December 1935," AFL-CIO Archives, Washington, D.C.

⁸⁹ Participation bottomed out in 1935, when just nine percent of the eligible voters went to the polls.

in former years since the federal government under Roosevelt had usurped many of its former functions. Moreover, the composition of the non-partisan city council was already changing in ways that reflected the rising class-consciousness of Flint's working people. In 1936, two Civic League commissioners were not renominated because they were alleged to have connections with the anti-union terrorist group known as the Black Legion. In addition, of three new Green Slate commissioners elected that year, two were factory workers who would supposedly represent the interests of industrial working people. In actuality, one of these blue-collar representatives turned out to be a consistent supporter of the Civic League majority.⁹⁰

The establishment of the U.A.W.-C.I.O. gave Flint's emerging working class an institutional base from which political power could be asserted. Even before General Motors recognized the union, in December 1936, U.A.W. organizers complained that a Flint Community Fund questionnaire probing unemployed workers' union and political affiliations was being administered by county relief officials and turned over to General Motors. Naturally, Genessee County Emergency Relief administrators denied there was anything improper about the questionnaire and its uses. Nevertheless, under union pressure, they also dropped the offending procedure.⁹¹ More

⁹⁰ Sylvester, "City Management," p. 124Ff. The Black Legion is discussed in Chapter Seven below.

⁹¹ Questions included such things as "Has the client expressed to you an interest in or indicated that he was informed about the A. F. of L.? the Unemployed Workers' Council? other proleterian groups?". See "William Haber (Genessee County Relief Administrator) to Henry Kraus, December 1, 1936" and "Victor S. Woodward (former relief administrator) to Kraus, December 16; in the Kraus Collection, Box 8.

dramatic displays of the union's political power followed the great sit-down strike which forced General Motors to bargain with the U.A.W. In February, city manager John Barringer was removed from office in response to untiring union protests over his use of excessive force during the strike. A few months later, in July, a mass meeting of five thousand auto workers voted to set up political organizations in the wards and to have them affiliate with the local Labor Non-Partisan League. This mass meeting also voted to recall a Green Slate commissioner who had supported the firing of the new city manager for having defended the Hotel and Restaurant Workers' union right to picket outside a downtown candystore. Shortly thereafter, the recall was accomplished. The local U.A.W.'s widely circulated Flint Auto Worker proclaimed,

It [the recall] should be a warning to all those minority interests in the city who think they can flout the interests of the overwhelming majority of the people and serve only those of big business or their own selfish ones.⁹²

Flint's organized working class continued to improve its political position during the years immediately preceding World War II. In 1938, a Genessee County Labor Political Action Committee was formed to fight the September primaries and November elections. In the primary, this new P.A.C. succeeded in getting five pro-labor candidates on the non-partisan ballot for the city commission. Intense factional feuding which raged inside the U.A.W. and the Flint local at this time probably hindered labor's campaign efforts in November. Even so, union-backed candidates won two more seats on the city commission (leaving them just

⁹² The Flint Auto Worker, I, 31, July 22, 1937, p. 1; also see the Flint Weekly Review, July 23, 1937, p. 1.

shy of a majority) while the Democrats swept most contests in the county.⁹³

By 1940, a more unified U.A.W. was able to secure its place in Flint politics. That year, union-backed candidates won a clear majority on the city commission which they were able to hold throughout the war. Undoubtedly, the union's deliberately moderate strategy helped ease fears about a labor-dominated City Hall. Carl Swanson, a non-radical Buick worker who was U.A.W. regional director during the war, later explained how the goal of legitimizing the union's place in local society took precedence over all other aims. Despite their majority on the commission, he recalled,

We did not go in and dominate the picture. We did not appoint labor people to every position that was to be appointed, such as mayor and city manager.⁹⁴

In fact, from 1940 to 1944, the union supported a prominent Democratic businessman, William Osmond Kelly, as the commission's appointed mayor.

In 1946, renewed factionalism in the U.A.W. temporarily broke local labor's united front. When the Democrats renominated State Representative Casper Kenny, a member of Buick's anti-Reuther Local 599, the county P.A.C. endorsed a Republican, and Kenny was defeated. In the aftermath of this setback, the Buick local launched a vigorous attack on the P.A.C. Unity was restored by 1948, when the entire local labor movement tried to oust Sixth District Republican Congressman, William Blackney, a strong Taft-Hartley supporter. A heavy Republican turnout

⁹³ "The Chevrolet Worker," II, 8, September-October 1938 discusses the P.A.C. strategy. This Communist Party newsletter and other documents relating to the activity of Flint's small radical groups in politics may be found in the Kraus Collection, Box 16.

⁹⁴ U.A.W. Oral History Project interview, p. 45.

in the District's rural areas gave Blackney just enough votes (800 out of 146,200 cast) to hold onto his seat. Naturally, this defeat disappointed local labor leaders. Nevertheless, 1948 marked a turning point in the institutionalization of the local New Deal realignment. That year, the U.A.W. strengthened its alliance with local Democrats by providing the Party with a precinct-by-precinct organization of campaign workers. In subsequent years, as this electoral 'machine' was perfected, the union won a permanent, powerful voice for its members in Flint politics.⁹⁵

The New Deal realignment in Flint was significant. Most importantly, it expressed industrial working people's independence from the political leadership of the local business class. After 1932, business class factions no longer defined the political spectrum in Flint. Instead, the rapid growth of a blue-collar, Democratic voting electorate created the basis for genuine two-party competition. The fact that this competition revolved around the New Deal's extension of federal assistance to the unemployed, the poor, and industrial unions (rather than socialism) should not obscure its class-conscious character. During the 1930s and 1940s, politics in Flint pitted a well-organized anti-labor, anti-New Deal Republican business class against an increasingly well-organized pro-labor, pro-New Deal working class.

⁹⁵ The role of the U.A.W. in postwar Flint politics is examined at length in George D. Blackwood, The United Automobile Workers of America, 1935-51 (Chicago, 1951), pp. 395ff. Blackwood surveyed voter behavior in three heavily working class wards for the period 1940-50. He found that UAW-backed candidates were successful in approximately half of all the decade's elections. However, this figure disguises labor's real influence since union-backed candidates won nearly all the "important" (national and state) contests. Apparently, just thirteen percent of the union families in these wards never voted with the union. Significantly, George Blackwood discovered that nearly forty percent of the union wives he surveyed voted against the UAW's candidates (and thus, against their husbands). He

In retrospect, it is easy to suggest that liberal Democrats coopted Flint's emerging working class in the 1930s, and thus prevented it from finding its own, presumably more radical, political identity. Happily, there is no need to resort to such a condescending interpretation. The New Deal realignment in Flint was no trick. The majority of the city's working people were not duped. Rather, Democratic liberals gave shape and substance to the fundamentally moderate reform impulses of a local working class whose 'making' took place after a second industrial revolution. This working class had no hidden revolutionary inclination which was frustrated by the New Deal. Today, nearly a half century later, the trust it placed in federal reforms and industrial unionism may seem mistaken, just as its hero worship of Franklin Roosevelt and John L. Lewis seems naive. Yet, how can we, the children of post-Depression prosperity, permit such judgements? After all, in their own time, that trust and those heroes did help change government and society, making everyday life a little more dignified and humane. As a closer examination of the long struggle to create a united automobile workers union in Flint will shortly reveal, the logic of working class development in Depression-bound America lies not in hindsight or social theory, but in the complex experiences of those people who organized themselves as a class.

speculated that this opposition stemmed from resentment against the union as a force which took the men out of the home.

CHAPTER SEVEN

FROM COMPANY TOWN TO UNION TOWN: THE ORGANIZATION OF A WORKING CLASS IN FLINT DURING THE GREAT DEPRESSION

Flint was a natural . . . Frankly, we worked just as hard in Cleveland, Detroit, and in Wisconsin, but things moved faster in Flint.

--George Addes, Secretary-Treasurer
of the U.A.W.-C.I.O., 1936-1947

I. The Struggle for a Union

A new kind of working class was organized in Flint during the 1930s. It was dedicated to changing the American society through the creation of industrial unions and the establishment of a state which would provide economic security, stimulate economic growth, and protect collective bargaining rights. This non-revolutionary, reformist working class did not emerge overnight. Instead, it was 'made' only after the working people of Flint had been immersed in two long, closely intertwined experiences: the Great Depression and an extremely difficult struggle to set up an auto workers union. Both of these experiences were essential to the timing and logic of working class development. Without the Great Depression there would have been no struggle for a union, and without the union, there would have been no lasting working class.

In the early 1930s, those working people who stayed in the city

shared in the unprecedented degradation of living and working standards brought on by the collapse of the automobile boom. Some workers quickly found a tentative awareness of class in their common fate. The hunger marches and the Fisher Body strike of 1930, and the surge of blue-collar Democratic voters to the polls in 1932 were but the first signs that a majority of Flint's industrial workers were capable of acting in unison to better their lives and work if they had the opportunity to do so. Of course, as the failure of the Fisher Body strike demonstrated, the Hoover years were no time to fight for a union. Spiralling unemployment and the ever-present threat of repression made unionization virtually impossible. Moreover, Flint's size and its notorious reputation as a company town discouraged the kind of radical organizers who remained active in Detroit and other bigger cities. In 1931 and 1932, there were no attempts to unionize Flint workers, nor were there any significant public protests against wage cuts and lay-offs. Yet, as soon as general economic and political conditions started to improve in 1933, Flint's workers jumped at the chance to organize their own labor unions.

In the Vehicle City, the rather amorphous sense of class which had begun to emerge from the shared degradation of the Great Depression assumed a more concrete (that is to say, institutional) shape during the years 1933 to 1938 when auto workers fought General Motors for a union. Of course, the creation of the U.A.W. was not the only organizational effort of the 1930s, but it was by far the most important. As one longtime Buick worker later recalled, automobile unionism

was the main topic of conversation I would say in Flint for a period of a couple of years. No matter where you went, this is what people talked about, for and against.¹

¹ UAW Oral History Project interview with Norman Bully, October 12, 1961, p. 3.

The struggle actually began in the second half of 1933 when 'external' events combined to create conditions favorable for unionization. Stronger sales of automobiles and the resulting improvements in automotive employment, the inauguration of the New Deal (especially the elaboration of labor's right to organize contained in Section 7(a) of the National Industrial Recovery Act), and the announcement of an automobile industry organizing drive by the A.F. of L. generated an enormous, nearly universal urge to unionize among the General Motors' workers in Flint. As Carl Swanson, a rank and file leader in the A.F. of L.'s Federal Labor Union at Buick recollected,

There was no problem at all getting people to join the organization. . . People were longing for some kind of security in line with their work. We had seen so much discrimination. . . people who had a lot of service and had been laid off and friends and relatives kept on. It was easy to organize people.²

For the most part, the first workers to present themselves to the A.F. of L. joined in small groups that had already formed on the shopfloor. Even after these groups affiliated, many tried to maintain their autonomy and anonymity. Arthur Case, a shopfloor leader who had worked at Buick since 1919, later explained,

These were AFL members who had signed up with the AFL and had little groups of their own and had received no recognition from anyone, not even the AFL. . . Their representatives would be something like shop stewards, except you were not elected or recognized by management.³

Very often, it seems, these shopfloor leaders had some previous organizational experience, or someone in the family who had been a union member,

² UAW Oral History Project interview, p. 3.

³ UAW Oral History Project interview, p. 2.

and this hastened the task of union-building. At Fisher Body, workers quite naturally turned the veterans of the 1930 strike for guidance. "We looked for leadership from one who had already demonstrated his leadership by that early 1930 effort," recalled trimmer Everett Francis.⁴ As a result of this spontaneous organizational activity, when officials from the A.F. of L. arrived in Flint in the summer of 1933, they found local units already established and prepared for affiliation.

While lesser skilled workers were signing up with the A.F. of L.'s Federal Labor Unions, skilled workers, especially tool and die-makers and maintenance crews, joined the Flint section of the recently formed Mechanics Educational Society of America, an exclusive union of skilled automobile workers. By September 1933, Matthew Smith, the British-born MESA organizer in Flint, claimed ninety-eight percent of the city's eligible workers had enrolled in the union and were ready to strike to press their demands for a wage increase from eighty-five cents an hour back to the pre-Depression levels of \$1.50 per hour. These men also wanted to end overtime shifts during the model changeover that kept them in the plants as long as eighty hours a week.⁵ Under pressure from

⁴ UAW Oral History Project interview, p. 7. The backgrounds of rank-and-file organizers are revealed in the UAW Oral History Project. For example, Clayton Johnson of Fisher Body 2 and John McGill, a prominent leader at Buick, had got their first union experience as coal miners in the 1920s. Tom Klasey, who helped organize Federal Labor Unions at Chevrolet had been an I.W.W. activist in the Pacific Northwest during World War I. Herbert Richardson, a rank-and-file organizer at Fisher Body 2, was one of the twenty-three strike leaders fired at Fisher Body 1 in 1930. Bud Simons, the most famous Fisher Body 1 shop-floor leader had been fired for strike activity at the Grand Rapids Hayes-Ionia plant in 1929.

⁵ Flint's MESA executive committee actually scaled down their wage demand to \$1.00 per hour in meetings with Chevrolet division head William Knudsen on September 21st. See "Stenographic Report of Hearing in the matter of Tool and Die Makers Strike in the Detroit Area, National Labor

Smith and his militant followers in Flint, who had struck on September 22 to take advantage of the model change, MESA members all over southeast Michigan downed their tools on September 26th. Once the strike spread, Detroit's vehemently anti-union Employer's Association headed up the industry's resistance. After a month, frustrated MESA leaders allowed communist members to hold mass rallies to whip up support among production workers, but these had little effect since most lesser skilled workers were on model change layoff. In early November, the beaten strikers returned to their jobs. Though a complete failure in the large factories like those in Flint, this first ever industry-wide strike did win MESA a few concessions in some of the smaller shops in and around Detroit. There, MESA managed to survive for several more years. However, in Flint, for all practical purposes, the organization was dead by early 1934.⁶

Meanwhile, the A.F. of L.'s campaign in Flint was making rapid progress among the lesser skilled auto workers. Union organizers used mass meetings and continuous publicity in the Flint Weekly Review to spread their message. In general, the A.F. of L. attracted new members because they expected the union to take quick action to remedy their grievances. The militance of many Flint auto workers frightened A.F. of L. officials. One organizer, James Anderson, actually left the city in early November

Board of the National Recovery Administration, October 18, 1933,"
Sidney Fine Papers, MHC.

⁶ A.J. Muste's argument that the MESA strike stopped wage cutting and improved conditions in the industry is unconvincing. See The Automobile Industry and Organized Labor (Baltimore, 1936), pp. 29-31. For more balanced accounts see Sidney Fine, The Automobile Under the Blue Eagle (Ann Arbor, 1963), pp. 163ff; and Harry Dalheimer, A History of the Mechanics Educational Society of American in Detroit from Its Inception in 1933 to 1937 (Detroit, 1951), pp. 3-5.

1933 for that reason. "He is afraid that the AFL is not going to deliver enough support to the Flint area if a strike is forced upon him," William Ellison Chalmers told Selig Perlman, "and he thinks a strike is inevitable."⁷ In 1933, in terms of rank-and-file militance, it seemed as if Flint's lesser skilled auto workers were very similar to the skilled workers who joined the MESA.

Nevertheless, there were major differences between the two labor organizations. First, the rank-and-file in the A.F. of L. unions could not depend on their leaders to actually initiate strike action as Matthew Smith had for MESA. Secondly, unlike the several thousand tool and die makers who had joined MESA to raise wages and shorten hours, most workers joining the A.F. of L. sought job security and respect from management. Production workers had lost these things in the Great Depression, while skilled workers could usually still count on them. "It was not the money at the time," recalled "Jack" Palmer, a victim of the 1930 strike and one of the first enrolled in the A.F. of L. at Chevrolet's Parts and Service division,

it was the way we were treated in the shop. There was no dignity. The foreman would cuss you and order you around by "Hey, you" and by number, and we had no respect at all.⁸

Of course, the steep decline in sales and resulting pressure on the automobile companies to cut their labor costs and speedup production had brought on the change in management attitudes towards their employees. During the 1930s, all vestiges of the old paternalism disappeared in

⁷ "Chalmers to Perlman, November 9, 1933," in the Philips S. German Collection, Box 3, WSU. At the time, Chalmers was reporting on labor activity in the automobile industry. Professor Perlman had directed his dissertation, "Labor in the Automobile Industry," at the University of Wisconsin.

⁸ UAW Oral History interview, p. 5.

General Motors' Flint plants. In its place, supervisors and foremen learned to use fear and intimidation to discipline and drive their workers. W.A. Snider, a Buick foreman, related his experience at the NRA hearings held in December 1934. He told incredulous government investigators that his superiors had pounded foremen on the back, telling them to "Go ahead and get that work out."

"They would pound the foremen?", asked an NRA official.

"Yes sir," answered Snider.

"And you would have to pound the men?", queried the investigator.

"Yes sir. Right on the back," replied Snider. This was known as getting work out with "a sledgehammer."⁹ Other times, management manipulated workers' fear of unemployment to achieve a desired production level. Ted La Duke, a machine operator in Chevrolet's flywheel department at this time remembered,

It was no uncommon occurrence for a foreman to go down to the man and tell him that he was not getting enough production from his job, and if he could not get it, there was lots of men waiting at the employment office for his job.¹⁰

The harsh treatment lesser skilled workers experienced day after day in the shops sustained enthusiasm for the new union, even after MESA's strike effort proved completely futile. Early in 1934, when membership in Flint comprised nearly half the A.F. of L.'s strength among the nation's auto workers, constant pressure from the rank-and-file forced reluctant union leaders to threaten a general automotive strike. This pressure 'from below' increased in February as more and more Flint

⁹ NRA Hearings, I. p. 163.

