

Melvin W. Jackson

Aw, Sit Down!

Notes on a New Era of Direct Action

January, 1937

“A fantastic situation!” exclaims one weekly voice of American employers about sit-down strikes.

“We are tired of having to get passes to enter our own factories,” many French capitalists protest.

Employers become powerless in the face of stay-in or sit-down strikes. The iron hand that holds the economic life of thousands becomes putty when confronted by these aroused workers.

The sacred property rights of the industrial tyrant are being questioned, and the absentee owner trembles lest sit-down strikes become more popular.

A new era of working-class solidarity is dawning. The slumbering giant is stirring and testing his chains.

Orthodox unionism is finding itself swept on in the rising tide of solidarity. Workers are spontaneously realizing they have a weapon more powerful than any ever dreamed.

Totally unorganized workers are arising in protest against deplorable conditions and are awakening to the advantages of industrial unionism. The stay-in strikes in June in France were spontaneous and took the trade unions by surprise. French trade unions are said to be enjoying an unprecedented growth due to the overwhelming success of these strikes. One observer writes, “It can be said roughly that the number of trade unionists has gone up from 600,000 to 4,400,000 since June. Some instances: The number of office employees passed from 25,000 to 825,000, the food workers’ union from 20,000 to 50,000, the Galleries La Fayette, which had not one single organized worker, now numbers 2,000 of them. Even the employees of the Banque de France begin to draw up their demands.”

Two thousand British and Welsh coal miners recently preferred to remain underground in the mines until their demands were met.

Miners at Pecs, Hungary, likewise declared a “stay-down” strike to wring concessions from the owners.

Poland, Czechoslovakia, Silesia, India, Argentina, Brazil, Mexico — all of these countries have witnessed within the past year the solidarity of workers united in economic direct action. Sit-down strikes, stay-in strikes, hunger strikes — all these echo a grim determination of militant workers. Workers who refuse to leave underground mines or who remain at their factory benches or in their stores and restaurants and offices while striking — this is the new type of class struggle confronting capitalism.

Even in Fascist Germany, police and Nazi Storm Troops become powerless in the face of sit-down strikes, which have occurred in protest against further wage cuts. The D. K. W. Motor Works at Spandau, and the Motor Works of Bauer and Schauberte in the Rhineland both witnessed successful stay-in strikes recently.

American rubber and tire companies, Bendix Aviation, General Electric, R.C.A., WPA workers in New York, Pennsylvania, Illinois, and elsewhere, Reading Maid Hosiery, Aluminum Co. of America, New York Shipbuilding Co., and many other corporations can testify to the efficiency of sit-down strikes by their lessened profits — and the workers of many of these places can hold up fatter pay envelopes as mute testimony of their success.

Violence, rioting, and bloodshed: for years and years these have been the pet bogeys of union haters. “Terrorism, destruction, and gore” meant the same thing as “strike” to labor baiters. They dragged these skeletons out to dangle before the horrified eyes of scissorbills whenever anyone even whispered “strike” or “solidarity”. “See what will happen,” employers have exclaimed as they reached for the telephone to call their tin soldiers or “private detectives” to come and do some rioting and terrorising for them.

Now, alas and alack, these myths which were so conveniently used by the bosses are being dispelled.

“Business Week” complains, “Sit-downs were so frequent that the union set up a system that placed the striking workers in charge of the plant during disturbances. Men were told off beforehand to guard doors, round up supervisors ‘for safekeeping in case of trouble’ and generally take over the plant.”

Order, self-discipline, and responsibility have universally characterized all sit-down strikes. The employers alone have been directly responsible for any bloodshed or destruction of property — because the workers realized that it is not by these tactics that their strikes are won.

In the recent French sit-down strikes which involved so many industries it is said the machines were preciously taken care of. The furnaces which must never go out were kept going; in the tan-yards the skins remained bathed, and every morning the masons wet the stones of the houses they were building. In short all work that could not be stopped without actual damage to valuable materials or machines was kept going by the strikers.

The workers here demonstrated they can take over and run industries without the parasitic control by a master-class, and that they can run them in an orderly and intelligent fashion. This is one thing capitalism has found itself unable to do: run industry in an orderly and intelligent fashion.

Where workers have not given politicians control of their strike, the sit-down strike has been uniformly and universally successful since the first one — the IWW strike of 3,000 General Electric employees in 1906.

The fact that the ownership of an industry belongs to the workers in that industry, just as the toothbrush he uses should belong to him; the fact that a worker has just as definite a right to the job upon which his economic life depends as he has upon his hair; the fact that the rights of the parasitic class should not include

the ownership of tools they never use but upon which others' lives depends — these facts are all understood by a sit-down striker, though he may not recognize them as such.

The worker at his machine which he refuses either to leave or to operate until his demands are granted, and the factory which continues to be operated by strikers, declare the worker's right to his machine, and his ability to run it when the shackles of capitalist ownership are shaken off, though at the time it be only temporary.

Where economic direct action and working class solidarity are used in struggles against the master class, the workers will never lose.

“Freedom cannot be gained through intermediaries.”

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