

ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW
OF
GENORA DOLLINGER

Interviewed by
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Oral History Interview of Mrs. Genora Dollinger by Jack W. Skeels, University of Michigan - Wayne State University Institute of Labor and Industrial Relations, July 31, 1960.

My family, being pioneers of Flint, have lived here all of their lives. My father worked in the Buick plant in his early years and my mother worked in AC shortly after it was built. At the time of my birth, my mother went back home to my grandmother's home and I was born in Kalamazoo, Michigan, and brought back here to Flint when I was still an infant. However, I have lived here all of my life and my whole family has lived here all of their lives. I attended the public school system here, going through grade, junior high, and high school. I did not complete high school because I got married to Kermit Johnson just before I graduated. After I married, my (first) husband—naturally like all young men in Flint—he found a job in the automobile factories here. At that time he was making 45 cents an hour and working for Chevrolet. It was approximately 1930.

Kermit's father, Carl Johnson, was a very interesting man, a union man who was then a member of the Chevrolet AFL federal labor union here in Flint and who was a graduate of the South Dakota State College. He was what we might call an intellectual worker. This man was a truly admirable person, and possessed a strong character. He had gotten hold of some socialist literature. We sent for a little paper called The American Guardian and my father-in-law and I were very interested in these brand new ideas. From this we went into a study of labor history and the roles that were played by the early leaders in the labor and the socialist movement here in America. We thought of ourselves as Eugene V. Debs socialists. We formed a little group here in Flint, a little socialist group. This was the main topic of our discussions: how the working man was historically always trying to better himself. This was my first contact with labor history. The public school system here did not teach anything at all of labor history. There was a Proletarian Party grouping here and there was a foreign language group called the IWO (International

Workers Order) in existence about that time. We had never had any contact with either of these groups up to this time, but this little first socialist group that we formed were meeting occasionally with these Proletarian Party members and here we read some of the works of S.L.P. and of Daniel DeLeon and exchanged ideas. We had sort of a friendly discussion group where they would attend our small meeting and our discussions and, on a few occasions, we would attend their discussion groups.

This was my very first contact because at this stage my father was a middle -class businessman, highly respected in the community and very, very conservative and very anti-union, and anti-socialist, so I had never any real working-class background.

I remember my mother talking about poverty but I had never had any connection with it and in school I was regarded as a girl from a wealthy family and never had any real contact with any of these political ideas. I remember when I first read the book, (I believe, by Reese) How the Other Half Lives. When I first read that book and about Jane Addams and her experience with under-privileged children and adults in this country, it was all a shock to me because I had never come in any close contact with people suffering any appreciable degree of economic privation.

It was a shock to me when I got married and realized that a person came home with a paycheck. My first economic experience when I was married was that I went down and bought what I wanted and the paycheck was gone in three days. I asked my husband to go back and tell his boss that we needed more money... this was not enough to live on. I remember my consternation when he said, "You cannot go back and tell the boss you need more money. This is something that you just cannot do." I said, "Well, this situation is impossible." Then I had to run home and ask my parents for some more money and, not having a good relationship with my father because I had run away and gotten married, my mother would help me out over my father's objections. Finally I decided, after I had been

told that I had made my bed and I had to lie in it, that I had to get along on this inadequate 45 cents an hour paycheck. That was a gruesome experience for me and the more I thought about it the more I was shocked to learn that people had to exist like that in this world. I wanted to read more and more about how the other half lived.

By that time Carl Johnson was actively participating in the federated AFL local. I insisted that his son, Kermit, join too—any organization to help out the poor working man. Kermit's interest was not too great because only a handful would show up, but he did go up to these meetings and I would follow. The AFL meetings were held in the Pengelly Building and attended only by men. At that time our growing Socialist Party group had rented a room in this same building and I regularly would hang around and listen to the discussions of these union men. Unionization in G.M. seemed at the time like such a hopeless task. You had to devote a lot of energy to it because the meetings that were supposed to represent the thousands of auto workers here in Flint had 25 or 30 people in attendance at most—more often much less.

There were never any big activities from the AFL locals. There were two reasons for this. First of all, it was understood by everybody that you did not dare to mention union in the shop or you lost your job. So everything was said esoterically in the plants, which meant that if you got one new member who dared to come up to these union meetings it was a big victory. They could not put out leaflets; they could not do anything openly or discuss it because your job was immediately gone if you did.

And the conditions that I witnessed! The conditions in those days were that men would be sitting on the lawns of factories all day long just hoping that they would be called in for some work. These men would bring their lunches and stay all day just hoping that they would be called in and given a chance to earn 45 cents an hour. Inside the shop the

foreman was always telling the men, "Do you see that line of men out there? You put out more work or there are plenty of them that will be glad to come in and get your job."

And then I learned about specific sad cases. I knew families where the wage earner was put under such pressure that he cracked up and took a wrench after a foreman and was committed to the Pontiac State Mental Hospital. I knew of workers who, out of their meager earnings, would have to bring a bottle of whisky to the foreman at Christmas or New Year's; or I knew of people who mowed the superintendent's or foreman's lawns or painted their houses all free—just to keep their jobs, just to keep feeding their families.

Of course, there was no workmen's compensation if a man was injured on the job. There was no such thing as social security or any adequate relief. There was no unemployment compensation or other benefits so these families were always under the dire threat of actual starvation existence if they lost their jobs.

The next period that hits my consciousness greatly is when Roy Reuther was sent in to Flint under the F.E.R.A. program* as the educational director in 1934. This was before Mortimer or Travis came in to start organizing. In the classes that he conducted under this program, he was able to teach labor history to the many workers who attended which made them conscious of their labor history background and generated a great deal of union interest. And this was the time of the Roosevelt administration when people, more specifically, the workers here in this area, felt that they had labor's friend in the White House and that they would be able to breathe a little bit more freely. But even then if you went into the shop and started talking on your own, all you could do is repeat what you heard in F.E.R.A. workers education class; if you started expressing any ideas of your own, you were immediately without a job. A few daring souls dared to speak out more openly and they were beaten up and had "accidents" happen to them. There was a period of

* Taught by Roy Reuther in 1934-35.

intimidation and terror existing then, and even though this had gone on in the auto plants for many years, it was a period of real terror prior to the UAW-CIO.

When we first organized groups of workers independent of F.E.R.A. workers ed. classes,** they met in basements of homes to discuss what could be done, “How could we get a few more members or how could we get some big violation of human rights resolved?” They started meeting in the basements of their homes—this is when we first obtained the backing of the Committee for Industrial Organizations. The basement meetings were small groups of people that were called together, by the Socialist unionists and the unionists affiliated with the Communist Party and the IWO. These were only select people who were called into these meetings. They were held in the basements of various members because we knew that plant cops were always circling around watching the men who they suspected of unionism and anyone coming to their homes. So, therefore, we were very cautious in the way we held these meetings, and often in the guise of poker parties.

Skeels: Was there a fear of company spies at the time?

Mrs. Dollinger: Yes, there was. You could be talking to a man on the line beside you and he would be drawing you out and making you feel that he was very interested with “Where were you meeting, and who were you discussing with, and how did you go about it?”