¹⁰ UAW Oral History Project interview, p. 3.

workers joined the A.F. of L. units at their plants in anticipation of a showdown with management. By early March, these various Federal Labor Unions had organized a city-wide council which claimed to represent 42,000 local auto workers. On the eve of the strike deadline, the local council sent representatives to Washington to urge A.F. of L. officials to order industrial action.¹¹ Much to the relief of union leaders, a confrontation was averted when President Roosevelt directly intervened to set up a special Automobile Labor Board to deal with the industry's problems. This settlement, which Roosevelt hailed as "a new course in social engineering," satisfied company representatives and the conservative national A.F. of L. leadership but very few of Flint's militant auto workers. Within a month of the March 25th settlement, three-fourths of the Federal Labor Union members in the city deserted the A.F. of L. never to return.¹²

Yet, clearly most Flint working people had not given up on a collective solution to their everyday problems. Sensing the defeatism of A.F. of L. officials like William Collins who, in the midst of the crisis, had assured the automobile companies, "I have never voted for a strike in my life. I have always opposed them." Flint's auto workers had merely rejected a union that was too weak to help them fight for recognition.

¹¹ UAW Oral History Project interview with Al Cook (the president of this local council), p. 13. Cook's claim was obviously inflated. Official paid up membership for Flint in March totaled just 14,000 persons. See AFL Membership Lists, Garman Collection, Box 1. The Federal Labor Unions were essentially locals set up at each major factory. According to national A.F. of L. strategy, auto workers would be temporarily organized into FLUs before being sorted out among the various established unions.

¹² AFL Membership Lists, Garman Collection. Roosevelt is quoted in Fine, The Automobile Under the Blue Eagle, p. 223.

and for the restoration of decent working and living conditions.¹³ YWCA industrial secretary, Helen Graves, told NRA investigators several months later that the women workers she supervised (including those who had been too afraid to join the union) "were unanimous in thinking that it had been a mistake they had not struck."¹⁴ Among the men, Fisher Body 2's Herbert Richardson best summed up the prevailing mood with his recollection that "everybody said we got sold down the river."¹⁵

In the aftermath of this bitter disappointment, and in the face of a vigorous anti-union counteroffensive by General Motors, a nucleus of union stalwarts were unable to re-establish the A.F. of L. in the city's automobile plants. Local Federal Labor Unions were reduced to mere shadows by further defections, and by 1936, the city's auto workers council was thoroughly infiltrated by company agents.¹⁶ Representatives from the A.F. of L. continued to hold meetings in Flint in 1934 and 1935, and the Flint Weekly Review dutifully continued to support the federation's efforts, but these things could not restore the union's lost creditability. Automobile Labor Board elections held in the big factories in early 1935 revealed the overwhelming majority of the city's auto workers preferred no union to the discredited A.F. of L. In fact, the A.F. of L. received only twelve percent of the nearly 29,000 votes cast, just a few more than the Works Councils, company unions which General Motors had set up in

¹³ Fine, Automobile Under the Blue Eagle, P. 148.

¹⁴ NRA Hearings, II, p. 536.

¹⁵ UAW Oral History Project interview, p. 9. Other remembrances of this demoralizing period confirm the notion that the A.F. of L. was deserted because it had failed to act. In particular, see the interview with Carl Swanson, a rank-and-file leader at Buick, in the UAW Oral History Project, pp. 9-10.

¹⁶ AFL Membership Lists. Also see Fine, Sit-Down, pp. 108-14.

1933 to comply with Section 7(a) and block the A.F. of L. ¹⁷

Undoubtedly, General Motors' deliberate attempts to intimidate union supporters contributed to the organizational failures of 1934-36. Widespread terror was generated by the mass firings and selective victimization of MESA and A.F. of L. members in 1934; and by the black-listing, visits by foremen, stockpiling of weapons and tear gas, and incredibly widespread use of shopfloor informers and paid spies which followed.¹⁸ Though General Motors carefully pruned its industrial relations files when it came under investigation by Senator Robert La Follette's Senate Subcommittee on Education and Labor in 1936, enough records survived to show that the company went to extraordinary lengths to repress union activity in its plants.¹⁹

¹⁷ A plant-by-plant breakdown on the ALB elections in Flint can be found in the Garman Collection, Box 2, WSU. Al Cook, the conservative president of the city-wide auto workers council who served on Fisher Body 1's Works Council recalled the employee representation plan "was sort of a farce. They did some things like getting the toilets policed properly." (UAW Oral History Project interview, p. 14) At Buick, some departments showed their disdain for the Works Council by electing comic strip characters like Popeye and Mickey Mouse to represent them. Most workers simply refrained from participating. Only the women workers at the AC showed any enthusiasm for the Works Council. For details on the AC and Buick Works Councils see Records of the United States Senate, 78th Congress (La Follette Civil Liberties Committee), RG46, Box 123, Files N1 and N2.

¹⁸ General Motors' anti-labor tactics are summarized in Jerold S. Auerbach, Labor and Liberty: The La Follette Committee and the New Deal (New York 1966), pp. 109-14. Reprisals were commonplace at all the major plants in 1934. Sixty-four shopfloor leaders were fired at Fisher Body 1 and 2. At Chevrolet, 126 workers were fired and appealed their cases to the Automobile Labor Board. One hundred twenty three were reinstated. However, when the Supreme Court invalidated the NRA in May 1935, the company fired "practically all the same ones that had been fired the year before." (UAW Oral History Project interview with Ted La Duke, pp. 11-2). Also see interview with Al Cook, p. 15; and Fine, Sit Down, pp. 37ff.

¹⁹ For example, in the eighteen months following the A.F. of L. strike threat, GM spent at least one million dollars hiring private detectives to ferret out union sympathizers. The evidence (which runs more than 700 pages) is located in Violations of Free Speech and the

The threat of unionization gradually forced General Motors to centralize and standardize personnel policies in the 1930s. From Detroit, top company officials liked to stress the cooperative nature of their relations with workers. However, in reality, authoritarianism and repression were standard operating procedure. For instance, Arnold Lenz, general manager of Chevrolet in Flint, told his superintendents and foremen, "We expect you to discharge anyone who is found circulating a petition or soliciting names for a petition inside our plants."²⁰ To find such union sympathizers, Lenz employed undercover detectives who worked in the plant and the town, while his foremen cultivated the kind of informers most workers branded "stool pigeons." By mid-1936, according to a National Conciliation Service study of management practices at Chevrolet, 3700 of 7700 workers had been directly affected by some form of anti-union discrimination or harassment.²¹ Although Lenz was arguably the most repressive general manager in Flint, the story was essentially the same in all of the city's General Motors plants. Workers had to work and live in fear if they were at all critical of the company. Bob Travis, a dynamic United Automobile Workers of America organizer who arrived in Flint August 1936, described the prevailing mood for the

Rights of Labor: Hearings before a Subcommittee of the Committee on Education and Labor, U.S. Senate, 75th Congress 1st session, pursuant to S. Res. 266, Parts 6 and 7 (GPO 1937)

²⁰ Interoffice memorandum from Arnold Lenz, "To all Superintendents, General Foremen, and Foremen," dated May 8, 1936, in National Conciliation Case File 176-1034, NRC. Also see general statement on company personnel policy in memoranda, "To all General Managers, Car Group," dated April 13, 1934 and August 13, 1935 in Records of the La Follette Civil Liberties Committee, RG 46, Box 123, File N1. Additional information is located in material from GM's executive training program dated 1933 and 1935 in Henry Kraus Collection, Box 16, WSU.

²¹ Case file 176-1034.

La Follette committee a few months later. "When I first got to Flint," he recalled,

I could not get more than 25 or 30 people together. . . . They were afraid. They knew there were spies in the local union. . . . Therefore it was necessary to organize little home meetings in members' basements.²²

Always a company town, Flint had been turned into a kind of industrial compound by General Motors' anti-union tactics.

Despite its effectiveness in the short run, the giant corporation's authoritarian response to threatened unionization strengthened many workers' resentments and their resolve to strike back when the next opportunity presented itself. Above all else, the treatment auto workers received at work sustained their growing conviction that General Motors was a common enemy. Older workers resented the speedup and the brutal discipline which compared so poorly with pre-Depression conditions. One beleaguered worker explained in a letter to Senator La Follette,

I have worked at Chevrolet for over 9 years and have seen the attitude of management towards their employees change from where you used to be a man, to now you are less than their cheapest tool.²³

Younger workers, whom bosses valued for their speed and agility, felt equally abused though their sense of what would be acceptable was not as clearly focused as those who had started in the factories during best years of the auto boom. For these workers, a wrenching personal experience often led to the commitment to collective action. Twenty-five years later, Clayton Johnson could still recall the day, June 30, 1936, when he collapsed on the line at Fisher Body 2, and was yanked up by his

²² Violations of Free Speech and Labor, Part 7, p. 2320.

²³ "Ward Lindsay to Senator La Follette, January 10, 1937," Records of the La Follette Civil Liberties Committee, Box 123, File N4.

foreman and told "to get back on my god-damn feet." As he remembered,

At the time I was only 28 years old. I had the feeling pretty much that if I had to work under these conditions, I would just as soon be dead. . . I have never felt very kindly towards General Motors since this time.²⁴

He was not alone.

Flint's automotive working people also felt degraded by the loss of their homes, their cars, and especially the 'steady work' which, in retrospect, increasingly made everyday life in the 1920s look satisfying and respectable. Ralph Burney, an unemployed Buick production worker, revealed this common way of thinking in 1934 when he told NRA investigators,

I think a man with a family should have \$30 a week. I know I could get by on a lot less than that, but a man wants to live. He wants to live like he should live and used to live.²⁵

As the Depression dragged on, even some of the most conservative, individualistic workers began to recognize the need for a common response to the debased condition of their lives. Frank Davidson, an unemployed Chevrolet toolroom worker who was born in Flint in 1884 and had "always worked steady up until 1930," described his growing consciousness of class this way in 1934. "I was never a radical," he said,

I always like to do my work, and always liked to come and go, but here is what I have found out since 1933, that you have to be in the group sometime.²⁶

Trapped by the Great Depression, unable simply to quit and move on as so many unsatisfied workers had done in the past, Flint's automobile

²⁴ UAW Oral History Project interview, pp. 5-6.

²⁵ NRA Hearings, I, p. 95 (emphasis added).

²⁶ NRA Hearings, II, pp. 474 and 479-80 (emphasis added).

workers discovered a collective identity in their rejection of miserable working and living standards (which they blamed on General Motors), and in the shared memories of the decent jobs and lives they had pursued in the 1920s.

For the many who embraced it, this new consciousness of class was primarily a reflection on twentieth century experience. Cut off from older working class traditions by their overwhelmingly rural backgrounds, and by the failure of every previous effort to organize an independent working class institution in the city, Flint's working people re-interpreted their own history during the Great Depression. From a kind of 'dialogue' between their everyday experiences and their remembered past, most of the city's industrial working people drew a common identity, and thus a rough set of common expectations for which they demonstrated a willingness to fight at some point in the Depression decade.

The demands of the nearly 1500 A.C. Sparkplug workers who had joined the A.F. of L. by March 1934 exemplify the logic of this historical process. In a letter to plant manager F.S. Kimmerling, FLU president stated the workers' primary demands were a reinstatement of those fired for union activity and a return to wages and production speeds which "approximate the nineteen twenty-eight schedule."²⁷ In addition, Minzey informed Kimmerling that the workers also endorsed the union's wider demands for seniority based on length of service, an impartial grievance procedure, union participation in time study, and a thirty hour week (to spread the work). At the time, like the rest of General Motors, A.C. management ignored the demands, telling workers the company union (the A.C. Employees

²⁷ "Minzey to Kimmerling, March 18, 1934," Kraus Collection, Box 8. (emphasis added).

Association) had all "the machinery for collective bargaining."²⁸ Nonetheless, the incident was significant for it reveals how, in the context of the Depression, looking backward could generate the demands for progressive reform among workers who had never before acted as a class.

During the relatively quiet months between the national automotive settlement of March 1934 and the beginning of the big sit-down strike in December 1936, continued economic insecurity, intensified shopfloor discipline, and General Motors' outright repression of dissent literally took the fight out of most workers. The small groups of Communist, Socialist, and "Progressive" auto workers described in Chapter Six above did continue to encourage genuine independent unionism in the big plants, but their efforts were thwarted by the all-pervasive fear of repression, and by the corruption and treachery of the local Executive Board which was set up to administer the rump of the A.F. of L.'s auto workers' union in the city. By the summer of 1936, Wyndham Mortimer, who was sent to Flint to report on the condition of the local union by the breakaway United Automobile Workers of America, found only four of the thirteen members of the Executive Board could be trusted completely. The others were either inactive, or suspected stool pigeons. In particular, he cited the local Board's policy of investigating every single application for union membership as deliberate sabotage. He reported,

It was quite evident from the first that the newly elected Executive Board had adopted a policy of keeping the union small, prevent it from growing so it could be more readily controlled.²⁹

²⁸ "Laurence Goodrich, chairman A.C. Employees Association, to all A.C. Employees, April 20, 1934," Kraus Collection, Box 8.

²⁹ "Mortimer to International Executive Officers, September 27, 1936," Homer Martin Collection, Box 1.

Given these difficulties, it is not surprising that most Flint auto workers simply gave up the hope of organizing an effective union in the two and half years preceding the appearance of the new U.A.W.A.-C.I.O. in the city in late 1936. Nevertheless, events in these year also revealed that important segments of Flint's automotive workforce remained extremely militant as they awaited a second chance to unionize General Motors.

Friction between management and workers did occasionally lead to confrontation in 1934 and 1935. In May 1934, two thousand of Fisher Body 1's five thousand workers struck over piece rate cuts, the firing of union activists, and the refusal of management to meet with worker representatives other than the Works Council. The strike, which lasted a week, coincided with similar job actions at other Fisher Body plants in the Midwest. It was settled only after General Motors' vice-presidents William Knudsen and Charles Fisher met with the A.F. of L.'s Francis Dillon to arrange terms for a return to work.³⁰

A year later, a similar incident occurred after union workers shut down a Chevrolet transmission plant in Toledo, Ohio, a hundred and twenty miles away. The Toledo strike encouraged A.F. of L. stalwarts at Buick to threaten a strike in key departments as a display of solidarity and in support of their own demands. The Buick union (which had approximately 500 dues-paying members at the time) secretly polled workers and found a few departments fully behind their efforts, some

³⁰ The agreement announced on May 16th simply allowed all workers on the payroll before the strike started to return to their jobs without discrimination. The company further agreed to hear workers' grievances and send them on to the Automobile Labor Board if they could not be settled. See Scrapbook, Volume II, pp. 79-88, Joe Brown Collection, WSU; and Scrapbook, Volume I, Francis Dillon Collection, WSU.

almost completely opposed, and others badly split over the issue.³¹ Despite this news, the members sent representatives to Toledo, got permits to distribute handbills, and passed a resolution calling on Francis Dillon to announce a May 11th strike deadline. The minority who opposed the strike injected red-baiting into the debate after the local Communists distributed handbills which asked workers to show solidarity and join the threatened job action. Dillon used this issue as an excuse for ignoring the Buick local's strike resolution until the deadline passed, and a settlement in Toledo undercut its original purpose.³² Although protesting workers gained nothing tangible from the Fisher Body 1 strike of 1934 and the Buick strike threat of 1935, the incidents confirmed two important, widely-held impressions: first, that there was a core group of militant workers in the big automobile plants; and secondly, that the national A.F. of L. would indeed back away from a clash with General Motors whenever it was needed.

In the second half of 1936, after the United Automobile Workers union had severed its ties with the A.F. of L. and joined John L. Lewis' new Congress of Industrial Organizations, Flint's frustrated militants finally saw a new opportunity to unionize General Motors materialize. Undoubtedly, 'external' events like passage of the National Labor Relations Act (also known as the Wagner Act), the re-election of Franklin Roosevelt (which seemed to imply the enforcement of the Wagner Act), and the opening of Senator Robert La Follette's investigation of

³¹ "Minutes 1935-37," Local 599 Collection, Box 1, Series 3, WSU; AFL Membership Lists; and UAW Oral History Project interview with Carl Swanson, P. 6.

³² "Minutes 1935-37;" Flint Weekly Review, May 3, 10, and 17, 1935; and Fine, The Automobile Under the Blue Eagle, pp. 393-4.

General Motors' labor practices inspired confidence among discontented auto workers. But, most importantly, the rejuvenated U.A.W. began sending organizers to Flint who believed in hard work and rank-and-file militance.³³ After just six months under this new and supportive leadership, local auto workers were ready to fight and win one of the most important strikes in American labor history.

Admittedly, the U.A.W. organizers sent to Flint in 1936 were political radicals. Wyndham Mortimer and Bob Travis, the first two to arrive, and Henry Kraus, who established the Flint Auto Worker to spread the C.I.O. message, were closely identified with the Communist faction of the new union's generally radical leadership.³⁴ Roy Reuther was an acknowledged Socialist, as were two local organizers, Kermit and Genora Johnson. As radicals, these organizers did have an advantage contacting the tiny cells of indigenous Communists and Socialists who were among the city's most militant auto workers. Yet the success of the new union in Flint cannot be traced directly to the political connections of its representatives. Rather, it was the willingness of the radical organizers to support local militants on local issues that ultimately attracted the majority of the auto workers of Flint to the U.A.W. As Arthur Case,

³³ Militant auto workers in Flint had been in contact with the C.I.O. since December 1935. These people were among the first contacted by the U.A.W. in 1936. See "Minutes of the Flint Trade Unionists Progressive Club" for November-December 1935 in Box 2 of the Homer Martin Collection, WSU.

