

Workers on the Right: Bottom-Up Conservatism and the Sit-Down Strike “Epidemic” in Michigan and Ontario

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This paper examines how workers and small employers in Michigan and Ontario worked to oppose labor militancy, organized labor, and the New Deal during the late 1930s. Amid the upsurge of sit-down strikes in 1937, outraged individuals and even groups of workers pushed back against the burgeoning “epidemic” of strikes in the region, engaging in resistance (sometimes violently) to strikers’ actions. When workers at an automobile seat covers plant in Detroit launched a sit-down to demand fewer hours and increased wages, their annoyed boss (Walter L. Fry) sat down himself – determined to halt spoiled workers’ militancy in its tracks. He hoped to show that he could upend others’ ability to work if he, too, quit working for his own company. Anti-union workers on the western end of the state in Grand Blanc launched a “stay-in” demonstration to prevent union supporters from launching a sit-down strike at a leather plant, keeping the factory up and running for several days by sleeping on the floor and working during the day. Just across the St. Clair River in Ontario, anti-union workers violently ousted sit-strikers at the Holmes Foundry near Sarnia. Such opponents of the sit-downers (and industrial unions) received warm coverage in Detroit’s and Flint’s newspapers for their resistance to New Deal-era labor militancy. Taken together, these incidents pointed to the robust presence of conservative, anti-union feeling in both Michigan and the wider region, among employers and workers alike. This paper would fit on panels related to the Committee of Industrial Organization and/or the New Deal, as well as conservative politics.