

Chip Walker and the Fisher Strike Orchestra

Eliot Singer

The Fisher Strike Orchestra and the Flint Sit-down Strike

The Fisher Strike Orchestra, or Fisher Body Union Orchestra, performed during the Flint Fisher Body Strike that lasted from December 30, 1936 to February 11, 1937 and led to General Motor's recognition of the United Auto Workers as a collective bargaining unit.

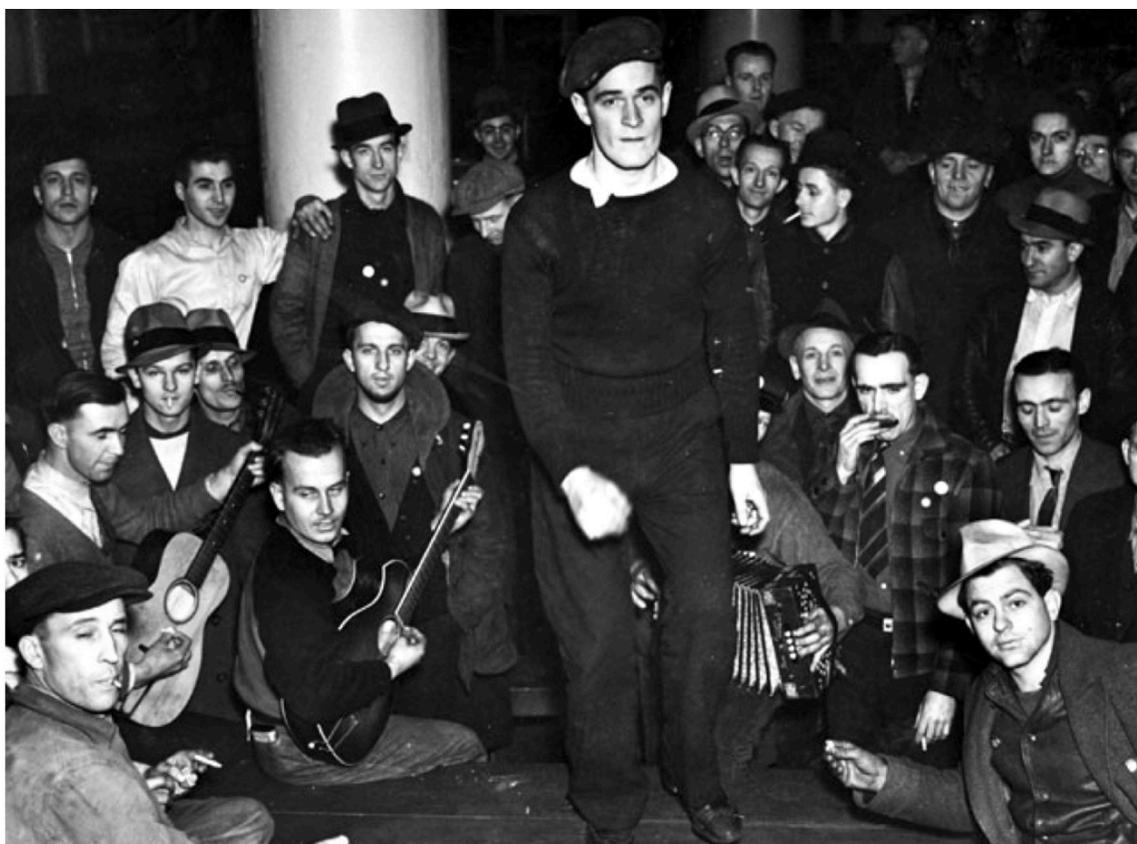
The Flint Sit-down Strike spawned strikes at many auto and other manufacturing plants, including at the REO Motor Car Company in Lansing, from March 10 to April 7, 1937, "where the men made up a little orchestra of their own and called it the REO Ramblers and entertained themselves" (*Lansing Auto Worker*, March 17, 1937, quoted in Lisa Fine, *Story of REO Joe: Work, Kin, and Community in Autotown, U.S.A*, Philadelphia, Temple University Press, 2004, p. 84). Except for one photograph (Archives of Michigan), there does not seem to be any further information available about the REO Ramblers.