³⁴ Homer Martin, a politically conservative ex-preacher from Kansas City, was the union's compromise president, but the Executive Board was dominated by political radicals. All eleven Board members, including vice-president Mortimer, had worked in auto plants. Mortimer and Travis both had experience leading rank-and-file strikes in Cleveland and Toledo respectively. See Fine, Sit-Down, pp. 89-93.

the prominent Buick activist, put it, "Our main reason for calling in the CIO was we got no action from the AFL at all."³⁵

Unlike their A.F. of L. predecessors, the U.A.W.'s organizers had to earn the confidence of Flint's new working class. In addition, they had to overcome the numbing fear induced by three years of systematic, anti-union repression. To begin, they worked patiently for several months re-establishing contact between the union and those workers who were known militants. Black workers and ethnic groups were also contacted. To increase the strength of the activist minority, the A.F. of L.'s plant-based locals were abandoned in favor of one big unit, Local 156. Bob Travis informed U.A.W. vice-president Fred Pieper that this plan of organization was "progressing very well" by mid-October 1936. He wrote,

A great number of meetings are being held in the homes, small towns, halls outside the union hall, and in little house parties. Every possible opportunity is being taken advantage of. . . Also committees have been set up within the foreign speaking people. . . The sentiment of Flint is very good. If it is possible for the local to erase this fear from their minds, I am sure Local 156 will be one of the largest in the International.³⁶

Banned from advertising in the local newspapers or on the local radio station (which was owned by the vehemently anti-union Flint Journal), the union's organizers relied heavily on Henry Kraus' well-written, professional-looking newspaper, The Flint Auto Worker, for publicity. By December, Kraus was printing a bi-weekly, 50,000 copy edition which union men all over the city delivered door-to-door.³⁷

³⁵ UAW Oral History Project interview, p. 5.

³⁶ The letter, dated October 19, 1936 is one of Travis' many very descriptive letters located in Box 8 of the Kraus Collection, WSU.

³⁷ Telegram: "Travis to Kraus, December 16, 1936;" and "Travis to

To overcome General Motors' intimidation of Flint workers, Travis and his associates relied on the emotional power of direct action. They especially encouraged the shopfloor groups which were re-forming at Fisher Body and Buick. In October and November, U.A.W. officials consistently backed up rank-and-file militants at Fisher Body 1 who called frequent, "quickie" sit-downs to impress management with the seriousness of their greivances. Travis also made converts at Buick by publicly endorsing the demands a committee of shopfloor leaders were making on divisional president, H.H. Curtice.³⁸ In December, news of U.A.W. strikes against General Motors plants in Atlanta, Kansas City, and Cleveland added credibility to union organizers' pledges of solidarity with local militants. So did Roy Reuther's quick mobilization of U.A.W. support for Flint bus drivers who went out on strike. Still, most auto workers held back, unwilling to risk open membership, and uncertain about the radical reputations of the U.A.W. leadership. On the eve of the great sit-down strike, only ten percent of the city's 45,000 auto workers had actually signed up with the U.A.W.-C.I.O.³⁹

II. The Great Sit-Down Strike

The story of the making-union sit-down strike against General Motors is a familiar one. However, most often it has been told to

Adolph Germer (of the C.I.O.), October 28, 1936" in Box 8, Kraus Collection.

³⁸ See correspondence between Ed Geiger (recording secretary of Local 156) and H.H. Curtice dated October 29 and November 3, 1936 in the Kraus Collection, Box 8. Also see Fine, Sit-Down, p. 117; and Flint Auto Worker, I, 3, November 1936, p. 3. Bud Simons estimated that there were just six hundred union members at the key Fisher Body 1 plant (out of 8000 workers) when the big sit-down strike began (UAW Oral History Project interview, p. 16).

³⁹ Fine, Sit-Down, p. 146.

emphasize the national significance of an event which ended with General Motors' recognition of the United Automobile Workers union.⁴⁰ Looked at from a different perspective, with an eye for its place in the 'making' of Flint's working class, the great sit-down strike appears as just another chapter, albeit the most important one, in the local struggle to remedy the demeaning circumstances of everyday life and work brought on by the Great Depression. "They have come to the mature conclusion it must be done if they and their children are to have a decent life," wrote one reporter covering the women who threw their energies into the picketing and other support work performed by the red-bereted Emergency Brigade organized by Genora Johnson.⁴¹ Certainly, this description applied equally well to the men who initiated the strike and sat in the plants for forty-three long, cold winter days.

The bitter struggle began on December 30th when a young, militant minority of the workforce shut down Fisher Body 2 without the prior approval of union leaders. Fisher Body 1 militants, led by the charismatic shop steward Bud Simons, quickly followed the lead of Fisher Body 2. In combination with other strikes elsewhere in the General Motors empire, the sit-downs at Fisher Body 1 and 2 soon forced Buick and Chevrolet management in the city to cut back their operations for lack of car bodies. Bud Simons remembered the first forty-eight hours of the strike were "one big mass of confusion" as shopfloor militants and union officials tried

⁴⁰ Sidney Fine's Sit-Down is the authoritative 'biography' of the strike. Henry Kraus' The Many and the Few: a chronicle of the dynamic auto workers (Los Angeles, 1947) is a far more dramatic, insider's account.

⁴¹ Mary Heaton Vorse, "The Emergency Brigade in Flint," New Republic, XC, February 17, 1937, p. 38. The recent documentary film, "With Babies and Banners" (New Day Films, Women's Labor History Project, 1978) details the work of the Emergency Brigade.

to develop a coordinated plan of action.⁴² As U.A.W. vice-president and longtime leader of the union's Communist faction, George Addes, recalled, the rank-and-file, not union leaders, determined the initial course of events. "There was no plan," he recollected, "We actually had no choice in the matter, it just developed too rapidly."⁴³

In Flint, the strike brought long simmering class-conscious hostilities out into the open. Once again, company officials and local authorities combined to defeat the sit-down by mobilizing all the resources at their disposal. To begin, the company sought and got an injunction from Judge Black, ordering the strikers to vacate the plants, but the union discredited the court order by publicizing facts about the judge's substantial ownership of General Motors stock.⁴⁴ In the aftermath of this fiasco, leaders of the city's automotive establishment formed an anti-union Flint Alliance on January 7, 1937. Under the direction of former mayor and Buick paymaster George Boysen, the Flint Alliance condemned the sit-down as the work of an alien, communistic minority, and pledged itself to protect "the Security of Our Jobs, Our Homes, and Our Community." At first, Boysen tried to enroll virtually everybody in Flint (including children!) in the Alliance. However, special pressure to sign up was put on non-striking auto workers by their supervisors and

⁴² UAW Oral History Project interview, p. 28. U.A.W. leaders had been planning to call out Fisher Body 1 immediately after the turn of the new year, but the action of Flint militants forced them to revise their plans. See Irving Bernstein, Turbulent Years: A History of the American Worker 1933-1941 (Boston 1971), p. 524.

⁴³ UAW Oral History project interview, June 25, 1960, pp. 15-6.

⁴⁴ The Judge reportedly owned \$200,000 worth of GM stock. Later in the strike, the union used news that Genessee County Prosecuting Attorney J.R. Joseph owned GM stock to undercut his effort to serve 300 "John Doe" warrants against strike leaders.

foremen in hopes of creating a massive back-to-work movement.⁴⁵

Despite the pressures, most auto workers did not join the Flint Alliance. Instead (if their actions after the strike are any indication), they stayed on the sidelines, waiting and hoping for a U.A.W. victory. With violence in the streets, constant harassment both on and off the job, and the memories of earlier union setbacks still fresh in their minds, the reluctance of the majority to reveal their loyalties is understandable. Older men with families and women workers at the AC were more easily intimidated, and tended to avoid open commitment. Consequently, the sit-down strike was carried on by a young, mostly unmarried minority of the workforce. As one participant later recalled, "The younger guys had the guts and said what the hell am I risking anyway."⁴⁶

The first, and most violent confrontation of the strike occurred on January 11th, the same day two hundred of the city's leading businessmen and professionals pledged themselves to the Flint Alliance at a downtown luncheon. City manager John Barringer and representatives of General Motors determined they could oust the hundred or so strikers at Fisher Body 2 by having the company's guards (who were still on duty at the plant gates) cut off the flow of food and heat to the factory's occupied second floor. The union responded by calling up reinforcements, and sending a special 'flying squadron' of pickets armed with billies to seize the main gate. When the union men arrived at the plant entrance, the guards retreated, locked themselves in a bathroom, and notified the

⁴⁵ Evidence of the kind of pressure applied may be found in files "Flint Sit Down - Flint Alliance" and "Flint Sit Down - Employee Groups Against the Strike," Kraus Collection, Box 9.

⁴⁶ Interview with Larry Huber, director UAW region 1-C, February 22, 1977, notes in my possession.

Flint police they had been captured by the strikers. The police answered the guards' plea for assistance with an all-out assault on the plant. Using tear gas to disperse pickets on the street, the officers charged the main gate. Twice, the police were repulsed by strikers who threw heavy door hinges and bottles from the second floor while directing a high pressure stream of water from a fire hose on the ground floor. Frustrated and freezing (it was just sixteen degrees fahrenheit), the police fired into the crowd of surging pickets as they fell back across the Flint River. Fourteen union supporters were wounded by the gunfire, but the day belonged to the U.A.W.-C.I.O.⁴⁷

The events of January 11th, known in union folklore as the "Battle of the Running Bulls," boosted the morale of the strikers, strengthening their resolve not to evacuate the plants. "Everyone was in a wonderful uplift," remembered Henry Kraus,

Despite the many who had been wounded and the occasional gas shell that came zooming down the street, all carried the intoxication of a great victory.⁴⁸

The battle also had an important effect on the still undecided majority of Flint's auto workers. Victor Reuther recalled,

The drama the [huge crowd of] bystanders witnessed put our point across more cogently than any words could have done, and served to nudge thousands of Flint workers off dead center.⁴⁹

Immediately after the police retreated, part of the crowd actually

⁴⁷ The attack on Fisher Body 2 is described in greater detail in Bernstein, Turbulent Years, pp. 529-31. A personal narrative of these events by a union supporter who manned one of the sound trucks which directed the strikers' defense can be found in the UAW Oral History Project interview with Tom Klasey, pp. 28-32.

⁴⁸ The Many and the Few, p. 138.

⁴⁹ The Brother Reuther, p. 157.

stopped a police car, turned it over and stripped it. More significantly, for days afterwards, the union signed up new members who wanted to help in the fight. Emotionally, the union victory over the Flint police on the icy streets in front of Fisher Body 2 was one of the critical turning points of the long strike.

The 'Battle of the Running Bulls' had one other important result. In the aftermath of the street fighting, Michigan's new governor Frank Murphy, a New Deal Democrat with very close ties to President Roosevelt, finally decided to order a contingent of the National Guard into the city. However, much to the chagrin of Flint's automotive establishment, the Governor refused to use the troops in their traditional role as strike-breakers. Instead, under Murphy's direction (which Roosevelt endorsed), the National Guard was deployed as a buffer to prevent further violence. For many years, Frank Murphy's decision to let the strike continue formed the focus of local business class hatred of the New Deal. "He didn't understand . . . ," C.S. Mott told Studs Terkel in 1969,

He was governor during the sit-down strikes, and he didn't do his job. He didn't enforce the law. He kept his hands off. He didn't protect our property. They had no right to sit-down there. They were illegally occupying it. The owners had the right to demand from the Governor to get those people out. It wasn't done. The same as today.⁵⁰

Unable to command the armed forces of the state to dislodge the strikers, the company joined in the mediation efforts which Murphy commenced in Lansing on January 14th. A verbal agreement which would have ended the strike by granting recognition to "employee organizations" was worked out, with evacuation of the Flint Fisher Body plants and face-to-face bargaining set for Monday January 18th. Though union president

⁵⁰ Hard Times, pp. 162-3 (emphasis added).

Homer Martin fully supported this plan, union radicals and the C.I.O.'s John Brophy were highly suspicious of General Motors' refusal to put anything in writing. Their suspicions were justified. On January 17th, the company revealed its true intentions when vice-president William Knudsen told the press that the Flint Alliance would be recognized as an employee representative with the same rights as the U.A.W. Of course, the so-called "Lansing agreement" was promptly denounced by union leaders, and the stalemate continued in Flint.

As the siege dragged on, the strikers in the plants received invaluable assistance from union members and other supporters (like the women of the Emergency Brigade) on the outside. One restaurant (greatly augmented by a volunteer staff) managed to feed the men with food donated by the U.A.W., a few nearby farmers, and worker-hunters. Inside the barricaded factories, shop stewards enforced military-like discipline and routine to sustain morale and prevent senseless vandalism.⁵¹ The strikers also received an enormous amount of aid from other U.A.W. locals. Unionists from other cities contributed foodstuffs, walked the picket lines, and, on occasion, took their own turns sitting-in the struck plants. In fact, on crucial days, caravans of U.A.W. members from all over Michigan and Ohio were rushed into the city to reinforce the Flint strikers. In addition, the green berets of Detroit's Women's Emergency Brigade and the white berets of the Emergency Brigade from Toledo were frequently seen walking the picket lines. Altogether, the constant participation of

⁵¹ State labor commissioner George Krogstad was extremely impressed by the order and discipline of the men in the plant he visited near the end of the strike. He found the machinery oiled and covered, the floors clean, and generally no signs of damage. See "Brief Resume of My Trip through the Strike Area," Frank Murphy Papers, Box 56, MHC. Also see UAW Oral History Project interview with Clayton Johnson, pp. 7-13; and Fine, Sit-Down, Chapter Six, "The Sit-Down Community."

working people from other industrial cities taught Flint's workers a lesson in solidarity they would not soon forget. In subsequent months, whenever striking workers elsewhere in the Midwest needed help, Flint could be counted on to provide some form of assistance.⁵²

In late January, U.S. Secretary of Labor Frances Perkins tried to mediate the dispute, but failed because General Motors' president Alfred Sloan absolutely refused to meet with any union or C.I.O. officials until the Flint strikers vacated the Fisher Body plants. By this time, the company was getting desperate. U.A.W. support strikes in nine other cities had virtually halted the production of General Motors' cars nationwide.⁵³ Hoping to force the issue, the company returned to the Flint courts and got a new evacuation order from Judge Paul Gadola. Local 156 responded by taking the offensive. On February 1st, union men seized the vital Chevrolet No. 4 engine plant after luring company guards away by creating a disturbance in another, nearby Chevy factory. At this point, tensions mounted. City manager Barringer announced the formation of a special "police reserve" to break the strike.

⁵² For example, in July 1937, a mass meeting of more than five thousand auto workers heard representatives of the Youngstown, Ohio steel strikers request food for their people. Flint workers responded by sending two truckloads of food including, 1500 pounds of sugar, 650 pounds of coffee, 700 pounds of rice, 500 pounds of navy beans, and hundreds of cases of assorted canned goods. Flint workers also picketed in Monroe, Michigan that month during its very violent steel strike. In April 1941, Flint workers drove to Dearborn in hundred car squads (five men to a car/one squad per shift) to provide assistance to striking Ford workers. See the Flint Auto Worker, I, 32, July 29, 1937; "Ted Silvey (C.I.O. Relief director in Youngstown) to Bob Travis, July 27, 1937," Kraus Collection, Box 1, WSU.

⁵³ General Motors was able to produce just 151 automobiles in the first ten days of February. One of the lessons it learned from the strike involved de-centralization of production facilities to decrease its vulnerability to strikes like the great sit-down.

"We will go down to the plants shooting," the over-zealous Barringer reportedly exclaimed.⁵⁴ At the same time, hundreds of extra pickets rushed to Flint from Detroit, Lansing, and Toledo. To avoid a certain bloodbath, Governor Murphy steadfastly refused city and company requests to enforce the Gadola injunction. Instead, with the direct assistance of President Roosevelt, Murphy finally pressured General Motors' William Knudsen into bargaining with C.I.O. president Lewis and U.A.W. vice-president Mortimer.

On February 11, 1937, General Motors, the world's biggest open-shop industrial employer, capitulated on the principle of written recognition. Knudsen signed a six-month contract with the United Automobile Workers that called for the evacuation of the occupied plants and a return to work without discrimination. Under this contract, the union was granted the right to be the sole bargaining agent for its members. Negotiations for a longer-term contract specifying wages, hours, and working conditions were scheduled to begin almost immediately.⁵⁵ The U.A.W. victory in the General Motors' sit-down strike marked a turning point in American labor

⁵⁴ The Flint Auto Worker, I, 15, February 6, 1937, p. 1. Also see Slyvester, "City Management," pp. 124ff. Barringer was rebuked by the City Council on February 8th, after the two worker members of that body raised questions about his conduct of police affairs. On February 23rd, after the strike was settled, Barringer was removed from office by a five-to-three Council vote.

⁵⁵ The union's original list of demands (issued on January 4th) formed the basis for the collective bargaining which was scheduled to begin February 16th. It included the abolition of piecework, thirty hour week/six hour day, seniority based on length of service, reinstatement to all those discharged for union activity, establishment of management-union committees to set speed of production, and the creation of "a minimum rate of pay comensurate with an American standard of living." See "Homer Martin to Alfred P. Sloan and William Knudsen, dated January 4, 1937" in the John Brophy Papers, Catholic University Archives. Copies of the first U.A.W.-General Motors contract are located in the Frank Murphy Papers, Box 17, MHC.

history. In Flint, news of the giant corporation's surrender touched off a celebration which Roy Reuther could only "liken to some description of a country experiencing independence."⁵⁶

III. A Union Town

During the six months immediately following the U.A.W.'s great strike victory, there was no holding back the expression of local working class demands and solidarity in Flint. At the automobile factories, some workers still believed General Motors would ultimately defeat the union, but most signed up eagerly, hoping to improve their own working conditions and wages. Undoubtedly, the U.A.W.'s performance in the long sit-down strike was its biggest drawing card. Many auto workers who had been skeptical of all unions since the failures of M.E.S.A. and the A.F. of L. in 1933-34, rediscovered their faith in the labor movement in early 1937. John McGill, a former A.F. of L. enthusiast who initially had felt the U.A.W. was "just another fly-by-night organization," later described this typical reaction for the union's oral history project. "Naturally when we saw them stick by the sit-down strikers as they did," he recalled, "why we came back in droves."⁵⁷

By mid-March, only a month after the sit-down settlement, Local 156 had 25,000 Flint auto workers on its membership rolls.⁵⁸ This figure represented a clear majority of the city's automotive labor force. Fisher Body and Buick were the centers of union strength, while AC Sparkplug seemed the most resistant to the union's appeal. However, even in the

⁵⁶ Quoted in Victor G. Reuther, The Brothers Reuther, p. 171.