In these cases you might think you had someone who was interested, like you were, in starting a union grouping in your particular plant. And this man would be on the company payroll as a company spy, drawing you out. He would come to these meetings and afterwards “accidents” would occur and various unexplainable happenings that generated more fear among the workers.

Skeels: Did you have this same problem in your Socialist group of having company spies in there?

** Taught by Roy Reuther in the Pengelly Building.

Mrs. Dollinger: The memberships of these groups were relatively small, and even afterwards we did not have any records of any company spies. We had people who would get frightened and drop out, but sometime in 1934 the socialists in this town organized one of the biggest, if not the biggest, chapter of the League for Industrial Democracy. We had prominently known speakers come in here to speak at these meetings. We had speakers from the Brookwood Labor College. We had socialist speakers like Norman Thomas. We had socialist attorneys but all these people were well known and we used to get meetings of 300 or 400 people. Our biggest one was, I think, over 500 people because this was in the period of what we felt was a liberalization of the whole country.

Skeels: Did any of these talk on unionism?

Mrs. Dollinger: Yes. That was the main purpose of the Brookwood Labor College speakers coming in and this attracted many doctors, lawyers, and professional people of status here in the city. So, therefore, that is why Socialists, who were known Socialists, in the plant had some protective covering operating in this League for Industrial Democracy that had such a big interested group of intellectuals around it.

Skeels: How about someone like Father Coughlin and his National Union for Social Justice?

Mrs. Dollinger: Socialists and liberals here in Michigan were very concerned about this movement. We never missed one of Coughlins' broadcasts. We would hear his broadcasts over the radio and then come together to discuss it and we were very perturbed about his ideas. To our knowledge he did not have any official organization here in Flint. He had many, many people who followed him; who believed that he was a Messiah.

Skeels: Do you think that he softened up the job of unionization? Or hadn't you ever heard anyone make a comment connecting the two things?

Mrs. Dollinger: He provoked more discussion among workers pro and con by his flamboyant ideas and speaking style. And I believe that the discussions on his proposals, his program of action, made people feel more free to discuss and to come to conclusions.

Skeels: What do you think the contribution of the LID was in the area of unionization?

Mrs. Dollinger: I believe that that played a very, very big role in fertilizing the ground here. We had many auto workers come to these meetings and they felt free in the discussion period following the lectures. They were enthused by the political ideas and the ideas formulated for action organizationally. The LID laid some important groundwork.

Skeels: Would the local union people here be prominently associated with a meeting at which Norman Thomas would be a speaker?

Mrs. Dollinger: When you are talking about the local union people, remember we only had a very small membership in this federated AFL union. Nobody knew the local union people. An industrial union for auto workers was just a dream then when the LID was holding its big discussion series. And of course, as these meetings grew, the enthusiasm grew. And among our intellectual groupings here in Flint, they became more radical in their thinking. One of the interesting things about this is when the events that they had been talking about (and declaring to their audiences that this was not only a possibility but a very great probability in the very near future) actually happened, they developed in such a traumatic fashion—the strike and the brutality associated with it—that most of the professional liberals ran fast. A majority of them disassociated themselves so fast from the action itself that it was amazing. There were probably a dozen or so intellectuals who remained true to their principles and did all they could to help the union. These people are naturally still revered by those who are still alive. I remember Dr. Winchester, (who is still alive) played a very important role. The WPA and Unemployed Union was organized following the recognition of the UAW-CIO and Dr. Winchester continued to play an

important role in providing actual county statistics on the poor and welfare cases—for which he earned the enmity of C.S. Mott and all the other powers that be in General Motors and Flint and Genesee County. Dr. Probert was the union doctor. When the sit-downers inside the plant needed medical aid, he would go into the plant in his medical capacity. Incidentally, these two men were later persecuted and hounded because they proposed and were the first to endorse what is now commonly accepted as the Blue Cross medical plan. Dr. Winchester's medical reputation was all but broken in his profession by C.S. Mott and the General Motors officials here in Flint. But you must remember too that among the Socialists here in Flint we were more or less what you would call Utopian Socialist and I do not think that General Motors minded our coming together and discussing what mankind could have if we had an equitable social system—so long as no action was forthcoming from these discussions. They have a long record—substantiated by the Senate LaFollette Investigating Committee Reports—of spying on all such liberal and radical groups.

The Socialists themselves were quite naive in the early days because we proposed at one point in 1935 that we bring Walter Reuther in here to speak. We had heard that he had just come back from Russia. We were full of inquisitiveness about what had happened there. We wanted it firsthand from Walter Reuther whom we did not know too well except as a Detroit Socialist. We wanted to hear firsthand about how the people of Russia were faring. When it was proposed in the Socialist branch meeting, some of the Socialists were afraid to sponsor him. After all, “he was a Red and a communist.” He had been “contaminated” and by the USSR and Stalin and it would be very dangerous for us to bring him. The majority felt we should not do this under the auspices of the Socialist Party. The proposal having been defeated in the Socialist branch itself. I, being active in organizing a Young People's Socialist League (mainly the sons and daughters of the adult members)

took it into the the Yipsel group. The youth agreed to take a chance and sponsor this meeting. So after a great deal of difficulty in getting the tickets printed, which we sold for 25 cents a ticket, we obtained the Masonic Temple here in Flint. It was a large hall that also had been mainly used—along with Court Street Methodist Church and others—as the place where the LID held it meetings. Not every place in Flint would rent to the LID, or Socialist Party and so we were pleased to get their agreement that they would rent the hall and we had an extra large turn-out at that meeting. The doors were not opened until every cent of the rental was paid. And so people were waiting for the doors to be opened while we were collecting and turning over the admission fees right up to the start of the meeting. Then we were told by the management at the Masonic Temple that if Walter Reuther raised a Red flag in that meeting or called for the revolution that the lights would go out and we would be immediately ordered to leave the premises. We, even then as Yipsels, were a little shaky about what Walter Reuther might do when he came in. We wondered what were we getting into. If he got up and called for the revolution, what would happen in Flint, Michigan! However, the meeting went off very well. I was very much impressed. Although I thought Walter Reuther was perhaps a little too radical and a little euphoric in making things sound so very rosy over there in the USSR. Nevertheless, I wanted to keep an open mind on the whole business. We must have had approximately 250 people turn out for that meeting. It is difficult to remember exactly, but it was a good crowd, remembering the size of the auditorium. And we were quite satisfied because we had made a little money on it and we had gotten these brand -new views and we had something to talk over and to think over and I believe this is the first time that the Socialist Party in Flint had even publicly discussed the meaning of the Russian revolution. The older members were so reluctant to be associated with the “Bolsheviks.”

Skeels: Now had there been much contact with the local socialist group and the national headquarters, Norman Thomas or any of his representatives? Or had you been pretty much on your own all along?

Mrs. Dollinger: We had been cutting our own path on union developments. We had members on the State Executive Committee of the Socialist Party. We knew, for instance, the farmer who was from Charlotte, Michigan, and very conservative. He would not even be called a socialist today. We knew the Detroit people in particular. Now the Detroit people, of course, were in the same situation, the same militant ferment that we were. I believe that the policies of the state organization within the national organization would be considered a middle-of-the-road group but was called the left of the Socialist Party at that time. This was the majority group with the deciding policy for the Socialist Party in Michigan, Detroit and Flint. It was called "The Clarity Faction."

