



Run Your Own Union Debate - Scenario 1

1936: Go on Strike in Flint?

It's December 1936. For years, workers at **General Motors'** Flint factory have been dealing with terrible working conditions and low wages. Now, they are organizing to make a change.

Many workers are planning to take action through a new strategy: the **sit-down strike**, where everyone sits inside the factory and refuses to leave until General Motors agrees to negotiate with the new **United Auto Workers** union to achieve better conditions. But some workers are afraid that this plan is too risky, and that they could lose their jobs in a strike.

In this meeting, *you* will decide what Flint's General Motors auto workers choose to do in December 1936, and determine the course of history:

1. Select one person in your group to argue **for** a sit-down strike.
2. Select one person to argue **against** a strike.
3. Select one person to **moderate** the debate.
4. Have everyone vote on whether to strike or not. After you've voted, watch the movie to find out what really happened.



Walter P. Reuther Library, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University



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The Moderator:

Your job is to make sure everyone's opinions get heard, by letting people on both sides of the argument speak and by stopping anyone who goes over the designated time.

Decide on a time that each delegate can speak for (1 minute, 2 minutes, etc.) and time each speaker fairly. If you'd like, give them an opportunity to respond briefly to each other's points.

The quality of the debate depends on you.

The Anti-Striker:

Possible arguments:

- We'll get fired, and lose our ability to make money and survive
- We don't get paid when we strike, so our families won't be taken care of
- GM is too powerful in Flint, controlling and spying on everything, so we can't beat them
- We'll get hurt or killed by the Flint police, who listen to General Motors
- Sit-down strikes are against the law, so the government will be against us

The Pro-Striker:

Possible arguments:

- We can't improve our working conditions unless we get a union in place here
- They fire anyone who steps out of line to scare us into working harder
- The pace of the factory is so fast we can't even use the bathroom or get a drink during our shift
- Michigan Governor Murphy said he wouldn't send the National Guard to attack us
- We have lots of people ready to support us with food and other supplies



The Moderator:

You are President Scholle.

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DRAFT - Share your feedback with the QR code.

Keep the Pledge:

You are Delegate Ruth Biggin of local 208, UAWA. You believe that the no-strike pledge is necessary to help our soldiers fight in this Second World War. This resolution trying to end that pledge is an insult to their sacrifices and to the workers and leaders who want to win the war.

Other points to consider:

- Striking during war hurts only the soldiers and the workers, not the company's leaders, since they'll get their money from the government either way.
- Most of the workers you represent support the no-strike pledge, to help the soldiers, and would not be happy if it was struck down.
- Corporations who support our enemies could cause problems for workers on purpose to get them to strike and damage the war effort.

End the Pledge:

You are Delegate Reynolds of Dodge Local No. 3. You believe that workers can only get better conditions through striking. The no-strike pledge jeopardizes workers' rights and ability to have a better life.

Other points to consider:

- The no-strike pledge blocks the democratic power of workers and unions, their ability to decide for themselves how best to fight for their rights.
- We support our soldiers abroad with Victory Gardens, rationing our food and fuel, scrap metal drives, and purchasing war bonds. What we need is better conditions at work to empower us to keep doing our part on the home front.
- “The corporation that I work for knows only one language and that is the language of strike.”