⁵⁷ UAW Oral History Project interview, July 27, 1960, p. 6.

⁵⁸ "Travis to Lester Boyd (UAW organizer in Philadelphia), dated

best organized plants, some departments had very few union members. In the spring of 1937, the union stepped up its pressure on these pockets of resistance. Sometimes, the methods of U.A.W. zealots were rather heavy-handed. "Jack" Palmer, one of the prime movers in the organization of Chevrolet's No. 3 Parts and Service plant, remembered,

We would get in a group and five or six of us would go over to a guy and say, "Now you are either going to join or we are going to throw you in the river." We would threaten them. Maybe some guy would get a little stubborn and then they (management) would send everybody home. But that was the way we organized the plants, through vicious tactics actually. People were scared, a lot of people were good people but they were just scared because maybe they figured this was not going to last.⁵⁹

Despite this very frank testimony, the role of coercion in the U.A.W.'s success in Flint should not be overemphasized. Most shopfloor leaders, especially those from the union's strongholds at Fisher Body and Buick, credited general rank-and-file militance, an effective shop steward system, and frequent victories in "quickie" strikes with sustaining Local 156's initial membership drive.⁶⁰

Looking back, Bud Simons, chief steward at Fisher Body 1, recalled, "Actually when the sit-down strike was over, the struggle began."⁶¹ There were at least three dozen significant strikes at the various General Motors units in Flint in the first few months after the company recognized the union. Most of these strikes occurred spontaneously in

March 16, 1937," Kraus Collection, Box 10.

⁵⁹ UAW Oral History Project interview, p. 15.

⁶⁰ For examples see UAW Oral History Project interviews with Bud Simons (pp. 49ff.) and Everett Francis (pp. 37ff.) for Fisher Body 1; Carl Swanson (pp. 12ff.) and Norman Bully (pp. 6ff.) for Buick; Ted LaDuke (pp. 24ff.) for Chevrolet; and Clayton Johnson (pp. 14ff.) for Fisher Body 2.

⁶¹ UAW Oral History Project interview, p. 49.

the city's Fisher Body and Chevrolet plants. Only one, an early April sit-down involving 130 women workers, took place at AC Sparkplug.⁶² For the most part, these "quickie" strikes allowed workers in specific departments to win concessions on the speed of production, pay scales, seniority, and the reinstatement of fired union members. In addition, they helped establish rank-and-file controlled shop steward systems which reflected the membership's desire to redress longstanding grievances against their supervisors and the company.

The rapid growth of shopfloor democracy in Flint surprised even the most radical union officials. In early March, Bob Travis wrote Henry Kraus,

The steward system is functioning properly. In fact, too much so. They want to meet every night. Everybody wants to talk. Leaders are popping up everywhere. One of the healthiest situations I have ever seen.⁶³

Departments led by young militants were particularly vulnerable to the unauthorized "quickie" strike. At first, Travis and his associates did not worry much about these job actions. Indeed, they seemed to view rank-and-file militance as sign of the union's vitality, and a necessary organizing tool. Yet, the repeated (often plantwide) disruptions of production in Flint clearly endangered the ongoing negotiations between the company and the union. Moreover, after March 13th, when the U.A.W. signed an interim contract with General Motors which, among other things, established a grievance procedure designed to circumvent the shop steward

⁶² Information on these strikes is compiled in the Scrapbooks titled, "Strikes" Auto: Feb. 15-28, 1937," "Strikes: Auto: March 1-31, 1937," "Strikes: Auto: April 1-30, 1937," and "Strikes: Auto: May 1 - June 29 1937" in FPL. Additional information is located in the Joe Brown Collection, Vol. 8, WSU.

⁶³ Letter dated March 8, 1937, in Kraus Collection, Box 10. In these early shop steward systems, each department had many stewards who in turn elected chief stewards as their representative to the shop (plant) committee.

systems and prevent wildcat strikes, the continued militance of Flint's rank-and-file violated official union policy.⁶⁴

Under pressure from their Executive Board, the company, and even Governor Murphy, the U.A.W. organizers in Flint tried to rein in local militants. Meetings were held at the various plants, and the membership dutifully passed resolutions prohibiting unauthorized strikes. But, still the disruptions continued. In fact, the number of wildcat strikes actually increased in late March and early April. Travis began to believe General Motors' "hirelings" and "reactionaries within our own movement" were fomenting the strikes to discredit local leaders and destroy the C.I.O. union.⁶⁵ Given General Motors' past anti-union record, such paranoia is understandable. Yet, it seems more likely that the wave of "quickie" strikes in March and April sprung from the rank-and-file's urge to settle their departmental grievances immediately through direct action. Workers who had won respect and changes in conditions through their own shop steward system did not give up that system easily. Where they could, workers on the shopfloor continued to pressure their supervisors to correct their grievances directly. In late April, wildcat activity in Flint finally dropped off. To secure the industrial peace, Travis, Roy Reuther, and Ralph Dale (the enormously popular organizer assigned to Buick) put together a city-wide, union-sponsored recreation

⁶⁴ The interim agreement of March 13th established a grievance procedure governed by committeemen (between five and nine per plant). It also set up seniority rules which restricted seniority by occupational classification and department. Under this contract the eight hour day/40 hour week was standardized, and the union agreed to allow time-study men to set the speed of production. Copies of this contract are located in the Frank Murphy Papers, Box 56.

⁶⁵ "Travis to Governor Frank Murphy, dated April 6, 1937," in the Kraus Collection, Box 10.

program to absorb the energies of their restive membership. On May 17th, Travis boasted to Adloph Germer,

So far as Flint is concerned, we have over thirty thousand in the union. We have 54 soft ball teams and up to the present time about 18 hard ball teams, with a recreational director, and a real sports program under way that will tend to counteract a lot of dissension within our own ranks.⁶⁶

Whether or not these union-run activities actually contributed to the decline of wildcat strikes which began in late April is a moot point. However, it does seem remarkable that at this early date the local union's radical leadership turned to recreation for social control purposes just as employers had done during the welfare capitalist era.

In addition to the pressures put on them 'from above', other changes in the local labor movement forced Bob Travis and his associates to become more concerned with rank-and-file discipline in the spring of 1937. Most importantly, the split between conservative union president Homer Martin and the radicals on the Executive Board began to disrupt the unity of the local union as workers took sides in the dispute.⁶⁷ Martin, a Missouri-born preacher turned union organizer, was a dynamic speaker and inveterate red-baiter. In 1935, while part of the A.F. of L. auto workers' organizing team, he had made a series of speeches in Flint which apparently won him a personal following in the newer plants where

⁶⁶ Letter in reply to a Germer inquiry (date May 7th), in the Kraus Collection, Box 11.

⁶⁷ This dispute would plague the union until 1941. A detailed discussion of its origins is beyond the scope of this study, but is an obsession with every autobiography or personal memoir of the union's leadership. For a balanced discussion of this volatile subject see Jack Skeels, "The Development of Political Stability within the United Auto Workers Union" (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Wisconsin, 1957).

many conservative Southern-born workers were clustered.⁶⁸ In 1937, he opened his campaign to win a majority in Flint by sending a representative to the city to push for the breakup of Local 156 into smaller plant-sized units. This proposal had some support among militants because it was thought smaller locals would be more responsive to specific shopfloor demands. Martin also attacked the U.A.W. officials in Flint, blaming them for the wave of unauthorized strikes. This was a mistake, for it alienated most of the militants who were attracted to the idea of smaller locals. In late April, Martin formed a slate of candidates in a bid to win the Local 156 elections, but Travis, Roy Reuther, and Ralph Dale campaigned successfully for their own candidates. To avenge this loss, Martin demoted Travis and ordered Roy Reuther out of Flint. The local union's membership responded by reaffirming their faith in Travis and by hiring Roy Reuther on as an independent organizer.⁶⁹

As time passed, and the affairs of Local 156 became more and more routine, Martin was able to increase his strength among Flint auto workers who remained militant about 'bread and butter' issues, but conservative in their politics. He had his greatest following at Fisher Body and Chevrolet, and won almost no support from Buick's rank-and-file. He seemed to secure the backing of many of the original A.F. of L. enthusiasts who feared the Communist/Socialist connections of the U.A.W.-C.I.O. officials in Flint. By late summer 1937, these conservative

⁶⁸ Martin's earliest visits to Flint were reported on by George Starkweather in the Flint Weekly Review for March 1935. Starkweather became a friend of Martin's at that time.

⁶⁹ Election results may be found in the Kraus Collection, Box 11. Also see Blackwood, The United Automobile Workers of America, pp. 85ff; and Roger P. Keeran, "The Communists and UAW Factionalism 1937-39," Michigan History, LX, 2, Summer 1976.

unionists dominated the organization at Fisher Body and Chevrolet, giving Martin the indigenous support he needed to breakup Local 156 and purge its radical organizers.⁷⁰ However, in the interim, throughout the late spring and early summer, Travis, Reuther, Kraus, and Dale did their best to secure and expand the power of Flint's new working class.

First, another anti-union offensive had to be repelled. Within the space of a week in late April, an Independent Automobile Employees Association and a Protestant Action Association announced their formation and intention to drive the U.A.W.-C.I.O. out of the city. The rival union (if one can call this shortlived organization that) claimed an initial membership of six thousand auto workers, and disavowed all connections with General Motors. Its nominal leaders, auto workers from each of the big local plants, condemned the C.I.O. as irresponsible, alien, and communist. Not many people listened. Its first meeting at the American Legion hall attracted just seventy-five workers, who railed against the U.A.W. and went home.⁷¹ Henry Kraus promptly labelled the group just "another company union failure" in an article in the widely-read Flint Auto Worker. Bob Travis called it a "stunt on General Motors part" which was "too trivial to worry about," but confessed he had to dissuade some union hotheads from taking physical action against its leaders.⁷² Unable to draw the U.A.W. into a confrontation or attract

⁷⁰ The Buick plant remained strongly loyal to the radical, or "Unity", caucus. For this reason, Martin opposed a separate charter for Buick in the spring of 1937. See UAW Oral History Project interview with Arthur Case, pp. 8-18; and the interview with Tom Klasey, pp. 34-6; for the clearest recollections of this period.

⁷¹ Affidavit on meeting of the Independent Automobile Employees Association held April 24, 1937 signed by Wilbert Hill; in the Kraus Collection, Box 10.

⁷² Flint Auto Worker, I, 22, May 1, 1937, p. 1; and "Flint Enemies

any real rank-and-file support, the Independent Automobile Employees Association quickly vanished from public view.

The Protestant Action Association had an equally short public life, but its very existence reveals something of the sinister quality of class conflict in Flint in the late 1930s. According to Detroit News reporter Martin Hayden, who interviewed the group's leaders (a minister and an architect), the P.A.A. had close ties with the Ku Klux Klan and the Black Legion, a shadowy fragment of the Klan dedicated to spreading anti-union terror all across southern Michigan.⁷³ Publicly, P.A.A. spokesmen admitted their group included KKK representatives as well as members of several other local fraternal organizations. They claimed to be "pro-American," "not anti-anything," but went on to condemn the U.A.W. as "a group of racketeers" who "can't differentiate between the Russian peasant consciousness and that of the American working man."⁷⁴ Luckily, the P.A.A.'s anti-union crusade never really got off the ground in 1937. This fact reflects the enormous changes that had occurred in local society since the mid-1920s when the Klan had actually dominated the city's politics. Though a small minority of Flint's blue-collar workers continued to flirt with the KKK, the creation of a strong, essentially democratic labor movement in the 1930s permanently prevented a resurgence of mass-based

of UAW Organize for Battle" by Martin Hayden, and article clipped from the Detroit News, May 2, 1937 in the Joe Brown Collection, Vol. 8, p. 76.

⁷³ Rumors of Black Legion activity had circulated freely in Flint since mid-1936. By that time, its members had been implicated in the murders of four union organizers in southern Michigan. It was also involved in many bombings and beatings of union activists. Estimates of its membership ran as high as 30,000 statewide. By 1939, thirteen Black Legionnaires had been sentenced to life in prison for their activities; thirty-nine had received lesser sentences.

⁷⁴ Quoted by Hayden in "Flint Enemies of the UAW."

ultra-rightwing politics in the Vehicle City.

The late spring and summer of 1937 witnessed an unparalleled expansion of the labor movement in Flint. Inspired by the militance and the success of the U.A.W., workers in almost every industry in the city organized and pressed their employers to sign written contracts which improved their wages, hours, and working conditions. Emotions ran high as retail clerks, waiters and waitresses, downtown office clerks, dry cleaners and laundry workers, and many others pulled their own "quickie" strikes and sit-downs. As one auto worker remembered, a kind of contagious enthusiasm for organization swept the city, with workers developing what he called an "if they got a union we can too" attitude.⁷⁵

For a few short months, under the continued leadership of Travis, Roy Reuther, and the other radicals, Local 156 was transformed into a kind of general workers union which offered advice and direct assistance to any group of workers who asked for it. Time and again, U.A.W. organizers, sound trucks and 'flying squads' of pickets were dispatched to aid striking workers. Initially, the Local tried to restrict its help to those working people with some connection to the motor vehicle industry. Workers at seven smaller auto parts and accessories manufacturers and mechanics at five automobile dealerships were brought into Local 156 under this policy.⁷⁶ However, once this expansion of the union began, it was hard to set boundaries. Roy Reuther, who had provided to the assistance of striking Flint Bus drivers in December, continued to be the most active of the U.A.W. organizers outside the automobile industry. He

⁷⁵ Interview with Larry Huber.

⁷⁶ "List of units in Local 156, June 15, 1937," in the Kraus Collection. Of the thirty firms whose workers are listed as enrolled in the Local, only ten were automobile shops.

personally directed a five-week long sit-in at J.C. Penney's department store which won women clerks higher pay, shorter hours, and affiliation with the U.A.W. as the Retail Clothing Clerks Association. Reuther also organized a strike by seventy-five cab drivers against three different taxi companies. It dragged on for months, and ultimately the drivers were forced back to work without a contract. Usually, the union's organizers were more successful. By mid-June, in addition to the above mentioned groups, construction workers at Fisher Body, coal truck drivers who delivered to the auto plants, super-market clerks at the city's biggest chains, dry cleaners and laundry workers, numerous waiters and waitresses, downtown postal telegraph messengers, and local utility company workers had all received strike support from the Flint's U.A.W.⁷⁷ In fact, almost all these workers were actually enrolled in Local 156 until they could be sorted out into the proper C.I.O. unions.

Working class women played an extremely important role in the expansion of Flint's labor movement in mid-1937. The red berets of the Emergency Brigade always seemed ready to assist striking workers, especially if other women were involved. For example, on March 31st, employees at the downtown Durant Hotel struck, disrupting the state convention of the D.A.R. Within minutes, Genora Johnson and some of the Brigade arrived on the scene, organizing pickets and confronting police. At day's end, the hotel's management had capitulated and signed a union contract with their workers.⁷⁸ In subsequent months, the Emergency

⁷⁷ The best source of information on these many long-forgotten strikes is the file "Strikes: Flint: Miscellaneous," FPL.

⁷⁸ For details see Auto Women in Advance (the official monthly magazine of the Women's Auxiliary in Flint), No. 10, April 1937 in the Kraus Collection, Box 10. Also see "Strikes: Flint: Miscellaneous."

Brigade helped organize the Retail Clerks Association and a local unit of the Amalgamated Clothing Workers union which was able to get all of the city's large dry cleaning establishments to accept union contracts.

The most remarkable woman to emerge from the class conflicts of 1937 had no connection with the Emergency Brigade or the C.I.O. Her name was Betty Simpson, and she was an organizer for the A.F. of L.'s Hotel and Restaurant Workers union. When she arrived in Flint in the early spring, none of the city's hotels or restaurants had recognized the union (although a few like the Durant Hotel had signed with the ill-fated C.I.O. Culinary Workers union). Nonetheless, by the time she was forced out of the city as part of a conservative reorganization of the local federation, 175 Flint establishments with more than a thousand employees had contracts with the Hotel and Restaurant Workers. In addition, she had extended the local union to include workers in Lansing, Saginaw, Bay City, and Pontiac.⁷⁹

Betty Simpson's success, like that of the U.A.W. organizers, can be traced to her own militance and a willingness to back local workers on local demands. She seemed to have an extraordinary ability to inspire mass picketing, even if it meant a confrontation with police. During the peak of a very violent hotel-restaurant strike wave (in June and July), she was arrested several times. Once, she was temporarily blinded by tear gas which was thrown into the sound truck she used to direct pickets.⁸⁰ Yet, until December, when national officials cracked

⁷⁹ "Review of Year's Federation Work," Flint Weekly Review, December 31, 1937, p. 1.

⁸⁰ This incident occurred during a strike against the Mary Lee Candy Company on June 25th. Repeated violence between pickets and police in the downtown shopping district during this strike led local merchants to form an anti-union Law and Order League which successfully pressured the

down on her activities and broke up the giant regional local she had formed, Betty Simpson continued to lead successful strikes against Flint hotels and restaurants.