Skeels: In spring, 1936, the UAW elected its own officers and started becoming interested in organizing. A little later they sent Mortimer up here. Now, did Mortimer make any imprint in the early days of organization?

Mrs. Dollinger: Yes, Mortimer was a very influential man both by his manner of quiet reassurance to the workers and his positive outlook for the Committee for Industrial Organization at that time. Of course, the early unionists here were greatly encouraged when we heard we had the backing of the militant United Mine Workers and John L. Lewis whom we thought would dare to do anything in the whole wide world. The financial backing and the moral support of John L. Lewis and the mine workers was our greatest source of inspiration. Of course, this was our great hope along with the Wagner Act and the Roosevelt administration. So this is when the union began to show a slight increase in membership but still it was by only one's and two's. There was a definite interest underground in the plants, but people were frightened with good reason of saying anything

openly because they were never sure who they were speaking to, with so many paid informers and stool pigeons.

Skeels: Did Mortimer call mass meetings that you remember, or was it more a quiet person-to-person type of campaign that he started out on?

Mrs. Dollinger: No, this I do not recall too well. He was not an effective public speaker but rather a grandfatherly type.

Skeels: When was the first time you came in contact with Mortimer? What type of meeting was it?

Mrs. Dollinger: I am so hazy on this that I cannot remember. I cannot remember when the mass meetings were first called in the Pengelly building. And this sounds strange too because I was in on the original grouping right from the beginning. But I do not remember the dates. I do not remember the date in 1936 December when the Fisher 2 and Fisher 1 men struck the plant, but I do remember that we were getting reports of other cities and their action. I just do not remember. I would have to count back from February 11—the plant evacuation date.

Skeels: How about when Bob Travis came in? Did he leave a strong impression at the time, do you think?

Mrs. Dollinger: Yes, Bob Travis was a man of very strong character and he was a very personable guy and he was another one that exuded confidence. He had just come from the Toledo strike and had some experience in organizing people. He was a fine, determined and energetic person. At that time I had not worked in the auto plants. When the mass meetings were called they were attended by men. However, I was attending, I was discussing with people, I was organizing, I was doing everything that I could to obtain the participation of the wives and families. When women started to respond we took actions on our own even before we organized officially as the Auxiliary—not only walking picket

lines but organizing meetings in our homes. We were at this time signing up workers from all plants in one local union in Flint. I was asked to help set up the press clipping service, but I was not satisfied that I was contributing enough in this task which any literate person could perform. So I set up a sign painting department for the production of picket signs. We were organizing publicity demonstrations like the flag raising ceremony at Fisher 1 for the newly formed CIO Union Veteran's Post. (This is during the Fisher Body strike. They went down for 44 days.) And then I, with the help of S.P. women, organized a children's picket line and I painted all the signs for that. I also made up the slogans for it. I can never forget the picture that swept the nation on the front page of many national and foreign newspapers. It was a close-up of my little two-year old son leading the children's picket line. He was standing in front of it in his little snow suit with a picket sign that said, "My daddy strikes for us little tykes." And the, anti-union Flint Journal made a special point that Chevrolet was not even on strike at the time and this little boy's father was a Chevrolet worker. But these activities, of course, all required picket signs with different slogans and we had a very busy sign painting department in the Pengelly Building which I turned over to Bruce Sloan, a professional sign painter (my friend and S.P. activist.)

Skeels: Now your type of activity was to help develop sympathy for the strike, is that right?

Mrs. Dollinger: Yes, and because I had been in local activities right from the beginning and had some ability to talk and explain the background of labor and the hopes of labor for the future, I naturally had a dedicated group of workers around me through my activities in the Socialist organization. I was an officer of the Socialist Party (I was also from an old established Flint family and could not be labeled an "outside agitator".)

Skeels: What were some of the other activities that were going on then during the Fisher strike?

Mrs. Dollinger: We were holding one mass meeting after another in the Pengelly Building. We were getting out leaflets. The mimeograph machines were busy all the time with organizing news of latest developments on the local and national labor scene. We first had an old broken down one, then we got a second one—old, used equipment. We were turning out leaflets all the time. We had volunteers passing them out at the gates of all the plants.

Usually a person who was not working in the particular plant would pass out the leaflets for obvious reasons. When Fisher was threatened we appeal to all workers for help and Chevrolet and 2nd shift Buick workers would get in the motorized picket line around the whole plant, cars circling the whole plant wherever emergency demonstrations were called to help Fisher 1. We were all active in that. Unionists out there all day long, eating meals in the strike the kitchen.

Skeels: Why did they have a motorized picket line?

Mrs. Dollinger: Well, for two reasons. Of course, rumors were circulating by the millions then, and we knew that General Motors was not going to take this threat to their power in the city of Flint! The first plants in Flint ever shut down by sit-ins, we knew that Fisher 1 was always in danger, because of its size, location and vulnerability. If you had a solid motorized line around the plant, you would shut off any attack of mobilization by police or squad cars or whatever it was, and secondly, it was a very good publicity thing to have this organized support for those men inside and then, of course, we had the walking picket lines at all times at Fisher 1. And we worked in shifts and I mean long shifts. During this period I can remember of just going home and getting perhaps five hours of sleep before returning to the Pengelly Building. The motorized picket lines were on special occasions when we had heard that the company was set to attack. It was not all of the time. Gasoline was pretty hard to get hold of, too.

Skeels: The soup kitchen was run by the union?

Mrs. Dollinger: Mainly by the union wives of Fisher 1 union men. Very little food came in contributions. Money was put in here by the mine workers. The food was good and sumptuous for those days. People were grateful that they could be fed while they were on picket line duty. Those who were working were giving all of their time and money to the strike and, of course, the Fisher workers and their families were going on relief. They had no income at all. The soup kitchen was for the pickets and the sit-down strikers. They were sending food into the plant. This was a sit-down in two plants at a long distance apart. They were feeding everybody who was active in picket duties at Fisher #1 and #2.

Skeels: Now here you organized a sign painting department. Do you have people either from the International Union or from the United Mine Workers who would say, "Well, here are a couple of things we have to get done. Genora, you see if you can get something done on the sign painting." Or did people just go and do things that were done?

Mrs. Dollinger: People just went and did things. Nobody ever gave me any directions. I remember at the time of the veterans' demonstration, it was the rank and file veterans who proposed that we do this. The American Legion was attacking us. "To hell with the American Legion. Let's organize a union post." Everything was, "Let us organize a union something." The spirit of unionism then was rising. When it came to children's picket lines, that was my idea and the slogans were mine but nobody ever thought about taking credit. We just did things as they came up, as we saw a possibility of furthering the union. We would take it to Travis and discuss it with him and he would say, "That is a wonderful idea." We had the "okay" and we went right ahead and organized it.

Skeels: The union did have some resources though because you need paint and signs and the like and you need the people.

Mrs. Dollinger: Yes, and that was sent in from the Committee for Industrial Organization.

Skeels: Was there much volunteer help around at the time?