The Fisher Strike Orchestra reportedly consisted of 12 instruments snuck into Fisher Body Plant No. 1. "The hour before strike meeting every evening was devoted to entertainment.... Best of all the strikers liked their own hillbilly orchestra, which broadcast its nightly programs over the loudspeaker for the benefit of the many outsiders who gathered each evening to listen. The

hopeful spirit of the strike was expressed by the orchestra's 'theme song' ['The Fisher Strike'], which had been adapted on the first night of the strike to the music of the well-know Southern folksong, "The Martins and the Coys" (Henry Kraus, *The Many and the Few*, Los Angeles, Plantin Press, 1947, pp. 104-105).

"On February 4, union forces—including the strikers' orchestra...—staged a hybrid dance and picket in front of Fisher 1 to prevent the carrying out of an injunction.... The strikers' band set up for the concert [and] pickets outside the plant began to execute increasingly complex marching formations for the sitdowners.... The pickets shifted from marching formations to snake dances, and when the orchestra began to play, the pickets paired off and began to dance. At one point in the evening, pickets of foreign birth gave exhibitions of the folk dances of the countries of their origins" (Kirk W. Fuoss, "Community,' Contested, Imagined, and Performed," *Text and Performance Quarterly*, 15, 1995, p. 91).



Step Dancer at Fisher Body Strike, Walter Reuther Library

The Fisher Strike Orchestra's Fiddler, Chip Walker

Chauncey (Chip) Walker (1912-1987), the Fisher Strike Orchestra's fiddler, whose wife Alice was part of the Emergency Women's Brigade, shared his memories during an interview published in *House Party: Reminiscences by Traditional Musicians and Square Dance Callers in Michigan's Thumb Area*, edited by Stephen R. Williams (Museum of Arts and History, Port Huron, 1982, pp. 29-30):

... “1937 come along and a big Fisher Body strike – a General Motors strike – and I was the fiddle player with the Fisher Strike Orchestra. And if you ever see any pictures of the Fisher Strike, 1937, you’ll see me, with the violin, in high top shoes. And I was in there for 43 days. I knew Walter, Roy, and Victor Reuther, and all them boys – Bob Travis and Old Man [John L.] Lewis. I played before all those guys in the IMA Auditorium. You know how many guys were in there? I think by memory it was about 13,000 people could get in there! Played before that crowd many times.

“I remember one exciting moment when we were on stage at the Rialto Theater in Flint. And we had a guitar player that thought he was a composer. And he took the song of ‘The Old Sour Apple Tree,’ and he put words to it: ‘We’ll Hang the Flint Police on the Sour Apple Tree.’ And the curtain dropped in front of us to save us, ‘cause stuff was starting to come down the aisle – eggs, tomatoes and all that sort of stuff. But from then on, from then on, little by little, you might say ‘steady by jerks,’ I kept picking up pieces [of work as a musician]. And then years later I put a band together, young guys in 1947-48, and we played on WTAC in Flint.” ...



Chip Walker Fiddling with Fisher Strike Orchestra

Chip also spoke briefly about the strike in answer to questions from fifth graders at Dye Elementary School in the Carman-Ainsworth Flint district during an April 1985 Michigan Council of the Arts “Folk Artists in the Schools” program (with my help and that of their teacher).



Chip Walker with Fisher Strike Orchestra, Walter Reuther Library

Remembering Chip

In his last years, Chip was active in the Original Michigan Fiddlers' Association, always happy to talk about his fiddling experiences, wonderful with children, and a friend. The strikes that led to the formation of the UAW have been much in the news on their seventy-fifth anniversaries. As far as I know, Chip is the only musician with a strike orchestra who has been identified by name, and the only one interviewed. We should take this opportunity to make sure he is properly remembered.



Appendix:

The Fisher Strike (lyrics)

Gather round me and I'll Tell you all a story,
Of the Fisher Body Factory Number One.
When the dies they started moving,
The Union Men they had a meeting,
To decide right then and there what must be done.

Chorus:

These 4000 Union Boys,
Oh, they sure made lots of noise,
They decide then and there to shut down tight,
In the office they got snooty,
So we started picket duty,
Now the Fisher Body Shop is on a strike.

Now this strike it started one bright Wednesday evening,
When they loaded up a box car full of dies.
When the union boys they stopped them,
And the Railroad Workers backed them,
The officials in the office were surprised.

Now they really started out to strike in earnest,
They took possession of the gates and buildings too.
They placed a guard in either clockhouse,
Just to keep the non-union men out,
And they took the keys and locked the gates up too.

Now you may think that this union strike is ended,
And they'll all go back to work just as before,
But the day shift men are "cuties,"
They relieve the night shift duties,
And we carry on this strike just as before.