The turning point in the organization of Flint's new working class actually came on June 9th, when U.A.W. workers at the Consumers Power Company shut down all generators in the Saginaw Valley, forcing massive layoffs and leaving nearly a half million people without electricity. This strike gained the power workers recognition, a wage increase, shorter hours, and overtime pay.⁸¹ However, the intervention of Governor Murphy and national union officials also spelled an end to the expansion of local 156. Under the auspices of John L. Lewis and Homer Martin, the C.I.O.'s director of automotive organization, John Brophy, was dispatched to investigate the causes of the continued militance of Flint's U.A.W. Brophy quickly concluded that Local 156 had to be reorganized. At the end of June, Bob Travis and the rest of the local union's radical leadership were removed from office and transferred to assignments which were deliberately scattered all over the country. Many Flint auto workers protested this purge, but to no avail.⁸² A committee of five was put in charge of Local 156's affairs for the rest of

City Council into dismissing the city manager for failing to preserve order.

⁸¹ Copies of this contract signed by Wyndham Mortimer and John L. Lewis for the C.I.O. and Wendell L. Wilkie, chairman of Commonwealth and Southern (Consumers Power parent company), may found in the Murphy Papers, Box 56.

⁸² A meeting of more than 5000 local members overwhelmingly endorsed a resolution in support of the purged leaders in the second week of July. Buick unionists were particularly adamant in their protests against the transfers of Travis and Dale. Ed Geiger, a rank-and-file leader, told the Flint Journal (July 6th), "if Ralph hadn't been there, there would have been sit-downs too numerous to mention." Protest letters, petitions, and other related materials are located in the Kraus Collection, Box 10.

the year. This committee, which contained no one from the union's radical "Unity" caucus, cracked down on militants within the auto plants, while parcelling out non-auto workers among newly affiliated C.I.O. unions in their respective industries. In August, Henry Kraus published the last issue of the Flint Auto Worker before leaving the city for a West Coast post. No new citywide labor newspaper was created to fill the void. Instead, each factory-based local began publishing its own tabloid. By the end of the year, both the reality and the idea of one big industrial union had been expunged in Flint.⁸³

Not so coincidentally, the Flint Federation of Labor was also purged and reorganized at this time. During the first half of 1937, its younger members had been swept up in the enthusiasm for the organizing zeal of the C.I.O. Indeed, on more than one occasion, the F.F.L.'s newspaper praised Bob Travis and the other U.A.W. radicals for the work they were doing in the city.⁸⁴ In late August, Raymond Bellamy, an official from the national Federation, came to Flint to put an end to this heresy. Bellamy set up a temporary regional office in Flint, declaring he would do away with the "public be damned" attitude of labor in an area "where legitimate labor activity has been regimented and coerced by irresponsible and radical groups."⁸⁵ At first, this typical conservative A.F. of L. bureaucrat found his task more difficult than expected. Betty Simpson

⁸³ All these actions are described and criticized in detail in a letter from Wyndham Mortimer to John Brophy dated September 29, 1937 (Brophy Papers). Mortimer charged that one of the special committee members, Bert Harris, was a Black Legionaire who was "thoroughly discredited up there." This charge was often made by "Unity" caucus supporters, but it cannot be verified.

⁸⁴ In particular, see the page one articles in the Flint Weekly Review for April 23rd, June 18th, and October 1st.

⁸⁵ Quoted in the Flint Weekly Review, August 20, 1937, p. 1.

pressed ahead with her militant organizing drive. Moreover, the new, independent-minded editor of the Flint Weekly Review refused to knuckle under, and continued printing praise of the U.A.W. Finally, in mid-October, Bellamy took dramatic action. He intervened in a sit-down strike called by Betty Simpson at the Home Dairy food store, breaking it before any agreement could be reached. Though organizer Simpson resumed picketing at the Home Dairy a month later, Bellamy had taken the initiative out of her hands. As a very serious recession settled in on the city in late 1937, Bellamy pushed the F.F. of L. back into its old anti-militant ways. Like Local 156, it too had been reformed 'from above'.

The severe recession of 1937-38 brought an end to the rapid expansion of Flint's labor movement, but it did not destroy the city's unions or the new working class-consciousness they embodied. In terms of mass unemployment, the first six months of 1938 represented the nadir of the Great Depression in Flint. As early as January 1, 1938, 11,000 local auto workers had been forced onto the unemployment rolls. By April, as many as sixty-five percent of the workforce at Buick and Chevrolet were laid off. Twenty thousand Genessee County families received public assistance in early 1938, nearly twice the previous peak (reached in 1934). Fully one-quarter of those families had never been on relief before.⁸⁶ Locally chosen relief officials (who had been given more administrative responsibilities after Roosevelt's triumph in the 1936 elections) heightened the crisis atmosphere by making rash statements about moving the "unemployables" out of Genessee County and sterilizing all second generation relief clients. This attack on the needy backfired. Instead

⁸⁶ Chafe, "Flint and the Great Depression," pp. 234-4; and Joe Brown Collection, Vol. XII, pp. 10-1 and P. 75.

of turning the employed against the unemployed, the relief crisis of 1938 revealed the strength of local working class-consciousness. In April, when food allowances for welfare recipients were cut to less than four cents per person per meal, a united front of all the major local labor unions staged a mass sit-in at the county relief offices until the cuts were revoked. Later in the year, continued protests by Flint's labor unions and unemployed council forced the state to remove the most offensive local relief official, welfare administrator, Louis Ludington.⁸⁷

Naturally, the mass unemployment of 1938 put Flint's labor leaders on the defensive. Faced with layoffs and threatened wage cuts, even the most militant of the city's workers looked to protect the gains they had already made, not push forward with new organizing drives. As unemployment soared, just keeping the auto workers union together became a problem. Participation at union meetings and dues collections fell off dramatically as layoffs and short-time mounted in early 1938. U.A.W. officials asked unemployed workers to remain in the union, and cut monthly dues in half (from \$1.00 to 50¢) to encourage them to do so. Laid-off rank-and-file leaders organized auto workers in the W.P.A. This caused some friction with the local unemployed council who tried to build up its membership by lowering its monthly dues to twenty-five cents.⁸⁸ At the same time, leaders of Local 156 initiated a dues collection drive among those auto workers who remained on the job. This drive was ultimately successful, but not until mass picketing by paid up members caused

⁸⁷ Chafe, p. 236; and clippings from the Detroit Free Press, April 16-19, 1938 in Civil Rights Congress of Michigan Collection, Box 51, WSU.

⁸⁸ William H. McPherson, Labor Relations in the Automobile Industry (Washington, 1940), see pp. 21-30 and UAW Oral History Project interview with Tom Klasey, pp. 40-3.

a temporary shutdown of Fisher Body 1 in mid-April.⁸⁹

Of course, the economic problems of 1938 intensified the factional dispute between supporters of U.A.W. president Homer Martin and backers of the more radical "Unity" caucus. Initially, the recession seemed to benefit the local Martin forces. In primary elections for the leadership of Local 156 held in February 1938, Martin's slate of candidates won a clear plurality of the votes cast. Encouraged by this success, Martin then moved his personal headquarters to Flint to step up his red-baiting campaign against the "Unity" caucus. Locally, this tactic worked. A large segment of Flint's industrial workers never seemed to shake off the fear of communism which had been a cornerstone of the political culture of normalcy. As Arthur Case, a non-communist Martin opponent at Buick later explained, this fear was basically irrational, but deeply rooted. "None of us really knew what Communism really was," he recalled. Nevertheless, he continued, at a meeting "if somebody at the door said, 'There's Art Case, a Communist, he is going to be talking tonight.' Half the crowd would go home."⁹⁰ In March, Homer Martin's handpicked candidate for the Local 156 presidency, Jack Little, received sixty-three percent of the 12,000 votes cast after a campaign highlighted by red-baiting. The rest of the Martin slate won by similar margins. Elsewhere around the U.A.W. that month, only the Packard local in Detroit gave Martin's men such a clearcut victory.⁹¹

⁸⁹ Company managers closed the plant hoping to weaken the union by encouraging factionalism and adverse publicity for the already much-criticized U.A.W. The national news media did respond as General Motors hoped; for example see "Strikes at Flint: A New Epidemic," *Newsweek*, VII, May 2, 1938, pp. 32-4. Also see the clippings in the Joe Brown Collection, XII, pp. 71-4.

⁹⁰ UAW Oral History Project interview, p. 25.

⁹¹ Joe Brown Collection XII, p. 43-9.

Despite their defeat, the local "Unity" caucus did not disband. As William Genske, a Martin opponent at the Martin stronghold Fisher Body 1 later explained, "They continued to attend union meetings. But they were usually outvoted and not listened to."⁹² The vigor of the "Unity" opposition in Flint during a year when Local 156 was decimated by unemployment kept Jack Little from imitating the red-baiting excesses of Homer Martin. Indeed, Little seems to have tried to work out an alliance with local Socialists after the union's top Socialists and Communists split irrevocably at the Michigan C.I.O. convention in April.⁹³ In addition, Little maintained Local 156's reputation for militance by backing the rank-and-file's demand for a strike vote at Chevrolet and Buick to protest seniority violations and wage cuts. He also formed a special 'flying squadron' of uniformed union members in May after the City Commission authorized the creation of a special volunteer police force to serve under the direction of the city manager.⁹⁴ In fact, under Little's leadership, only one major change was made in Flint's U.A.W. At the end of 1938, Local 156 was finally broken up into six factory based locals (Buick-599, Fisher Body 1-581, Fisher Body 2-598, AC-651, Chevrolet-659, and Standard Cotton Products-655). Many "Unity" caucus supporters had long urged this kind of separation. "Each of us felt that we ought to have autonomy to solve our own problems," remembered

⁹² "Dual Unionism: Group Formation in the United Auto Workers," December 3, 1970, a term paper prepared for professor Thomas Smith's Sociology 469, University of Michigan-Flint; p. 4 (in my possession).

⁹³ "Confidential Report of the Socialist Party on the Inner Situation in the Auto Union," dated June 7, 1938, Kraus Collection, Box 16. Also see Skeels, "The Development of Political Stability," pp. 69-70; and Keeran, "The Communists and UAW Factionalism," p. 129.

⁹⁴ Joe Brown Collection, XII, pp. 74-6 and 82.

Martin foe Norman Bully.⁹⁵

Throughout 1938, Homer Martin's leadership of the national U.A.W. had become increasingly autocratic and erratic. In the fall, his suspension of the "Unity" opposition on the union's international Executive Board and his subsequent denunciation of John L. Lewis split the U.A.W. In March 1939, a special convention called by C.I.O. president Lewis expelled Martin, and he took his small band of supporters into the A.F. of L. A few Flint auto workers followed Martin out of the C.I.O., but the vast majority remained loyal to Lewis and the union that had fought the great sit-down strike. "Martin's attack on Lewis and the CIO had been a major blunder," Victor Reuther recently explained, "in those days the initials CIO meant more to workers, in terms of loyalty and identification, than did UAW."⁹⁶

In June 1939, Martin tried to capture the loyalty of Fisher Body 1 (the only plant where he had substantial grassroots support) by calling a strike just before the annual model change. This was another blunder. U.A.W.-A.F. of L. pickets closed the big factory for one day, but once Walter Reuther, the U.A.W.-C.I.O.'s General Motors department director, showed up to mobilize C.I.O. loyalists, the picket lines were broken and the plant reopened. In retaliation, Martin resorted to 'goon squad' tactics. He called in men from Kansas City and Saint Louis, gathered his local supporters, and tried to close Fisher Body 1 by force. Men and women workers going into the plant were beaten in the streets, and an emergency meeting of the C.I.O.'s Local 581 was besieged in the

⁹⁵ UAW Oral History Project Interview, p. 10.

⁹⁶ The Brothers Reuther, p. 192.

union hall. Local police allowed this warfare to continue for two days, presumably in the hope that the union would self-destruct. In the meantime, 'flying squadrons' of U.A.W.-C.I.O. loyalists from other plants in Flint, Detroit, and Pontiac converged on the union hall across the street from Fisher Body 1. When a stalemate developed, the State Police entered the city and ordered both sides to disperse. Martin had lost his bid to control the union at Fisher Body 1, and was thoroughly discredited among most Flint workers.⁹⁷

A month later, Walter Reuther called a successful tool and die makers strike against General Motors in the midst of the annual model change. It was a brilliant stroke, for it restored confidence in the militance and the solidarity of the U.A.W.-C.I.O. among the great majority of the General Motors workforce. In Flint, lesser skilled rank-and-file leaders played a crucial role in the strike, organizing production workers who walked the picket lines day and night for six weeks. At Chevrolet, militant production workers led by Jack Little and "Jack" Palmer used the strike as an opportunity to restart collective bargaining with a plant manager who had withdrawn recognition from the U.A.W.-C.I.O. during the open fighting with Martin's union.⁹⁸ Of course, the strike victory assured the loyalty of General Motors skilled workers to

⁹⁷ Martin did retain a core of supporters at Fisher Body 1, but not enough to win the NLRB elections in 1940. During the war years, most Martin supporters joined the U.A.W.-C.I.O. See the Flint Daily Journal, June 15, 1939; UAW Oral History Project interview with William Genske (one of the Local 581 stewards caught in the union hall) for an account of this strike.

⁹⁸ Little, Palmer, and another worker "Pop" Warner were elected by a majority of Chevy No. 3 workers to lead a sit-in in the plant manager's offices until he re-established negotiations. After this demonstration, Jack Little returned to work in No. 3 and never ran for a leadership spot again. UAW Interview with F.R. Palmer, p. 23.

the C.I.O. It also helped establish Walter Reuther as a major contender for the union's leadership. In this sense, it was actually the beginning of a new era of factionalism within the U.A.W.

In early 1940, the U.A.W.-C.I.O. swept every National Labor Relations Board jurisdictional election in Flint. In their UAW Oral History Project interviews, virtually all of the city's rank-and-file leaders (including those who had supported Homer Martin up to 1939) had the same explanation for these C.I.O. victories. "Workers had not forgotten '33 and '34 with the AFL walking out on us," explained Buick's John McGill. Tom Klasey, a onetime Martin backer, put it this way, "We had had enough of the A.F. of L. . . . We were going to stay with the C.I.O."⁹⁹ In the aftermath of these election victories, the U.A.W.-C.I.O. was quickly built back up to full strength in almost all departments in the major plants. Even A.C. Sparkplug was fully organized after the new regional director, Buick militant Arthur Case, hired a full-time women's organizer to do the job.

By late 1940, when the first pro-labor City Commission in Flint's history was elected, it is fair to say that the city had been transformed from a company town to a union town. Never again would the local business class be able to dominate the public life of Flint as they had done prior to 1930. In both politics and industrial relations, two areas of public life where Flint's business class had held a virtual monopoly over decision-making, the new organized working class asserted its power, forcing reforms which did change the character of local capitalism. In this respect, the direct accomplishments of the union in collective

⁹⁹ UAW Oral History Project interviews with John McGill, pp. 9-10; and Tom Klasey, p. 46.

bargaining with General Motors seems at least as impressive as the "New Deal formula" that the vast majority of the workers endorsed year after year at the polls. Between 1940 and 1955, through national negotiations with General Motors, the U.A.W. got Flint workers not only increased pay, but paid vacations, equal pay for equal work, a grievance procedure with an impartial umpire, paid holidays, built-in cost of living raises, a pension plan, family insurance, and supplemental unemployment benefits. Moreover, at the plant level, union pressure did lead to improvements in working conditions (particularly in health and safety matters) and work rules (like fixing and extending rest breaks). Of course, the line was not dismantled, and disputes over the speed of work and production standards continued. Nevertheless, there was a major change in the relations between workers and management. Foremen lost the arbitrary firing power that had built so much insecurity into the lives of most workers. Finally, on the shopfloor, by holding on to their informal shop steward organizations through the war years, by using the grievance procedure, and, on occasion, selectively slowing down or stopping the production process, Flint's industrial workers won something else in these years: a self-respect that had been stripped from them in the early days of the Great Depression.

The organization of a working class in Flint in the 1930s was more than an isolated local event. It inspired similar changes in other company-dominated towns in the Midwest, and it led to qualitative improvements in the working and living standards of automobile workers all over the country. Perhaps Victor Reuther best summed up the significance of what happened in Flint during the Great Depression in his published memoir, The Brothers Reuther and the Story of the UAW. "Our solidarity

and shared ideals were fortified by the extraordinary qualities of humanity summoned forth among the workers of Flint by the series of emergencies," he wrote,

They endured what seemed an unending nightmare; they suffered terror, broken heads, their families hunger, and extreme risk, not just for another nickel on the hour, but for the dignity and individuality denied them by an arrogant corporation. They won a richer life for millions of industrial workers in other towns and cities. They exhibited the most selfless quality men can possess: the ability to sacrifice immediate material security for desirable but as yet unrealized goals for humankind.¹⁰⁰

¹⁰⁰ p. 171.

CHAPTER EIGHT

CONCLUSIONS

I. The Company, the Union, and Rank-and-File Discontent, 1937-1950

In the 1940s, class conflict in Flint was ultimately institutionalized in bureaucratic organizations and procedures. In retrospect, given the essentially non-revolutionary, reformist inclinations of the overwhelming majority of Flint's new working class, this development appears inevitable. However, the historical process through which this regularization of local class conflict occurred was by no means simple and direct. The industrial and political tensions created in Flint by the establishment of a genuinely independent labor movement did not subside overnight. Throughout the war years, Flint remained a hotbed of rank-and-file militance within the U.A.W., and by 1945, there was even some discussion of forming a separate labor party among the members of the Chevrolet and Buick locals. Nevertheless, despite the vitality of the rank-and-file movement in Flint, shopfloor union leaders were never able to regain the power and the momentum they had lost in 1938-39. There were at least three closely related reasons why the sustained militance of the rank-and-file in Flint's U.A.W. did not lead to the establishment of a lasting workers' control movement during the 1940s. In combination, changes in company policy, changes in official union policy, and the long run social and economic changes brought on by the war boom blocked

radicalization of Flint's new working class.