Mrs. Dollinger: Oh, all of the help was volunteer. I never accepted or never was offered a penny for my help. There were staff people and organizers who were paid. But we never even thought about who was getting paid and who was not.

Skeels: The strike spread to Fisher 2, I believe, and this took it right into the heart of the General Motors area.

Mrs. Dollinger: Yes, that was a few days before New Year's Eve because I was on that picket line then. This was a difficult front and one of my vivid memories because I was shocked by some unexpected developments that day. On the picket line before New Year's Eve we had many wives that came down and called up to their husbands in the second-story windows and say, "If you do not take me out on New Year's Eve, I am going to divorce you." And we heard some bitter altercations going on between the husbands who refused to come down and their wives. And then we saw some men that were considered good union men slink out of there and go with their wives because they did not want to be threatened with divorce. Divorce cases were actually started at that time against husbands by their wives. And I remember on New Year's Eve the problem became very acute. I had been thinking about how more women should be informed. All the men were coming down to the meetings and I began to hear men say, "My wife does not understand. She said that I should have nothing to do with the union. She has to feed the children." This means no pay check was going to be coming in from idled workers. And the confused wives were complaining bitterly, "If you had not gotten into this union, our kids would not be crying because we have not got enough money to feed them." And this had been sinking into my mind. Who was talking to the women? On New Year's Eve this is all that I discussed on this picket line with the few wives who were there. I talked with them and I said, "Something has got to be done." We had learned at this time that the General Motors

representatives were going around to the homes of the Fisher Body workers and telling the women that their husbands were having poker parties and strip tease dancers in the plants and they were having a glorious time, leaving their families to suffer. And it was at this time then that the union in Fisher 1 adopted the policy of letting a man out for overnight and back in again. They were trying to quell it that way. So at this time I went through Fisher 1. I was escorted through and saw the conditions in there so that I could come back and tell the wives, "There is nothing in there except that they have got pads made up to sleep on and the guys are sitting around playing cards and they have the metal up at that window with the hose pointed through it for protection but that is the only reason these windows are bolted up" and so on. New Year's Eve is when I discussed it with some of the women down there, "We have got to call a meeting of the wives now. We have got to try to organize the wives because this is going to break up this whole union development." And I was thoroughly convinced that if we did not do it that this was going to be the Achilles' heel of the whole union development here in Flint.

I believe it was just a couple of days after, we put out our leaflets and we asked all union men to take them home. This was my first experience of speaking to a mass meeting. I got up and I made a plea for these husbands to carry the message of unionism back into their homes and to tell the women that we needed them so that they could play a very important role and I made a pretty persuasive speech. This is the first time that I had ever talked at a big mass union meeting. Then the next couple of nights we set the meeting up and I think we must have had about 35 women show up and I was very pleased about that.

This I have to tell you because it is a humorous thing also. The Socialist Party had had a split in its ranks a short time previous to this and a group had gone over to the Lovestoneites, the CPO (Communist Party Opposition). They had two very active women

in that group. These women were viciously attacking me when I was in the press department and in the sign painting department and viciously attacking Travis' leadership. They were attacking me for working with the Communist Party. They were Communist Party Opposition. These two women, I never will forget them, had some other women around them. So I decided at that meeting not to start this off with a test vote because I knew that their candidate was going to be a Lovestonite. I knew that if I ran myself, there would just be a split before it was organized. They, fully expecting that I was going to be the one to run for president of this first Women's Auxiliary, were taken completely off guard when I put up another woman as president and accepted myself the vice-presidency. I do not even remember the woman's name. Now this woman I thought would be a very fine person and very representative of the wives of auto workers. But I think that that first meeting and the next meeting were the only meetings she ever presided over because she became frightened and resigned. I was vice-president, so I became the acting president of the Women's Auxiliary.

We built this Women's Auxiliary up to a membership to reckon with. Now remember these memberships were just put on sheets of paper. You signed your name and address and, if you were lucky enough to have a telephone, put that. This membership was growing and growing. We had, I would say, 500 or 600 names when we found it necessary to form a military formation within this group. I cannot tell you the date of that either. I think it was a matter of two or three weeks, maybe a couple of weeks after the formation the Women's Auxiliary. Remember now the men were so very, very busy and the sentiment at that time was, "Well, these women are all right. They are good for the strike kitchens." We set up a first aid station, things like this. But they never seriously considered us as any factor that could really help them. If we could just knock down the propaganda about what was going on in the plants and we could bring the wives over on

the side of the unions, this was a wonderful job. They considered us a strike kitchen operation, first aid station, and an educational force. So when we decided that women could play a more active role, we had no one to advise us, no one who really had time for us including Travis. He did not have time. He was far too busy. So were all the other men. I was speaking at every meeting from then on, "Get your wife down to the Women's Auxiliary." No one was around to advise us and we wanted to set up a military formation that could be thrown in the battle lines like the men's flying squads you know, with captains and well organized. And the highest rank that I knew of then (and this shows my ignorance of the whole great United States Army) was the rank of captain. And so we decided to have a captain and five lieutenants of this Emergency Brigade that could be used to be thrown into strike action where there were threats against the picket lines or battles. So besides being the president of the Women's Auxiliary, I was elected captain of the Women's Emergency Brigade. This whole idea and this whole thing was my baby. So I served as captain and by this time the union men looked upon me as the leader of the Flint women. I had five very wonderful lieutenants, one of whom was a Fisher Body 1 factory girl, (Ruth Pitts) one of them was an AC factory girl (Nellie Besson), "Tester" Walker from Redmond's, and the other three were wives, but young dynamic women. They were not tied down with children and could participate on a moment's notice. This was set up that at any hour of the day or night and we were called out that we would drop everything and come. Now we formed this because in the Women's Auxiliary we had many mothers and older grandmother who wanted to be part of the strike because they had a grandson working in the plants or a husband or a brother or a father. We did not want to ask these women or mothers who could come down only part time, maybe with four or five children at home. We could not ask them to come out on a moment's notice, so we formed this separate arm of the Women's Auxiliary. It was adjunct to it. This caught fire. We wore

red berets and red arm bands with white letters, EB, on it and we wore them at all times. You could be a member of the Women's Auxiliary and you did not have the red cap and red arm band, you were not on call 24 hours a day. But this caught on so fast that the membership of the Emergency Brigade went up to 500. The Auxiliary by this time came close to 1,000 and it worried me. We had a little grandmother in her sixties that insisted upon signing up. She wanted to be in the Brigade any hour of the day or night. And we had a young girl, she was about sixteen, I think, and she insisted. So each time I would get up and speak to the women I would make it sound more dangerous than ever because I wanted them to realize what this was about. I thought I must make it clear that this is not any great popular movement that is good to belong, like a social group or something. And so I would tell them, "Remember, when we go into a situation and if the police come out," (they weren't called police then, they were called flatfeet and cops), "if the cops come out and start shooting or throwing tear gas or clubbing, you stand at your post of duty. You do not move, and if your sister beside you goes down in a pool of blood, you do not get hysterical. You cannot join the Women's Emergency Brigade if you are going to lose your head and get hysterical. We cannot be bothered with having to take care of two people, if one is injured and another one is going to go hysterical. Do not sign up in the Women's Emergency Brigade, take your role in the strike kitchen, take your role in the first aid station in the Women's Auxiliary." But each time I had to make the possibilities of what might happen to us sound much more gory than before in order to try to limit this thing. So this is where the press got the idea that we meant business and they wrote up such articles as, "Embattled Housewives are Going into Battle with Their Brooms and Mops," and so on. Now we were not too concerned with brooms and mops at that time. We had clubs up there at the union hall that the union men had to sometimes tack a little tiny picket

sign on for legal reasons, big stacks of them that all union members had for our protection and use.

