

LABEL FLASH

Bean Soup & Cornbread in the Winter of Our Discontent

February 11th—An Important Anniversary for Labor

UAW families mark the anniversary of the Treaty of Detroit with meals of bean soup and cornbread on February 11th. Here's why:

When workers at the Fisher body plant in Flint, Michigan executed their historic sit down strike 71 years ago they sparked a dramatic growth in the U.S. labor movement, taking a stand against the industrial tyranny that then prevailed in America's manufacturing plants, conditions that suppressed wages and controlled every movement of workers on the shop floor. Within weeks after the Treaty of Detroit was signed on February 11, 1937 to end the strike, the UAW's membership had grown from 30,000 to 500,000.

Strikers took over the Flint plant on December 30, 1936. They held out for six weeks against tear gas and the menacing guns of National Guard troops; ignoring an injunction issued by a judge whose investment portfolio included \$200,000 in GM stock. The workers slept on boards stretched across boxes. They went for long stretches without sanitation (the company cut off water to the plant until the city of Flint forced them to turn it back on). During the stalemate family members provided sustenance of bean soup, cornbread and apples, handing the food through broken plant windows.

The United Auto Workers union has been pummeled in Congress and in some segments of the press recently. When lawmakers took up the issue of a bridge loan to revive the U.S. auto industry late last year, the UAW got more criticism than

auto industry management. The drumbeat has continued even as the new Congress revisits the idea of an economic stimulus. We still see critics, led by Republican members of Congress, condemning UAW members specifically and the labor movement in general for representing "narrow" interests.

There are also some powerful voices reminding us that if not for the UAW specifically and America's unions, America's middle class would be an anemic sliver of



Supporters pass in food to sitdown strikers

the population.

The middle class that emerged from the Treaty of Detroit created the impetus for much of America's social and economic progress into the 20th Century. As Washington Post columnist Harold Meyerson noted last month, the UAW and its then-president Walter Reuther provided financial backing, moral support and active involvement to the Civil Rights movement of the 60s. Reuther and the

UAW stood shoulder to shoulder with Cesar Chavez and the United Farmworkers in their struggle. The UAW and Reuther helped create the National Organization of Women, funded the first Earth Day and became the first and most prominent proponent of national health care reform.

Meyerson also pointed to a little-known effort by the UAW in 1949, calling on automakers to pioneer small, fuel efficient cars. That year the union issued a pamphlet entitled: "A Small Car for the Future," but that suggestion was rejected out of hand by auto company executives as was the recurrent effort by the UAW to get representation on corporate boards. (Recall, if you will, the lament by Reuther's contemporary, then Machinists President Floyd "Red" Smith, who, after he was invited to negotiate concessions with a bankrupt corporation, "Once, just once, I'd like to be invited into the boardroom of a going concern.")

"In a broad sense, [Republicans] want to destroy the institution that did more than any other to raise American living standards, and they want to do it by using the power of government to lower American living standards—in the middle of the most severe recession since the 1930s. The auto workers deserve better, and so does the nation they did so much to build," Meyerson wrote.

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So, as this new Winter of Our Discontent continues to grip the nation—let's take a solidarity stand with our brothers and sisters of the UAW. Anyone up for bean soup and cornbread?