The initial organizational success of the U.A.W.-C.I.O. in 1937 had caught the General Motors Corporation off guard. Within the company, management had not been prepared to bargain with a union; they had only been prepared to prevent unionization. As a result, there was enormous confusion among company officials on how to respond to workers' demands and conduct collective bargaining. At the plant level, managers and departmental supervisors had no clear ideas about who to recognize and what issues were to be considered as part of the bargaining process. Top corporate officers in Detroit hastily elevated industrial relations to a major managerial function and set out to define its policies and train managers in collective bargaining techniques, but these things took time to develop. In 1937 plant managers and departmental supervisors had no time to spare. They faced angry, militant workers led by shop stewards who called frequent "quickie" strikes and work slowdowns to back up their demands for rapid improvements in working conditions and shop discipline.¹ In Flint, as we have seen, the shop steward system was established in all the major plants, and it was extremely effective. In just a few months of face-to-face bargaining with their immediate supervisors, Flint's shopfloor militants were able to force significant concessions on work pace, production standards, and discipline from the company.

The recession of 1938-39 and the intense factional feud which split the U.A.W. in those years gave General Motors the opportunity to develop a tough, unified response to the union's presence in their

¹ These points are discussed at length in Frederick Harbison and Robert Dubin, Patterns of Union-Management Relations: United Automobile Workers (CIO), General Motors, and Studebaker (Chicago, 1947), especially pp. 17-26.

factories. Though some company officials undoubtedly would like to have destroyed the union, this was not the main thrust of their new industrial policy. Basically, General Motors' top executives decided they could live with the U.A.W. if, and only if, the union agreed to restrain its militant rank-and-file and limit the scope of collective bargaining to wages, hours, and working conditions. This meant the company would henceforth refuse to relinquish its right to hire, fire, promote, and discipline workers. Moreover, G.M. decided to oppose all proposals for joint-union management responsibilities. In other words, it would grant unionized workers no say in the determination of work pace and production decisions. Essentially then, General Motors decided it would vigorously assert its managerial prerogatives. In all cases, except bargaining over wages, hours, and working conditions, it would initiate action which the union could either accept or protest through established grievance procedure. This management-dominated system is what the company insisted on during contract negotiations in 1940. In return for recognition as the sole bargaining agent for all workers (not just those who were members) in those plants where it could win N.L.R.B. certification elections, the U.A.W.-C.I.O. was forced to agree to a sharp curtailment of its own powers.²

In Flint, the split between the U.A.W.-C.I.O. and Homer Martin's U.A.W.-A.F. of L. had allowed most plant managers to suspend collective bargaining until the N.L.R.B. election process was completed. In some plants this suspension of bargaining lasted nearly a year. During the dual union period, General Motors' new industrial relations policy was

² Harbison and Dubin, Patterns of Union-Management Relations, pp. 46-50.

put into effect in Flint. When bargaining between management and the five big local unions was resumed, it was under the provisions of the strict 1940 contract which stripped shop stewards of all legitimacy, and sharply curtailed the powers of the shop committeemen (who represented from 300 to 500 workers). Almost every local union leader interviewed by the UAW Oral History Project remembered the split in the union and the 1940 national contract as giant steps backwards for the workers on the shopfloor. In 1940-41, while they worked hard to bring all the workers in their plants back into the U.A.W.-C.I.O., both the company and the union's General Motors Department pressured them to suppress what had previously been their most effective organizing tools: the shop steward system and direct action on shopfloor grievances. In 1960 Ted LaDuke, an early Martin supporter at Chevrolet who remained loyal to the C.I.O., summed up the prevailing recollection this way:

Today, the workers in the shop feel that it was that split that developed in the organization that lost us more than we ever gained back as far as contracts are concerned, as far as working conditions in the shop, and the power of collective bargaining is concerned.³

The U.A.W.'s new leaders directed the attempt to suppress shopfloor militance in Flint in 1940. With Ford as yet unorganized, and Homer Martin's A.F. of L. union still challenging the C.I.O. in certification elections around the Midwest, R.J. Thomas, the new U.A.W.-C.I.O. president, and Walter Reuther were determined not to give General Motors any more excuses for breaking off collective bargaining. Executive officers from union headquarters were sent to Flint, in part to help local officials with the restoration of the membership in the plants where

³ UAW Oral History Project, p. 30.

it had fallen off, but also to keep rank-and-file militants in line with the new contract.⁴ On September 17th, both Thomas and Reuther had to rush to Flint after the discharge of a shop committeeman prompted a wildcat strike which closed down Chevrolet, idling 13,000 workers. According to the National Conciliation Service's report on the incident, "the Union [leaders] agreed to put the plant back in operation and [then] negotiate further" with the company.⁵ Two days later, both men again were forced to rush to Flint to put down another, even more serious, wildcat strike. This one followed a fight between union members and hardcore Martin supporters who refused to join the C.I.O. local at Fisher Body 1. Plant management responded to the fight (a rather common occurrence in those days) by firing seventeen workers, all members of the U.A.W.-C.I.O. This discriminatory action led C.I.O. militants to call a strike which shutdown the entire plant. In a show of solidarity, shopfloor leaders at Buick initiated a sympathy strike which closed that plant. All totaled, the combined strikes kept 20,000 workers off the job. Thomas and Reuther were able to get everyone back to work on September 20th, but as these events demonstrated, Flint's rank-and-file movement was far from dead in 1940.⁶

Fighting between U.A.W.-C.I.O. workers and small groups of Homer Martin supporters caused several other less dramatic strikes at Fisher Body 1 and Chevrolet in 1940. Invariably, supervisors decided to discipline members of the C.I.O. majority after these incidents. In

⁴ See UAW Oral History Project interview with Evertt Francis, pp. 46-7. for a clear recollections of this activity.

⁵ National Conciliation Service Case File No. 199-5863, NRC.

⁶ National Conciliation Service Case File No. 19905883, NRC.

response, rank-and-file leaders would call for a "quickie" strike. That year there were at least three such wildcat job actions at Fisher Body 1 which were not settled until Walter Reuther had intervened. William Genske, one of the plant's shop committeemen at the time, recalled,

On each occasion Reuther came down and told the people that they had to live up to the contract. He just would not permit any wildcat strikes. Then it seemed from the standpoint of the people in our plant after Reuther had won his victory in establishing the CIO back in GM that he was determined to sell the company on the idea that the UAW was a responsible union. The membership did not always see eye to eye with that because it ruled out a lot of activities which they thought would eliminate some of the problems they were confronted with.⁷

Of course, Genske was right about Walter Reuther's motivation, and about the opinions of the local membership.

At Fisher Body 1, rank-and-file opinion against Reuther's no-strike policy hardened in late 1940 after eighty-two union men in the north trim department were fired for striking in protest of the disciplining of their unofficial stewards. When this happened, Reuther immediately sent officials from his General Motors Department to prevent any sympathy strikes. These officials stayed on in Flint, supposedly to expedite the reinstatement of the fired strikers. This process took several weeks, and even then, most of the eighty-two were placed on probationary status in widely scattered jobs away from the trim department. In the end, all but one striker got their original jobs back, but not until many months had passed. The delays and the unwillingness of the union's G.M. Department officers to press the company for immediate reinstatement, confirmed many Fisher Body workers' suspicions about the inadequacy of

⁷ UAW Oral History Project interview, p. 22.

of the official grievance procedure.⁸

By 1941 most of Flint's rank-and-file leaders (a group that included the unofficial stewards and many local union officers and committeemen) were convinced that the national contract's committeemen system and tedious grievance procedure would never solve their problems. In 1940-41, General Motors had pushed its workers hard as new car sales rebounded strongly from the recession of 1938-39. On the shopfloor, many workers felt victimized by a new speedup and management's strict discipline. When negotiations for the annual national contract stalled in early 1941, Flint's big locals led the call for a company-wide strike. Recognition of a shop steward system, improvements in seniority guarantees, and a wage increase were the most important demands. In addition, both the Buick and the Fisher Body 1 locals passed resolutions calling for the dismissal of Walter Reuther as General Motors Department head. Reuther, always a shrewd manager of rank-and-file discontent, responded by setting a strike deadline for May 15th. At the last moment, with negotiators making progress at the bargaining table (though not on shopfloor grievances), the strike was postponed. Buick Local 599 and Chevrolet 659 struck anyway. These unauthorized actions were ended within a few days, but only after federal mediators had intervened on the grounds that both plants had begun some defense-related production.⁹

⁸ See UAW Oral History Project interviews with Everett Francis, pp. 47-8; and William Genske, pp. 37-9 for recollections of the impact of this event.

⁹ Blackwood, The United Automobile Workers, pp. 170ff. At Buick later that month, a resolution to renew the strike over local issues passed a special meeting of the day shift by a two-to-one margin but was overwhelmingly defeated by the second and third shifts. See "Membership Minutes-1941," Local 599 Collection, Box 1.

In Flint, conversion from automotive production to war materials production was a long process that started in late 1940 when the first machine guns came down the assembly line at the AC. Federal plans for war production in Flint (which included the erection of a new aluminum foundry at Buick and a tank plant in suburban Grand Blanc) were well advanced by January 1941, but actual conversion was not finished until the fall of 1942.¹⁰ Undoubtedly some of the delay was caused by the difficulties inherent in the shift from making cars and trucks to manufacturing airplane engines, tanks, and other armaments. However, General Motors' well-documented reluctance to abandon profitable civilian production until the country was actually at war accounted for much of the lost time. As Alan Clive has recently pointed out in his excellent study, State of War: Michigan in World War II,

Certainly, from mid-1941 onward, thousands of tons of critical materials and countless man-hours were wasted in the production of passenger cars. The automakers allowed concern for profit to obscure the very vision upon which the government was depending for the creation of production "miracles."¹¹

All totaled, the war boom created an additional 25,000 jobs in Flint, almost all of them in manufacturing. However, before full war production was attained and labor shortages appeared (in mid-1943), many local workers were forced to endure a long spell of unemployment. Employment in Flint's major factories began falling in July 1941 and bottomed out

¹⁰ Confidential "Survey of the Employment Situation in Flint, Michigan," prepared by Research and Statistics Division, Bureau of Employment Security, January 3, 1941, in Records of the Bureau of Employment Security, RG 183, Box 185.

¹¹ (Ann Arbor, 1979), p. 25. Also see Barton Bernstein, "The Automobile Industry and the Coming of the Second World War," The Southwestern Social Science Quarterly, 47, 1, June, 1966.

in January-February 1942 when 23,000 auto workers were out of work.¹² Unemployment remained a major problem in Flint through the summer of 1942. It took the edge off the initial patriotic enthusiasm many local rank-and-file leaders had shown for war work. For example, at the end of June, Chevrolet Local 659's Searchlight got itself into hot water with management and the union's General Motors Department for warning workers,

Until there is a shortage of man-power, we must not increase our individual production. After all our brothers are back, we will do our part. To act differently is merely to increase G.M.'s profits.¹³

Of course, unemployment compensation helped ease the financial burden on out-of-work auto workers. In addition, General Motors established a loan plan which allowed workers with seniority to draw against their earnings.¹⁴ Nevertheless, when compounded by resentment against the C.I.O.'s No-Strike Pledge (made at a White House labor conference shortly after Pearl Harbor), and suspicions about the U.A.W.'s call for "equality of sacrifice," widespread irritation over prolonged unemployment helped create a new unity among Flint's rank-and-file leaders in 1942.

The wartime rank-and-file movement in Flint (which most labor historians recognize for the part it played in the drive against the No-Strike Pledge within the U.A.W.) was built upon the traditions of

¹² "Labor Supply and Demand for War Production in Flint, Michigan," U.S. Employment Service, March 5, 1942, in Records of the Bureau of Employment Security, op. cit.

¹³ See correspondences between H.W. Anderson (of Chevrolet) and Walter Reuther, dated July 3, and July 13, 1942 in the UAW-General Motors Department Collection, Box 1, WSU. The Searchlight's warning was published on page 6 of the June 24th issue under the headline "To all Plant #9 Workers."

¹⁴ The effectiveness of G.M.'s loan plan depended on "the interest of the personnel manager" in each plant. See "Survey of the Employment Situation in Flint," January 3, 1941 for details.

of local militance and shop steward activity that dated back to 1933. It was led by local union officials and shop committeemen at Buick, Chevrolet, and the AC who had already been alienated by the U.A.W. leadership's suppression of shopfloor militants in 1940-1. Though sometimes branded "communists" by the company and the hostile press, this movement was clearly non-communist. In Flint, as elsewhere, all the Communists in the union fully supported the No-Strike Pledge. Indeed, the Communists were the strongest proponents of incentive pay to increase productivity, a proposal which rank-and-file caucus members unanimously opposed as a return to the old hated piecework system.¹⁵

The growth of the rank-and-file movement as a political force in the U.A.W. in 1943-44 was closely linked to the spread of wildcat strikes which dramatically expressed many members' discontent with working conditions, War Labor Board grievance procedures, and the No-Strike Pledge. Unlike Detroit, Flint was never the scene of a massive wave of wildcat strikes. However, there were at least a dozen significant wildcat strikes in the city between February 1942 and the end of the war. None of them directly concerned wages, even though anger against the W.L.B.'s policy of holding increases to no more than fifteen percent of their January 1, 1941 levels (the so-called "Little Steel formula") was widespread. Disputes over production standards and company discipline provoked the majority of Flint's wartime wildcat strikes.¹⁶ In addition, there were

¹⁵ The No-Strike Pledge and the fight against it within the U.A.W. are examined in Nelson Lichtenstein, "Defending the No-Strike Pledge: CIO Politics during World War II," and Ed Jennings, "Wildcat! The War-time Strike Wave in Auto," both in Radical America, IX, 4-5 July-August, 1975 (a special "American Labor in the 1940s" edition). Also see Clive, State of War, especially pp. 79-87.

¹⁶ These generalizations are based on an examination of the relevant

several recognition strikes in the new facilities and smaller (non-G.M.) factories. The most important of these, at the new Grand Blanc tank plant in July 1942, was started by shopfloor militants who had been transferred over from Fisher Body 1's welding department. This strike closed the plant for nearly two weeks, and was not settled until War Labor Board mediators arranged a certification selection (which the U.A.W.-C.I.O. subsequently won by a seven-to-one margin).¹⁷

Most of Flint's wartime wildcat strikes occurred in mid-1944 at Chevrolet and Buick where assembly workers had grown tired of the long hours and seemingly endless delays (300 to 400 days) in the official grievance procedure. At both plants, unofficial shop stewards led disgruntled workers. These stewards knew they could count on the support of their local union officials because those officials had recently joined in the union-wide Rank-and-File Caucus.¹⁸ A similar situation

National Conciliation Case Files, and the strike scrapbooks in the Automotive History Collection at the Flint Public Library.

¹⁷ See "Report to Local (581)," in the Everett Francis Collection, Box 7, File: "War Years," and various reports dated July 15, July 18, July 20, and July 22, 1942 in Records of the Emergency Protection Defense Board, Box 4, File 3033, State of Michigan Archives, Lansing.

¹⁸ The Rank-and-File Caucus was formed in early 1944 after the union's Executive Board voted to suspend local officials who supported wildcat strikes. Its leaders were Eddie Yost of the giant Ford Local 600, John McGill of Buick 599, and Robert Carter of AC 651. In Flint, the Caucus also had the support of Chevrolet Local 659 officials and membership. In 1944 the Caucus challenged the No-Strike Pledge at the union's annual convention, and lost. However, the Caucus did force the convention to submit the Pledge to a membership referendum. At the convention, Bob Carter challenged R.J.Thomas for the union's presidency, and John McGill ran for the second vice-president's spot against Walter Reuther and George Addes. Both were defeated handily. When the referendum on the No-Strike Pledge drew less than twenty-five percent of the union's members to the polls in February 1945, and passed by a two-to-one margin, the Rank-and-File Caucus collapsed. The significance of the referendum is hard to gauge, since, as Ed Jennings has pointed out, more workers actually struck in 1944 than voted for the pledge in early 1945.

existed at the AC where Flint's biggest wildcat strike took place in March 1945. It all started shortly after a committeeman was laid off for alleged violence against a foreman. To protest this action, forty to fifty women workers immediately stopped work, but local union officials were able to get them back on the job within an hour. Nonetheless, two days later on March 26th the company discharged eight of these women and suspended five others. When news of these reprisals spread (through the unofficial shop steward network), 13,000 of the plant's 17,500 workers walked out with the support of the officers of Local 651. The next day a mass meeting of more than 2200 strikers listened to the pleas of federal mediators to return to work, and then voted narrowly to continue the strike. On the evening of the 28th, another larger mass meeting was held at the I.M.A. Auditorium. This time, Walter Reuther (who had picked up support in Flint for his opposition to incentive pay and his recent public expressions of doubt about the No-Strike Pledge) convinced the majority to vote to end the walkout.¹⁹

At the end of the war, Flint's rank-and-file movement seethed with discontent. Its leaders at Buick, Chevrolet, the AC and Fisher Body 1 were anxious to strike to reassert their power on the shopfloor, raise wages, and correct what they saw as the deficiencies of the U.A.W.'s "responsible" relations with G.M. The active members of the union backed these leaders.²⁰ From June to September 1945, the union's Executive

¹⁹ National Conciliation Case File No. 453-1180.

²⁰ For reasons that remain unclear to me, Fisher Body 2 did not experience the same upsurge in support for militant activity during the war. In fact, its dues paying membership declined rapidly in 1944-45. See "Correspondences with Local 598," George Addes Collection, Box 69E, WSU.