Skeels: How did the Battle of Bull's Run figure in with this now?

Mrs. Dollinger: This was the reason for the formation of the women's organization. Let us go back to the Battle of Bull's Run. This battle went on for a considerable period of time before it was finalized. When reinforcements first came down there, the attack by the police had just been made. The tear gas was thrown into the plants and the battle lines were drawn in front of the plant there and union men soon set up the barricades to prevent the police from entering. This was on Chevrolet Avenue directly under the overpass in front of the Fisher 2 plant. The barricades were set up at one end toward Third Avenue and down on the bridge on Chevrolet Avenue which became the battleground and the police were on the other side of the bridge or south side of these barricades shooting down fire bombs, tear gas, buckshot, and rifle shot into this area in front of the plant gates. This was my first experience with any such violence. I had heard about it. I had read about it. I thought I knew how to act under such circumstances, but coming into this situation I was terrorized. I was frightened and you first lose all your power of thinking for just a matter of moments and then you become terribly, terribly angry that armed policemen are shooting into unarmed men. The men were grabbing up boxes of hinges and throwing back at the police and paving stones and running back into the plant to get fresh air because this tear gas was terrific, and blinding. The tear gas had begun to come out in certain sections of the plant and it was all out there on the street. Then when I got very, very angry, you very often do something else that is very foolish. I said, "I am going to walk right up to that firing line and let them shoot a woman and then maybe Flint will wake up and they will find out just what is happening here." So I started walking up and Kermit Johnson and a fellow by the name of Charlie Hammer came up and grabbed me and said, "Don't do that. Don't be a

martyr at this stage.” As we turned around, we all got sprayed with buckshot going back and I was infuriated because I saw a very good friend of mine, Fred Stevens a Socialist, who was president of the bus drivers union at the time helping out the UAW strikers, jumping over a pool of water which turned red, he was shot in the leg. And other men carried past me, bleeding.

As this battle continued, Victor Reuther on the union sound car was appealing for help constantly as the people of Flint began to accumulate behind the police lines. Now it was being broadcast over the radio. The whole city of Flint was aware that a violent battle was going on. People began to come down to find out what was going on but they were in back of the police as the police were firing into us. At one point during this battle, I found it necessary to go to the women’s rest-room. I asked one of the fellows, “Where is the women’s rest-room.” The door to the women’s room was locked and the men could not open it. So they took me up to the men’s rest-room and they posted a guard. Now let me tell you, the men were so gallant at the time that when the battle broke out, they said, “All women and children to safety.” They escorted every woman out of there. They tried to do the same thing with me. I said, “Oh, no. You are not going to do this to me if they are going to fire unto unarmed men, I am going to stay here too. I have got as much protection as you have under this barrage.” So I happened to be the only woman that was left down there in the firing area at that time. (Later, other women joined us?) So the men escorted me up to the men’s bathroom and they stood outside as a guard until I came back out. We found out the next day that in the women’s rest-room seven plant superintendents were locked up there all night long scared to death to come out.

Then in the waning hours of that battle, the sound batteries began to give out and this is the first time that Victor Reuther came back to a small group of us said, “Well, it looks like we are going to lose this one. The batteries are going down on the sound truck.”

And I said, "Please, Victor, if they are going down, let me speak." And I said, "Please let me get up there and tell them that there are a whole lot women down here." And he said, "Well, go ahead. We've got nothing to lose now." So I got up there and I made my plea to the citizens of Flint. And I said, "Do you know that these cops who are cowards enough to fire into unarmed men are also cowards enough to fire into the mothers of children. There are women down here. There are mothers of children down here that the cops have been firing into," and I said, "now I am making a plea for all of you women up there to come down and stand beside us and to us out." I said, "Break through those line. Don't let the police stop you. Break through, pleas. For God's sake, come down here and help us." And this became the end of the battle. The women broke through those lines. We saw the cops grab one by the coat. She pulled out of the coat. Of course, they did not want to shoot women in the back as they started breaking through. We saw those women trickle down there followed by the men and the firing stopped. That is when we really won this battle. This was the turning point. And we were so relieved. The firing could not continue because then everybody in Flint knew there actually were a group of women down there then. Everybody knew that the police would be firing into women and the mothers of children, if they fired. And so we set up our picket lines; we started a bonfire; we began to get warm. I remember my brother and my husband then, Kermit, and another young man by the name of Phil Wise and I who had been in the Yipsels together all of us, went in the plant to the superintendent's office and we wrote down a parody of a song. We got new batteries in sound truck by this time too. And we sang union songs, "When a Scab Dies, He Goes to Hell," and so on. But this one was in commemoration of this battle. We composed it right then and there. It is printed in The Many and the Few. They so not say who wrote it. But this was a quartet group that we had. We put this quartet over the sound car singing, "Not a cop down on the corner, It's a pretty certain sign, Our

union men are holding fast, That good old picket line.” And then we had “Jacks and Janes” coming in, you know. (To the tune of “That Old Gang of Mine.”)

This was when I realized what a tremendous force the women could be. This was what finally decided, “We have got to organize the women. We have got to have a military formation of women.” And this was the instructions of the Women’s Emergency Brigade too. If the cops start firing into the men, the women take the front line ranks. Let them dare to shoot women. We just threw this in the police’s face all the time. Stand up there and let them dare to shoot a woman, you know, and we suddenly became militant mother of children.

My leadership of the women incensed the George Boysen group, the Flint Alliance. One attack on me was made after another and they tried to claim that I came from Moscow and I was receiving Moscow gold, etc. Then they tried to attack me for abandoning my children. At this time I had two children and investigators were sent around to my apartment which was upstairs in my mother’s house and my mother was looking after the children and he came up one morning when my two boys were left up there alone. He found my two boys up there. The six year old was not going to school at the time. Mother was watching them. I had a six year old and a two year old and he asked my six year old boy why he was not in school and he replied he was on strike duty watching his little brother until his grandmother came up. And this investigator said, “What do you mean you are on strike duty?” He said, “Well, our father and our whole family is out on strike and we have got to win this strike and this is my strike duty.” But they used this in circulating propaganda among the women that I was organizing and the men too, that I had abandoned my children, that I had just walked off and left them without explaining that I rented an apartment in my father’s apartment building. My mother was

downstairs and she and my two younger sisters were looking after the children all of these many hours that I was away from home.

Another measure that General Motors and their Flint Alliance used against me was that I, as a tuberculosis victim, was having my lung collapsed by air twice a week. Dr. Winchester was the county doctor who was doing this. They instructed him to cut off my pneumothorac treatments which would have been pretty drastic for me. This doctor, who was sympathetic to the strike, refused to do that. He had ordered an additional quart of milk a day for me from the relief set up in Flint for tubercular patients because the diet on our factory wages was pretty low and this also was cut off until a protest was put up by the union movement.

Every means that they could use to strike at me personally they used. There were many of them. The bank stopped my father's transactions. He was a photographer, had real estate transactions, and had mortgage payments on these real estate transactions. They froze all of his transactions. He went down to find out about it. They wanted me "evicted from that apartment upstairs with the Reuther brothers." They had had spies on the building. They claimed the Reuther brothers were coming up there and planning strategy. Until I was evicted, his transactions at the Citizen's Bank would be frozen. My father turned against me and gave me orders to leave at once. Of course, I was far too busy to pick up and move right during that period. I refused and he said that he was going to turn off the heat and the water. I told him I would get the city health authorities on him for doing this. And of course, my mother was on my side and my two younger sisters and they were helping me out with my home situation, but every means was exerted on my family and on myself. My relatives were involved. It was a pretty big personal pressure move that anyone involved in this strike was put under, but particularly for me because of my health condition.

Now we come to the plans for bringing this thing to a head. We had been discussing in these private group meetings and particularly among the Socialists that here in Flint we could not win, without striking General Motors in a spot that was going to hurt them and that spot, of course, was their low-priced car production field. We knew that the Chevrolet motors were produced only in Plant 4 in Flint. No other plants throughout the country were producing motors. They produced other parts. They assembled them elsewhere and so on. And we knew that shutting down Buick would not help because that was not the big selling car. So we knew we had to strike them where it was going to tie them up financially. This is when we began to discuss ways and means of putting Chevrolet on strike. Fisher Body 1 did not bother G.M. too much because they were producing bodies for Buick. The little Fisher plant did not bother them because that was a body plant for Chevrolet. They had enough body parts stored, so we had to stop them in their motor production line. That was the only place in the country where General Motors was able to produce the motors to put into these cars to keep on selling them. So Kermit Johnson, who was working in Chevrolet Motor Plant #4 came back one day with a plan drawing out all of the exits and the entrances of this great big long plant #4, how it would have to be barricaded with gondolas and so on. He said, "But of course, we have got to pull some kind of a diversionary ruse so that the company does not get wind of this." Because this was such a tremendous job to try to barricade plant #4 they could slaughter the few union members in there in a hurry before we would be able to get a start at barricading it. And so in the discussions the proposal was made to strike Plant 9 and to tell it to only a few people that this was the key plant.

Skeels: Now these were the discussions that were made within the meetings of the SP.

Mrs. Dollinger: This was prior to it being discussed with Travis. These were not always official Socialist Party meetings. These were just the group caucus meetings that we would

get together in a hurry because there was so much hectic activity going on. We proposed it to the Reuthers. Walter Reuther was in here. He said we were completely insane for thinking of such a thing. He cited the number of years it took to build the AFL and that we could not hope to do it overnight. And I personally was told that I was not dry behind the ears that this was my first strike situation and that we had to learn how to creep before we could walk. I got this personal attention from Reuther because I was a very talkative person. I was much more talkative than Kermit Johnson who had brought the plan in and I could not be bowled over quite so quickly by superior knowledge or travel or experience or training or anything else as he could on these matters. So I felt that we were stopped completely, that is, those in the Socialist Party who were for this plan of shutting down Plant 4, risking it all on one big long shot of having a complete victory. We were told, of course, that no other major corporation of this size was organized. "This was the biggest industrial corporation in the world and we were Utopian in our plans" and so on. So I went home and I typed out a two-page, typewritten, single-spaced letter to Norman Thomas of the Socialist Party, figuring perhaps he, as the head of the Socialist Party, could have some influence on the Reuther brothers who had a great deal of influence here in the Michigan situation. Norman Thomas never replied to us, but sent this letter or telephoned directly to Chicago to Frank Trager who was the National Labor Secretary. Trager was also the ideological leader of the Michigan group that was called the Clarity group within the Socialist Party. Frank Trager got the letter and came in here personally. He talked to the Reuthers. He talked to our group in the Socialist Party on this. And he went all through the Pengelly Building. He attended the meetings. He observed. He talked to rank and file workers who were not members of the Socialist Party. He drew his own conclusions and then he came back and said, "As National Labor Secretary, this sounds

like it is a feasible plan and it is my opinion as National Labor Secretary that you, Reuther, shall do everything that you can to implement this and to put it into effect.”

Skeels: It was more an opinion then?

Mrs. Dollinger: He carried a great deal of weight because of his being the ideological leader of the Clarity group in the Socialist Party. He was one of the three leaders of this group nationally. And then as National Labor Secretary his opinion carried a great deal of weight. I do not believe that Walter Reuther would have taken anybody else's opinion but his. It was at this stage then that Walter Reuther made some comment, “I wash my hands of it.” Norman Thomas' wing of the Socialist Party had very little understanding of the actual working men. His grouping was more the intellectuals and the professionals in the Socialist Party. The Clarity group was the leadership of the union people and the working people. Reuther, in this group in the Socialist Party, would have been very embarrassed if he had refused to co-operate with Trager. However, he told us privately that he washed his hands of responsibility for the whole affair and that if it did not come off that Kermit Johnson was going to bear the full responsibility for it. So it was then that this was brought in to Travis in the strike strategy meeting. I cannot tell you how many people were in there. I cannot tell you the discussion because I was not in on it. Kermit Johnson was. Of course, everybody who worked with Kermit claimed that it has been his idea ever since.

Plans were carefully laid to hold a secret meeting inside the plant of Fisher 1 and passes only to those people who were supposed to be planning the strategy would be issued. They deliberately issued it to a known stool pigeon, too, one that we had not opened up on. We made sure that he was there. And in this meeting they carefully went over the plans of taking Plant 9, not Plant 4. Nothing was mentioned about Plant 4. They said they had investigated the operations of Plant 9 and it would be the one product of the car (bearings) that would tie up all of General Motors and they made it sound very, very

convincing. This is why, when the strategy was pulled, the people who understood they were to start this sit-down in Plant 9 understood what terrible pressure they were going to be under. This is why the company was taken completely off guard and sent all of their plant protection men over there with clubs and guns and tear gas bombs to immediately squash this. And this is why the strategy had such success because all of the plant protection men were drawn to this one plant and all of the city police were immediately notified to come there and the men inside did take an awful drubbing. The Women's Emergency Brigade was there outside of Plant 9 to make it look like this was the battle. This is where the battle was to take place. We broke out all of the windows when the men inside were being tear gassed and clubbed to let air in to them and we stood in line formation when the police came, and we faced them with our clubs. The union men and sound car were held on the other side by the police and at a certain point after they carried injured Plant 9 men out in the ambulances, G.M. felt that everything had been quelled and the city police were sent back. The Women's Emergency Brigade and the union men were all sent back to headquarters in the Pengelly Building to make it look like this was the battle and it was lost, it was a terrible defeat. This was to delay any suspicion of the real action that was taking place in Plant 4 on the other side of the Chevrolet compound.