Board members were bombarded by resolutions from the various Flint locals urging, among other things: a special convention to repeal the No-Strike Pledge and prepare for a strike, union participation in reconversion to prevent a new speedup, no reconsideration of the old contract, the institution of a shop steward system, the creation of a national chain of labor-oriented newspapers, and even the formation of a separate labor party modeled along the lines of the British Labour Party.²¹ To quell this discontent and the discontent of most other General Motors' Locals, Walter Reuther called for a company-wide strike in October 1945.

Reuther wanted General Motors to grant a thirty percent across the board wage increase and simultaneously freeze the prices of its cars. To prove his claim that the company could afford these demands, he also asked General Motors to open their books and the negotiations with the union. It was a bold strategy designed to win over the militant rank-and-file and the consuming public. In addition, it was also clearly designed to help Reuther win the U.A.W. presidency in 1946.²² In Flint, the call for a strike was answered with great enthusiasm by the rank-and-file leadership. Every local voted overwhelmingly for the strike in late October. When General Motors refused to be intimidated, Reuther set the strike deadline for November 21st. Local militants began preparations

²¹ These last two items were contained in resolutions passed on August 12th and September 15 at regular (thus rather small) meetings of Buick's Local 599. There is no other indication in the records I have examined that they were ever discussed again at Local 599. However, within Local 659 at Chevrolet, a tiny group of radicals led by F.R. Palmer did keep the issue alive in the late 1940s. See the George Addes Collection, Box 69E, for the various resolutions.

²² This point is brought out in Barton Bernstein's fine article, "Walter Reuther and the General Motors Strike of 1945-46," Michigan History, IXL, 3, September, 1965.

early, forming a citywide strike committee and electing the AC's Robert Carter its chairman. When the deadline passed, there was no hesitation in Flint; well-organized pickets immediately hit the streets. On December 1st, when U.A.W. president Thomas agreed to G.M.'s request to reopen the parts and accessory divisions to accommodate customer orders, his office was flooded with protests from Flint like the one from the AC's Local 651 which read, "Our plant is down 100 percent and we intend to keep it down 100 percent until our just demands are won."²³ The next day, Thomas backed away from his offer, and told G.M. only those plants that voted to reopen would do so. None in Flint did.

The strike dragged on for 114 days, and ended with the union accepting a 18.5 cents per hour wage increase without any provision about prices, or any success with opening G.M.'s books or the negotiations. The union did get concessions on benefits, vacation pay, and a restoration of the overtime premium that had been lost during the war; but in no sense was the U.A.W. able to expand the scope of collective bargaining beyond what General Motors had defined in 1940. Flint's rank-and-file leaders tried to get the union to refuse the 18.5 cents and hour offer, yet most of the city's workers were probably ready to return to work after sixteen weeks without a paycheck.²⁴ Locally, the long run impact of the strike was significant. When it was over, most of the city's

²³ These telegrams and Thomas' correspondences with G.M. president C.E. Wilson may be found in the R.J. Thomas Collection Series I, Box 9, WSU.

²⁴ See UAW Oral History Project interview with F.R. Palmer, pp. 35-7 for recollections of the end of the strike. Also see "Flint City Wide Strike Committee to R.J. Thomas, February 21, 1946," R.J. Thomas Collection, I, Box 9, for the local response to G.M.'s offer.

shopfloor leaders and union officials seemed ready to accept Walter Reuther's leadership, and though some were quickly alienated by the red-baiting campaign he launched after winning the union presidency in 1946, they found it impossible to fight back as they had against Homer Martin in 1938-39. A decline in rank-and-file militance and the fears aroused by Cold War politics both outside and inside the union left Flint's few real radical rank-and-file leaders isolated from the membership in the late 1940s.²⁵ By 1950, when Buick's Norman Bully (who was by then a member of the G.M. Department's national negotiating team) sought the opinions of Flint's membership on the advisability of signing a five year contract with the company, he found "these people heaving a big sigh of relief because we were going to have labor peace for five years."²⁶

II. The Limits of Working Class-Consciousness in Mid-Twentieth-Century Flint

From 1933 to 1946, the industrial workers of Flint, Michigan, demonstrated a consistent commitment to industrial militance and shopfloor organization. Granted, not all workers participated in strikes or the unofficial shop steward system, but over the years, a substantial activist minority aroused and sustained a class-conscious willingness to struggle against General Motors for improvements in working and living conditions. Ultimately, it was this working class-consciousness that inspired the creation of the U.A.W. in Flint, and the growth of the

²⁵ When necessary, Reuther made personal appearances in Flint to defeat his opponents in local union elections. See the UAW Oral History Project interview with F.R. Palmer (who lost the presidency of Chevrolet Local 659 to the Reuther machine in 1948), pp. 38-43, for a bitter memory of this period.

²⁶ UAW Oral History Project interview, p. 27.

local rank-and-file movement in the 1940s. Why then, we must finally ask, did this militant class-consciousness disappear so rapidly after 1946? Why was bureaucratic industrial unionism so easily established once Walter Reuther became U.A.W. president? The tough-minded new industrial relations policy that General Motors had inaugurated in 1940, and the U.A.W. leaders' subsequent attempts to prove they ran a 'responsible' union are just part of the answer to these questions. As we have seen, what William Serrin labeled "the civilized relationship" between management and labor was not simply imposed on Flint's workers 'from above'.²⁷ In fact, up to 1945, the attempt to form such a relationship actually fueled local rank-and-file discontent and shopfloor organization. Thus, we must look elsewhere, to the long run social and economic changes brought on by the war, for a full explanation of the collapse of working class militance in Flint during the late 1940s.

In recent years, labor historians have stressed three reasons why the war eventually led to a decrease in rank-and-file militance and radicalism in the C.I.O.²⁸ Each of these reasons has some relevance to the decline of class conflict in Flint. First, it is said World War II broke up the primary work groups which had formed the backbone of the new industrial labor movement in the 1930s. There is some evidence that this did happen in Flint. Local rank-and-file leaders interviewed by the UAW Oral History Project recalled the draft, the transfer of workers

²⁷ The Company and the Union: The Civilized Relationship of the General Motors Corporation and the United Automobile Workers (New York, 1973).

²⁸ See James Green, "Fighting on Two Fronts: Working-Class Militancy in the 1940s," Radical America, IX, 4-5, July-August, 1975, especially pp. 38-42, for a review of the literature.

to new war plants (including the one built for Buick near Chicago), and the shifting of workers to new jobs within the same plant as having caused some disruption of their communication with the membership. Yet, none of Flint's activists placed much emphasis on these things. Indeed, the success they had building up the local rank-and-file movement suggests that new primary work groups formed quite easily under the pressures of war production. As David Brody has recently pointed out, the work group "by no means withered away" during the war or even "under the influence of the postwar labor management settlement." It is clear why work groups endured. Professor Brody continues,

Wherever they came into regular contact on the job, wherever they recognized a common identity, factory workers formed bonds, legislated group work standards, and, as best they could, enforced these informal rules on fellow workers and on supervisors. Work-group activity was an expression of the irrepressible social organization of the shopfloor.²⁹

Given this fact of industrial life, it seems that the dispersion of experienced work-group members throughout the wartime workforce may just as well have promoted rank-and-file organization as disrupted it.

The real communication problem which plagued Flint's rank-and-file movement was their alienation from the top leadership of the union they had helped to create. Had the shop steward system been supported by the U.A.W. hierarchy, and given a primary role in the collective bargaining process (as in Britain's automotive unions), it would not have collapsed after the war. In fact, a healthy official shop steward system would have been able to sustain the workers' control traditions of the rank-and-file movement, and pass them on to the next generation of auto

²⁹ "The Uses of Industrial Power I: Industrial Battleground," in Workers in Industrial America, p. 205.

workers. In Flint, at least, the U.A.W.'s failure to support the shop steward system created by its most dedicated members was a principal cause of the postwar decline in working class-consciousness.

A second reason often given for the rapid demise of working class militance and radicalism in mid-twentieth-century America is the large influx of blacks and women into the industrial workforce which occurred during the war years. Racism and sexism, it is contended, divided the working class from within, and in James Green's words, "obviously created serious problems not only in terms of union solidarity, but in terms of shop-floor solidarity" too.³⁰ Without a doubt, a great many of Flint's white male workers resented the substantial increase in black's and women's employment in the local war industry. This is not surprising. From 1908 to 1941 the essentially racist and sexist hiring policies of General Motors reinforced the prejudices most white males brought with them to Flint during the automobile boom. These prejudices surfaced in every major plant in the city after 1941, even though management generally tried to restrict new black and women workers to the limited job categories that had been traditionally open to them.³¹ Local union officials and rank-and-file leaders divided over these issues, but not nearly as much over women's work as over the hiring and upgrading of black workers. For example, in 1942, while some local leaders like Buick's Arthur Case adhered to the U.A.W.'s progressive race policy and

³⁰ "Fighting on Two Fronts," p. 40.

³¹ These generalizations are based on the materials gathered on Flint in Records of the Committee on Fair Employment Practices, RG 228, Box 669, Regional File, Region V, National Archives; and a very clear discussion of the local race problem in the UAW Oral History Project interview with Arthur Case (who was twice regional director in these years), pp. 30-2.

fought to open up production jobs to black workers, Federal Fair Employment Practices Committee investigators reported others, including U.A.W. regional director Carl Swanson and Chevrolet Local 659's president Terrel Thompson refused to forward discrimination complaints "because they are unsympathetic with the requests of these black workers."³²

Without going into further detail, it can be stated categorically that racism and sexism were important problems that did, at times, divide Flint's industrial working class and its leaders. Nevertheless, these problems were not a primary cause of the decline in local working class-consciousness in the later 1940s. Though the number of blacks and women employed in industry in Flint roughly doubled during the war years, the absolute increase was not enough to disrupt the basic patterns of discrimination which had always existed at G.M. and in the city as a whole. As mentioned above, personnel managers continued to channel blacks and women into jobs that had always been open to them. Most new women workers found industrial openings at the AC and the smaller (non-G.M.) plants that always hired lots of women.³³ Similarly, most new black workers got jobs at plants (Buick, Chevrolet, and the AC) that traditionally had kept some black workers on the payroll. Fisher Body 1, the plant with the most Southern workers and managers, hired only one hundred blacks during the war, and laid them all off in 1945. In fact, across

³² "Report on Complaint against Management, January 9, 1942," in file: "Chevrolet Motor Company--Flint, Michigan," and "To Colonel Strong from J. Duncan (of the F.E.P.C.), July 15, 1942," Records of the Fair Employment Practices Committee. Generally it seems that the more radical rank-and-file leaders at Buick, Chevrolet, and the AC after 1943 fought hardest to remedy black workers' discrimination complaints.

³³ The U.S. Employment Service's "Labor Market Report for Flint, Michigan, March 1943" showed AC's workforce was 42% female while the rest of G.M. was just 4.7% female.

the city, following the 'last hired, first fired' rule, in 1945-46, layoffs fell heaviest on blacks and women, while postwar boom rehiring favored returning white male veterans with pre-war seniority.³⁴ In other words, wartime changes in the labor force were simply not extensive enough or permanent enough to account for the postwar decline in local working class militance.

The final reason some labor historians cite for the moderation of the postwar industrial labor movement is the nationalism which wartime appeals to patriotism aroused. In particular, it is argued that nationalism divided the worker's own consciousness, and consequently, blocked the transformation of labor militance into political radicalism. To quote James Green again,

the class struggle begun in the 1930s continued on the shop floor, where militance often won out over patriotism. . . , but in the realm of political society, where the worker saw herself or himself primarily as a citizen, patriotism or even jingoism became more important than class consciousness.³⁵

Of course, in wartime Flint, workers were exposed to constant patriotic news and calls for "equality of sacrifice". This propaganda was aimed at them by the government, the company, the local media, and even their own union. Yet, it seems questionable to conclude that these nationalistic appeals, which fell on deaf ears as far "equality of sacrifice" and adherence to the No-Strike Pledge goes, would nevertheless be extremely persuasive in the political arena. In Flint, at least, wartime

³⁴ The generalizations are based on special employment surveys conducted by the National Conciliation Service in Flint on May 31, 1945 (Case Files No. 453-2188, 2190, 2191); and on the quarterly "Labor Market Development Reports" for 1944-47 found in the Records of the Bureau of Employment Security.

³⁵ "Fighting on Two Fronts," p. 41.

nationalism did not block the political radicalization of the local working class, so much as it reinforced workers' already well-established moderate (non-revolutionary) political inclinations.

Though the disruption of primary work groups, changes in the composition of the labor force, and wartime nationalism undoubtedly contributed the decline in class conflict in mid-twentieth century Flint, none of these things was as significant as the revitalization of the pre-Depression mass-consumer culture which began as soon as the war was over. In the postwar era, the U.A.W.'s final suppression of the rank-and-file movement and the shop steward system which was its heart and soul, left Flint's postwar working class with no institution vital enough to counter the claims of mass-consumerism and leisure-time pleasure on the attentions of the individual worker. In a very real sense, the collapse of the union as an effective force in everyday life on the shopfloor, cut most workers off from the values (especially industrial militance and workers' control) that were rooted in the class experiences of the 1930s and 1940s. As time passed and the consumer economy boomed, the U.A.W. became a distant bureaucracy, and most workers lost faith in it. Ironically, the success of the union in negotiating wage and benefit increases in longterm contracts probably encouraged this loss of faith. Of course, such a union could not transmit working class values to new generations of auto workers. Like the workers of the 1920s, the auto workers of Flint who entered the industry in the 1950s and 1960s adjusted to the degradation of their work by committing themselves to the accumulation of things and the pursuit of recreational enjoyments like fishing, hunting, boating, and the building of "a cottage up north." In the long run, though the working class

consciousness which emerged in Flint still burned in the minds of many of the older generation who were there at its making, a bureaucratic U.A.W. and Democratic Party increasingly divorced from its New Deal heritage could not make a new generation of workers feel its power.

III. A Comparative Perspective

The significance of the early development of mass-consumerism, and of the failure to establish a lasting shop steward tradition in Flint can be made clearer by a brief comparative digression.³⁶ Coventry, England, a major production center of the British automobile industry, also experienced a second industrial revolution during the first half of the twentieth century. Yet, the quality of that experience differed enormously from what happened in Flint. Indeed, in twentieth-century Coventry, the institutions which transmitted the values of a nineteenth-century working class to new generations of working class families never broke down. Instead, those values and institutions were adapted to changing conditions by workers who saw themselves engaged in a permanent class struggle against their equally class-conscious employers.

In the first fifteen years of this century, Coventry was a fast growing engineering center where the expansion of motor vehicle manufacturing, an offshoot of the bicycle-making industry, remained the preserve of many small companies that produced high quality vehicles for a limited market.³⁷ By American standards, the industry was slow to

³⁶ The material in this section is drawn from my article, "Divergent Traditions: Union Organization in the Automobile Industries of Flint, Michigan and Coventry, England," Detroit in Perspective: A Journal of Regional History, 5, 3, Spring 1981.

³⁷ Daimler, Hillman, Humber, Morris Engines, Riley, Rover, Siddeley-Deasy, Singer, Standard, and White & Poppe Engines were probably the most

rationalize production methods and reduce its dependence on highly skilled labor. However, within the context of their own society, by World War I local automakers and other firms represented by the powerful Coventry and District Engineering Employers Association had already introduced the kind of "advanced technology" (mainly automatic machine tools) that threatened the craft status of engineering workers, and thus, the whole local structure of industrial relations.³⁸

The disputes procedure outlined in the national agreement of 1898 between the Employers Federation and the Amalgamated Society of Engineers formed the basis for industrial relations in pre-World War I Coventry. It narrowly defined the rights of the union to bargain with employers over wage questions and provided for Works, Local, and Central Conferences to settle sticky issues. In Coventry, several other craft unions were brought under the terms of the agreement, but until 1913, no lesser skilled workers had recognition. In that year, the Coventry branch of the Workers Union, which had carried on aggressive recruiting among the city's newly arriving machine operatives, called a successful three day strike against two vehicle makers, Humber and Daimler, and the Coventry Ordnance Works. Strikers won wage increases,

important automotive firms established in this period. The local industry remained very unstable through the 1920s. Following the Great War, Alvis, Armstrong-Siddeley (replaces Siddeley-Deasy), and Triumph were added to the list of important motor car makers. Jaguar was established in 1934. A more complete list of Coventry's early motor vehicle industry see Kenneth Richardson, Twentieth Century Coventry (City of Coventry, 1972), pp. 345-51.

³⁸ This point occurs throughout the literature on the turn of the century engineering industry, and demonstrates the different character of similar industries in Britain and the United States. For a clear example see James Hinton, The First Shop Stewards Movement (London, 1973), pp. 16ff.

a 53-hour week, and overtime guarantees similar to those of the engineering unions. In Local Conference shortly after the strike, the Workers Union signed a disputes procedure agreement with the Employers Association, the first such "recognition" agreement in the country.³⁹

Though the Great War put a halt to Coventry's first automobile boom, it accelerated the transformation of local industry. As a major war production center, Coventry attracted great numbers of initially unskilled workers (including many women) who operated machines on piece work bases that often put their earnings near those of skilled workers who generally were paid on a time-based scale. This 'dilution' problem spurred organization of a strong shop stewards movement among skilled workers who wished to preserve their wage advantage and traditional control over entry to the trade, and among lesser skilled workers who were wooed by generally more radical stewards affiliated with the craft unions and the Workers Union.⁴⁰ In May, 1917, 30,000 Coventry engineering workers struck as part of a nationwide action against government plans to extend 'dilution' in the war industries. This strike brought stewards of different unions together in an independent committee, and highlighted the radical political character of the movement's rank-and-file leadership.⁴¹

³⁹ Richard Hyman, The Workers Union (Oxford, 1971), pp. 61-71. Also see "Report of Conference between Coventry and District Engineering Employers Association held 6/25/13 on wage rates for unskilled workers" (Mss 66/1/1/1, Modern Records Center, University of Warwick) for straightforward statements of employer opinion prior to 'recognition'.