When the brigade was sent back, four of my lieutenants and I just slipped away for a couple of blocks, circled around and walked back to Plant 4 to get news of what was going on. At the time the union men attempting to shut down the plant were in a hectic situation. We were on the outside of the gates and there were arguments and there was all kinds of confusion that we knew that their plans had not been completed as quickly as they thought they could be. (We learned afterward that there had been all kinds of things going amiss. The union man from Plant 6 marching through without his army had to return for it, and so on. People started fist fights in there afraid of having the plant shut down

because they would lose their jobs, and unionists having to throw these men out physically and many people getting frightened and others saying, "Count me in, I'll be in the union." What a hectic situation was existing in there!)

So the message was called out: Kermit Johnson came to the main entrance and yelled out, "This is one hell of a mess. Don't let anybody in here." Back he went again. And so we just stood guard. By this time the company, occupied with cleaning up operations in Plant 9, had found out that Plant 4 was being barricaded and they sent word to the city police to return and I cannot tell you how many minutes intervened in this whole thing. It seemed like it was taking ages inside the plant and yet it seemed the city police arrived very, very quickly.

We saw the whole police force marching down Chevrolet Avenue toward us and we sent a woman over to a restaurant to call the union hall and to get all reinforcements in the Women's Emergency Brigade back down there immediately. And of course, we had cars there lined up ready to carry them. Four of us strung ourselves across the gate. The fifth woman was over in the restaurant calling when the head of the city police force came up and told us to get out of the way, that they were going in the plant. (I think there were about 75 in that formation of police that came down there.) We strung ourselves across the gate and we hung onto each other's hands as we were across that gate and we squeezed awfully hard. We told them they would go in over our dead bodies. He started shoving the first person in line. (I was the first person in line.) He said that these were the orders of the Police Department and that we were not to obstruct the function of the police. I do not know what we were going to be charged with, everything probably. But we appealed to him then that if he worked in that plant and his wife wanted to see that he had a decent job and decent working conditions, surely his wife would not abandon him in his fight. A

couple of the other police entered into the discussion and they decided they had better persuade us instead of using rough tactics.

But the delay was just long enough. It was long enough between the pleading and the threats and the discussion that went on between this force and these five women strung across that gate. We never shifted our position while we were talking to them. We did not even come out of position while we were talking to them. Then we looked up toward Chevrolet Avenue and we saw the Brigade of women coming down with the American flag flying at its head, the Women's Emergency Brigade, the red berets, the red arm bands and all of them singing, "Solidarity." It was a terrific sight for us because we were very tense at that moment. They came in and then the cars of union men were arriving from the other direction. They were unloading and they came in and we immediately set up a picket line of women which then put the police in the position again of having to attack these women. The women set up the picket line. The men then were on the other side of the street. This was the understanding that we had had. This is the role that the women decided that they were going to play in this strike. The police were faced with the same situation again of having to club this line of women with the American flag at their head in order to break through that plant gate.

This gave the men inside the plant the time to completely barricade so that the company police could not come in from the rear and do the same thing in Plant 4 that they had done in Plant 9. By that night, of course, the governor acted and the National Guard was sent in. We were all under military restrictions. Barbed wire was thrown up and young men with guns brought in. The whole area was an encampment where nobody could come in and nobody could leave.

When the National Guard came in, the picket line was dismissed. I went back and I remember at one point I wanted to come back and get word in to the strikers and I thought I

would break through one of these barbed wire barricades and I was met by a sixteen or seventeen year old boy with a rifle. He put this rifle up against my chest. He was so nervous and I was trying to plead with him, you know, this woman's tactics business, but these young ones had a duty. They are in the service. His finger was actually trembling on the trigger and he said, "I have orders to shoot anybody. I have orders to shoot." I said, "Pleas, I just want to go through and talk to my husband and I will come right back out." "I have orders to shoot." I gave up that attempt. This is one battle I did not win. He was a very, very nervous young man. Of course, machine guns were set up on top of the personnel building down there. We all would come down and observe.

Then the union negotiated the food caravans that would go through with passes to get food in to the men in the plants. This was the beginning of the 14-day strike. That led to the culmination of the General Motors strike nationwide. Of course, pressures were brought on those Plant 4 sit-downers, the turning off of the heat in freezing weather, and all of these things were quite an ordeal for those men to go through.

Skeels: I suppose this was quite a boon to you people, especially those of you who were connected with the Socialist Party at the time, because it would certainly attract a lot of people in after seeing the role that you people were playing.

Mrs. Dollinger: Yes, that is true, except we were given orders by our State Executive Committee to do no more recruiting of people who were eager to be in with us. We felt that we had shown our bravery under fire and our dedication to our ideals and so on. We were the kind of people that they would like to be associated with. We were given orders then not to embarrass Governor Murphy or to embarrass the Committee for Industrial Organization by recruiting for the Socialist Party and giving it a stamp of being a socialist labor movement, a socialist labor union.

Now this was not true in the Communist Party. They, I think, did a much better job by opening up their books and recruiting left and right. They sent in young college men and they sent in qualified stenographers and editors and young men to write up press releases. They sent in a whole crew of capable and competent people. They were all paid people. So they did have as the strike progressed a greater numerical preponderance in the organization and the actual running of the strike than the Socialists had because the latter neither had the money nor the possibility of bringing in people who could work professionally.

Skeels: Did you agree with that policy?

Mrs. Dollinger: No, I did not. I fought it up and down in the branch of the Socialist Party. I felt that it was absolutely wrong when people were knocking at our doors to join that we were not allowed to let them join if they wanted to. I was voted down. After I was voted down, there were a couple who had said they were going to join and I signed them up. I was brought up and severely chastised for doing this. Because we could not afford to be conducting a great battle on the economic field and a political battle within our own ranks of the leaders, I gave up on trying to allow any more people to come into our discussions.

Skeels: Then the SP was actually on the outside although making its contribution?

Mrs. Dollinger: Yes, the only ones that were in the paid positions really were the Reuther brothers, and other staff members. But we had a majority of rank-and-file leadership in Flint. Oh, yes, at these big mass meetings Leo Krzycki was brought in from New York, who was a National Board member of the Socialist Party. Powers Hapgood and other CIO leaders all played roles, coming in as visiting dignitaries with great labor reputations and they also carried a great deal of weight when they sat in on strategy meetings. But as far as the actual daily running of the strike, we neither had control of the union papers or the daily bulletins, the publicity or anything else. And there was quite an ideological struggle going

on between the Communist Party and some of the members of the Socialist Party. I was one who opposed so many of their policies that they exerted quite a bit of pressure on me in various ways. Word was out not to interview me directly. Interviews must go through Travis' office and, of course, the reporters of the daily papers knew about this proscription and so advised one of our active women, Hester LaDuke. But it was not possible at all times. The public press carried news of the women's activities which you can't find in the editions of the Flint Auto Worker.

Skeels: All the books that have been written give Murphy and Roosevelt a great role in settling the strike. What was your attitude to these?