⁴⁰ In December 1916, the Workers Union had more than 8500 male members in Coventry, while the Engineers and Toolmakers each claimed about 4000 members. Membership in other unions was far smaller. (Hinton, note 3, p. 217.)

⁴¹ In his book, Hinton goes to great lengths to demonstrate this point. An official Commission of Inquiry into Industrial Unrest No. 4 Division, Report of the Commissioners for the West Midlands (H.M.S.O., 1917) traced the rise of the radical stewards to the official prohibition on the right

In its aftermath, although stewards continued to lead shopfloor job actions, local union officials gradually got control of the movement by dominating the formation and policies of a Coventry Engineering Joint Committee that was able to win temporary "recognition" from employers in December, 1917.

This first shop stewards system did not survive. In July, 1918, about 20,000 skilled union members struck in protest of the government's announced intention to embargo the hiring of skilled labor.⁴² Taken without the approval of the Joint Committee, this strike split that body, rendering it ineffective. Moreover, the strike failed when the Ministry of Munitions threatened to use conscription against workers who refused to return to their jobs. It was a serious blow to the prestige of the union leaders and the militance of the skilled workers.⁴³

In the immediate aftermath of the war, union strength in Coventry grew; but as soon as the economy slipped into a sharp depression in 1920, the local labor movement began to collapse. Shopfloor organizations were decimated by widespread unemployment and by a systematic

to strike which "has undoubtedly taken authority out of the hands of responsible officials and given it to the Shop Stewards." p. 5).

⁴² The numbers on strike varied from day to day. On July 25 only the United Machine Workers joined the strike. Woodworkers, Iron Moulders, Coremakers, Brassworkers, and the Workers Union refused. See "Daily Reports of the Munitions Council" for July 17-29, 1918, MUN II, No. 272-82, Public Records Office, Kew.

⁴³ The Ministry of Munitions circulated the following notice on July 27: "It is now necessary for the Government to declare that all men wilfully absent from work on or after Monday, July 29, will be deemed to have voluntarily placed themselves outside the area of the munitions industry . . . and they will become liable to the provisions of the Military Service Acts." At 10:00 am a mass meeting of 10,000 strikers approved a return to work with "very few dissentients." (MUN II, 282).

employers' attack on the concessions granted during the war emergency.⁴⁴ Wage rates were negotiated downward while radical stewards and other union members were sacked. The final blow fell in March, 1922 when employers, anxious to define their "managerial functions" as they saw fit, locked out the Amalgamated Engineers all across the nation. In Coventry, fourteen other unions joined the Engineers by striking just after a big May Day rally, but the employers remained adamant. By June, economic pressures on union treasuries and individual members had undermined the solidarity of the strike. The news that negotiations for a settlement had started sent many scurrying back to the workshops. One prominent shop steward later wrote, "There was an unholy scramble for jobs, the men were beaten to their knees."⁴⁵

The 1922 Lockout destroyed union strength in Coventry's automotive industry. Local A.E.U. officials chose to be vindictive towards those who returned to work before union notices were posted. By October, nearly 3000 members had been reprimanded, fined, or excluded. Membership in the local A.E.U. dropped drastically and then continued to slide downwards for the next ten years.⁴⁶ The local Workers Union was destroyed, losing more than ninety percent of its members.⁴⁷ Other craft unions survived, but as organizational shells without an effective role

⁴⁴ At their peak in Coventry after World War I, the A.E.U. had more than 12,000 members, the Workers Union in excess of 8000, and the National Union of Vehicle Builders near 2000 paid up members.

⁴⁵ George Hodgkinson, Sent To Coventry (London, 1970), p. 73.

⁴⁶ A.E.U. membership dropped more than seventy-five percent from its postwar peak to less than 2500 paid up in the early 1930s. Details of the District Committees retaliation can be found in the "Minutes of District AEU," July 18 - September 27, 1922, in the A.U.E.W. District Offices, Coventry.

⁴⁷ Hyman, Workers Union, p. 145.

on the shopfloor.⁴⁸

The collapse of the first shop stewards movement and union power in the early 1920s left Coventry an open-shop city for most of the interwar period. Its growing economy allowed those with jobs to maintain a higher standard of living than that suffered in the nation's 'distressed areas' (in Scotland, North England, Wales, and Northern Ireland). As a result, even though it had considerable unemployment, Coventry became a magnet for unemployed workers willing to leave their homes elsewhere for a chance to work in the "new" industries.⁴⁹ In the local vehicle-aircraft industry, employers took advantage of these conditions, rationalizing the production process and replacing skilled jobs with the kind of lesser skilled positions that still looked like opportunity to migrants and youths. New machinery was introduced throughout the period, and beginning in the late 1920s all the major motor car manufacturers started

⁴⁸ The Vehicle Builders, whose skills were still vital in the body shops, survived best. The Coventry branch was the largest in the country and had amassed considerable financial resources during the war. Through the hard years of the early 1920s it lost a few hundred members, but paid unemployment benefits to all who qualified. After the General Strike it actually grew to a peak membership of 2500. Finally, in the early 1930s, rationalization and depression cut its ranks drastically. See National Union of Vehicle Builders, Quarterly Report and Journal and the Minute books of the Coventry branch in the Vehicle Building and Automotive Museum, Coventry. Also see the interview with "Three retired members of Coventry's National Union of Vehicle Builders," Coventry Tapes - No. 79, Lanchester Polytechnic, Coventry.

⁴⁹ Coventry's population soared from 169,000 in 1931 to nearly 230,000 in 1940. (Twentieth Century Coventry, p. 64) It is estimated that eighty percent of the 42,000 migrants who arrived in the city between 1931 and 1939 came from the mining districts. (Richard Croucher, "Communist Politics and Shop Stewards in Engineering, 1935-46," PhD. thesis, University of Warwick, 1977, p. 195) In this period, Coventry's unemployment rate was never less than two percent below the national average even though it reached seventeen percent in early 1932. ("Coventry Unemployment 1930-39 - statistics supplied by the Ministry of Labour," Coventry City Library).

to use 'track work' in their assembly operations. Until the late 1930s, continued harassment and 'blackballing' of union activists created a climate of fear that kept worker protests to a minimum. As one Armstrong-Siddeley engineer told the A.E.U. District Secretary in October, 1930, "You can't trust the men. Even amongst our own members you do not know who you are talking to."⁵⁰

Though they lacked any real bargaining power, the surviving skeleton union organizations in Coventry did help sustain local working class values between the wars, including the value workers in the vehicle industry placed on shopfloor democracy. However, other institutions and circumstances were also crucial in carrying local working class-consciousness forward. Most importantly, key supporters of the first shop stewards movement found places in other working class organizations that gave them active roles in Coventry's public life. For example, George Hodgkinson, a moderate Socialist steward at Daimler who was sacked in 1923, became the city's chief Labour Party organizer. More radical stewards, including those affiliated with the Communist Party, continued to meet and discuss trade union strategy and unemployment policy throughout the 1920s in the Coventry branch of the National Minority Movement. In the 1930s, several of these N.M.M. members would rise to leadership positions in the revived union movement.⁵¹ Other former militants

⁵⁰ Quoted from a notebook record of District Secretary Givens' interview surveys of members in Coventry firms. Taken in 1925 and 1930, these surveys are by no means scientific, but they provide an invaluable insight into shopfloor conditions in this era of union weakness. The notebook is in the A.U.E.W. District Offices, Coventry.

⁵¹ See Coventry branch membership list for 1929 in "Loose material from National Minority Movement - Midlands District and Coventry Branch," Mss 81/3/2/2, Modern Records Center.

committed themselves to the Trades Council (which was led by radicals from the Transport and General Workers Union in the 1930s) and to the National Unemployed Workers Movement.⁵² Taken as a group, the politically active workers who participated in these class-conscious organizations earned the positions from which they would direct a second shop stewards movement when the opportunity arose in the late 1930s.

Other aspects of everyday life sustained the kind of broader working class consciousness that was expressed in the full support local workers gave the General Strike in May, 1926.⁵³ Coventry's healthy Cooperative movement grew apace with the city, strengthening what Richard Crossman (the city's notable postwar Labour M.P.) observed as

the impression that the institutions through which the working class would overthrow capitalism and achieve a Socialist society were not located in Whitehall and Westminster but nearer home.⁵⁴

The continuous stream of migrants who entered Coventry in these years strengthened such sentiments. For unlike the rural individualists who flooded Flint in the early twentieth century, most newcomers to Coventry came from working class backgrounds in the mining districts and engineering centers of Scotland and North England.⁵⁵ When they arrived, these people fit easily into the political and social life of Coventry's working class. Some even stepped right into leadership positions in the

⁵² Jock Gibson, president of the Trades Council in the early 1930s discussed these organizations at length in an interview in 1972. See Coventry Tapes - No. 65. Account books of the Trades Council can be found in the Modern Records Center, (Mss 5B/2/2). Annual Reports of the Trades Council are located in the TUC Library, London.

⁵³ Local strike leaders actually reported more men out the day after official TUC notices to return to work were posted. Virtually all the city's major works were shut down at that time.

⁵⁴ "Introduction" to Sent to Coventry, p. xiv.

⁵⁵ See note 49 above.

reviving labor movement.⁵⁶

The economic boom created by rapid expansion in the local vehicle and aircraft industries after 1935 provided the leaders of Coventry's working class the opportunity to restore the shop steward system. With unemployment rates dropping despite the increasing population (thanks largely to the opening of seven "Shadow" aircraft factories), new 'dilution' problems arose.⁵⁷ As shopfloor agitation increased, old shop stewards and younger radicals combined with trade union officials (who were now largely former shop stewards themselves) to re-establish the kind of organization that had first emerged in World War I. Jock Gibson, a migrant from Glasgow who was Trades Council president before going back to the shops as a steward-organizer for the Transport and General Workers, later recalled,

they just started again as they were in the 1917-1922 period. You were getting back to the combining of the shop stewards within the plants, they were starting to meet irrespective of their unions but as workers within their factories.⁵⁸

In other words, in contrast to their counterparts in Flint, Coventry's industrial workers did not have to create an entirely new working class consciousness when they organized their unions. Instead, both the

⁵⁶ "Appendix - Brief Biographies" in Richard Croucher's thesis gives details on five such leaders.

⁵⁷ These problems virtually duplicated those of World War I. Prior to the precedent-setting Coventry Toolroom Agreement, Ministry of Labour conciliation officers reported the greatest source of tension between the A.E.U. and the Employers Federation was "the wide disparity of wages, exemplified, it was mentioned by earnings of L12 per week by pieceworkers against L6 per week for skilled day workers." ("Weekly Reports Ministry of Labour and National Service Industrial Relations Officer, No. 9, Midland Regional Area, November 16, 1940, LAB 10, No. 350, PRO, Kew).

⁵⁸ Coventry Tapes - No. 65.

structure and character of industrial unionism in modern Coventry were derived from existing class traditions, especially that which had already transformed the craft-consciousness of the official unions into the shop-floor democracy of the shop steward system.

Thus, both the timing and tactics of union organization in Coventry differed from what had happened in Flint. There was certainly militance as the pre-war boom opened up organizational opportunities, but there was no single massive explosion of hostilities as occurred in the Flint sit-down strike. In Coventry in the fall of 1937, the Engineers' District Secretary (a former Daimler steward and Minority Movement leader) led a successful strike of grossly underpaid apprentices and youths against some of the city's biggest employers.⁵⁹ This event was a turning point, for it inspired shopfloor organization and job actions throughout the city. The aircraft factories were organized first, in part because union militants were hired into them during this period when the government began to prepare the nation for war. The gang system that prevailed in some of the aircraft assembly shops also facilitated organization, since gangs created their own stewards out of gang leaders.⁶⁰ Before they converted to war work (in 1938-39), a few departments in the older automotive plants were fully organized. However, effective plantwide shop steward committees (complete with their own conveners) were not put together until 'dilution'

⁵⁹ For details see Croucher, "Communist Politics. . .," pp. 62-77; and "Minutes of District AEU" for September 27 - October 14, 1937.

⁶⁰ For discussion of the gang system see interviews with Reg Glover (Coventry Tapes - No. 13) and Jack Jones (Coventry Tapes - No. 23). Glover later wrote up his experiences as an advocate of the gang system under the pseudonym Dwight Rayton ("ShopFloor Democracy in Action: a Personal Account of the Coventry Gang System," an Industrial Common Ownership Pamphlet, No. 1, August 1972).

problems peaked during the first part of the war.⁶¹

By the end of the Second World War, the shop steward system had been established in most of Coventry's vehicle-aircraft industry through a process of shop-by-shop organization and confrontation.⁶² Though inter-union rivalries did exist (particularly between the Transport and General Workers Union, which had absorbed the Workers Union in 1929, and the biggest 'skilled' unions like the Engineers and Vehicle Builders), there were shared values that often united the efforts of officials, stewards, and the rank-and-file from various organizations. Most importantly, Coventry's entire working class was committed to the shop steward system. For them, unions had to be formed around workshop democracy, not factory-wide representation as in Flint. Furthermore, Coventry's relatively lower paid workers preserved a craft-like view of work very different from the generally instrumental view of rationalized factory jobs held by most of Flint's working class. As a result, under the shop steward system, work stoppages over job content and definition were more frequent in Coventry than Flint. And even in the rate disputes that still caused most of Coventry's strikes, money could become secondary to principle. Jack Jones, the District Organizer for the Transport and General Workers from 1939 to the early 1950s, explained this point to employers in a series of mid-war Local Conferences on semi-skilled workers' piece rates. It is a matter of history . . .," he stated,

We think it is a very good principle that the base rate of

⁶¹ This point is discussed at length by Croucher, pp. 209-23.

⁶² Some shops were not fully 'closed' until the early 1950s. (Interview with Stanley Wyatt, former district official of the N.U.V.B., January 27, 1978, notes in my possession).

the men should be raised; it raises their importance in the industry. . . it is not earnings, but the status of the men [that matters].⁶³

Finally, it should be observed that socialist union organizers in Coventry won far more rank-and-file support for their positions than Flint's radicals, because socialism in Coventry was a grassroots phenomenon which had grown in importance as the political ideology of a class dedicated to putting the Labour Party in charge in the Council House (which it did in 1937) and shop stewards on the factory floor. In Flint, there was no such tradition. As we have seen, socialism had completely failed there prior to World War I, and before the great automobile boom permanently altered the character of local society. By 1930, without an institutional base or local leadership such as that which existed in Coventry, socialist class-consciousness could not be restored in Flint.

In both Flint and Coventry, the logic of whether automotive workers organized in good times or bad, whether they created industrial or 'craft' unions, whether they eventually put power in the hands of national officials or shop stewards, or fought harder for material living standards and the New Deal than workshop privileges and socialism was not governed by theory. Nor were these things the mere effects of 'factors' intersecting in moments artificially frozen for study. Rather, the logic of these events, and thus of working class-consciousness itself, stemmed from the ways these particular groups of working people searched their unique traditions and pasts to bring different, changing presents under control.

⁶³ "Proceedings in Local Conference," July 30 and October 6, 1943, Mss 66/1/1/8-9, Modern Records Center.

IV. A Few Wider Implications

One can hardly generalize about the character of an entire society, especially one so large and diverse as our own, on the basis of one case study. Nonetheless, this history of Flint, Michigan does prompt some interesting speculation about the way most academics have looked at the development of the United States in the twentieth century. Clearly, if the historical experience of Flint indicates anything at all, it is that classes have existed, and do exist, in modern America. Indeed, what seems most striking about the history of Flint since 1900 is the continuous existence of a business class strong enough, not only to protect its own immediate economic interests, but also to actually shape fundamental social values and political culture. When viewed at the local level, as we have done here, this business class appears to be far and away the most powerful influence on the way American society grew during its second industrial revolution. When we watch the transformation of Flint from a small town to a metropolitan automotive production center, the direct connections between the economic power of the business class and its ability to direct social and political change appear evident. In the Vehicle City, control of the second industrial revolution through investment in new technology, the creation of large corporations, the implementation of mass-production, and the making of mass-markets for consumer goods yielded far more than profits; it also conferred the power to make vital decisions about the character of society and politics.

The flexibility and innovativeness of the business class which emerged in Flint are also striking. Whenever challenged by discontented working people, or unforeseen social and economic events, Flint's business

class almost always found a way to manage the problem. Between 1900 and 1930, it answered the Socialist Party threat with progressive reform, early industrial unionism with welfare capitalism, and rapid population growth with Americanization and the city manager system. Only the Great Depression--the breakdown of the political-economy produced by the second industrial revolution--led to changes which were, initially at least, beyond the control of this business class.

A working class was 'made' in Flint in response to the Great Depression, and in response to the violence a desperate business class used in an attempt to repress it. This new working class was not, as we have seen, politically revolutionary. Nevertheless, it was a true class, dedicated to struggle against the traditional business class monopoly over economic, social, and political decision-making. Industrial unionism and the New Deal formula did not produce all that the working class of the 1930s and 1940s hoped for, but they did lead to important social and political reforms which are too often dismissed as insignificant by contemporary radicals. The making of a working class in Flint in response to the breakdown of consumer-oriented capitalism suggests that the deep pessimism of the New Left cultural critics of the 1960s was, and is, mistaken. When it is healthy and expanding, advanced consumer-oriented capitalism may indeed create "a pattern of one-dimensional thought and behavior," as Herbert Marcuse once explained.⁶⁴ But what happens when the flow of new products and pleasures into working people's everyday lives slows down, or stops altogether? What does history tell us? If past events in Flint--a city which experienced a second industrial

⁶⁴ One-Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society (Boston, 1968), p. 12.

revolution before the Great Depression--are any indication, then new possibilities for far-reaching social and political change may open up.

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