Mrs. Dollinger: This was something I disagreed with. At every turn when we were planning any action at all during this strike, the top union leadership at the time (and here I am not talking about the Chevrolet workers or the Chevrolet leaders of that situation) were always hesitant that we might embarrass Governor Murphy or Roosevelt. Being a Socialist, I felt only a socialist government or at best a labor party government could truly represent the working class. And this was the only kind of a government that the workers could ever have complete confidence in. I was not too concerned about the Democratic Party politicians and I took the position that we had to put pressure on these people because they were getting pressure from the NAM and from General Motors, terrific pressure, and we had to exert all the pressure we could by our mass actions and demonstrations facing them with making decisions favorable to labor. This is where our disagreement came in all up and down the line. I was not too concerned about saving their reputations but rather putting them on the spot where they had to make a decision, Murphy and Roosevelt and the Democratic politicians. The line of the Communist Party then was of co-operating and getting along with these people and doing nothing to embarrass them publicly.

Skeels: Did the CP put any pressure on you to modify your stand?

Mrs. Dollinger: Oh, they put all kinds of pressure. As president of the Women's Auxiliary and leader of the Women's Emergency Brigade, we had many attempts through Dorothy Kraus coming in. She was the wife of the editor of the Flint Auto Worker, the little union press that was being put out. She would come in and try to modify our actions, stating that we should play more the role of gaining sympathy rather than being a military formation, and so on. And it came to the point where we had to have her told very nicely that she was not an auto worker's wife, that she was not a Flint person, and that she was not going to come in in any capacity and tell us what our line was going to be. Then pressure was brought on Travis to have her appointed an International representative of the UAW and to put her in charge of the Women's Auxiliary. So she came in with this new signed authority and attempted to have it accepted but she was unsuccessful. As a result friction developed. Because of her having no authority over this effective force of women, pressure was exerted in a number of ways and attempts were made to bribe me and to buy me off. I was told that I would not have to worry about money or my children. During this whole strike I did not have a decent pair of shoes. I had a pair of high heel shoes with holes in the soles and I found that playing cards in the soles of the shoes would wear longer than any other kind of cardboard. I had no galoshes and we had freezing cold weather and much of it was slush. My feet were always wet and I was having my lung collapsed twice a week for tuberculosis. For the women in the Auxiliary, whom the CP could influence, they bought them all little low-heeled, sheep-lined boot shoes. I was taken aside and told that this was very dangerous, my feet being wet and cold all of the time and that I too could have a pair of those shoes and I could have some warmer clothing, better, more practical clothing, if I would just be "reasonable." But I was a very, very unreasonable person when it came to bribery.

The American Civil Liberties Union was convened during this period, shortly after the Battle of Bull's Run. They helped organize a very large meeting which was convened of leading liberals in the state of Michigan. The convened in the Durant Hotel Ballroom to hear the striker's side of the story and naturally strike leaders were scheduled to speak. I was not at first notified. Then they decided that I could not be excluded because I had made the appeal to women that had actually broken up the Battle of Bull's Run. Of course, word was out from the rank and file that I had played this role, so I was called off a picket line and told to come down to this meeting. I went directly from the picket line to this beautiful crystal chandelier ballroom filled with people with lovely coats and furs, well-dressed professors from universities and and asked to speak. My shoes were old and muddy. My hair was stringy and I was tired and exhausted, as all of us were at the time. And I remember that my sweater had a hole, a big hole in the sleeve of it. This was my first experience in such a lovely setting after going through such a hectic situation and I was extremely nervous. Some women had come down with me from the women's group. This is before the Brigade was formed. I said to these women that I had brought down with me off the picket line, "I am going to do my duty for the union." But I said, "If I get up there and drop dead, carry me off without any fuss or bother." When I got up there and faced this audience, I felt like my mouth was filled with cotton. You could not get up there and agitate workers to join the union and take action. You could not talk to them about conditions in the shop as though they understood, nor take anything for granted. You had to explain the unbearable conditions of work and life to them in Flint.

I thought my knees were going to buckle. But I thought, "Well, one hundred years from now, nobody is going to know the difference." Then I remember starting out saying, "I do not know what your philosophy in life is, but I do know that the philosophy of every human being on this earth is to get the utmost out of life." I went on to explain to them

why the workers in the plants felt that it was necessary for them to have more of the material means of life, to have the right to happiness, and freedom. You lost your constitutional rights, once you walked in that plant and onto company property. I told them why the women were so concerned at home. I do not remember everything I told them. But I know I wound up again with the business of, "Everyone's philosophy is to get the utmost out of life," and I said, "If you want to get the utmost thrill of your life, tomorrow morning get down there on a picket line." I was looking at all these mainly professional people, well-dressed women and men. "Get down there and get a picket sign and march on a picket line and know that you are helping these people who are fighting so hard for better conditions in life." That is when I nearly did pass out because I got a standing ovation. And as I went to get off the platform, I think I was the last speaker, I remember there was a long line to shake my hand and there was a Scotch professor from the University of Michigan who introduced himself and said that he taught public speaking. I apologized for my lack of training. "I have never had any public speaking experience. I just hope that I got my explanation over why these men are fighting so hard and are willing to give their lives." And I remember him saying to me, in his Scotch brogue, "Little girl, little girl, never take any lessons in public speaking. I doubt it could do anything but harm your style." It gave me confidence and I think that is why I felt assured from that point on that I could convince people of an idea. After the strike was over, I went on a national speaking tour. It was national to the extent that it was speaking before the large unions in the Eastern states.

Skeels: May I interrupt you for just a minute? What were your impressions when the strike ended? Here you have the set of concessions that really might not be regarded as being highly satisfactory to some of the members, you know, because it was bare recognition and the agreement to bargain on other issues. How was this received?

Mrs. Dollinger: The general rank and file at the time of the settlement of the strike were so happy because we had been told by practically everybody how many years it took to build the AFL, how long it took for the development of the Knights of Labor, etc., that we felt we had achieved a great victory and, of course, the union press played it up, "World's Largest Industrial Corporation Brought to its Knees by the GM Workers." There was no feeling that we had not gotten everything. We thought we had gotten far beyond anything that we expected when we first started out. The morale was so terribly high and on top of that the strength of the union and the high morale and solidarity of the unionists was so great that every time the company would move against them in any department of part of the plant, the steward would shut off the line. The grievance was settled on the spot and men felt that the strength lay in their solidarity and their strong union organization. They accomplished much more with this steward system and on-the-job action than they have accomplished, in the opinion of many people as far as actual working conditions are concerned, through negotiations subsequent to this. It is true that they have gotten many things through negotiations, workmen's compensation, the cost of living, etc. It is true these are big things, by on-the-job conditions today cannot be remedied fast.

The worker does not feel the freedom today to have his grievances rectified or the protection or the solidarity behind him as he felt then. And, of course, everybody wanted to join the union. Local 156 in Flint was signing up milkmen. They were signing up Consumer's Power workers. They were signing up everybody. You cannot imagine it. Everybody came down to the Pengelly Building and wanted to join the union. They thought this is a union that is going to embrace everything, everybody, we are all united in the strength of our power. These people were taken into 156 with object in mind, of course, of putting the dairy workers, the retail clerks and the cotton plant workers in their own separate unions afterwards.

But the feeling of strength was something that you just could not know unless you have lived through that period. There was solidarity and brotherhood. When the union men then called themselves “brothers” and addressed each other on the floor as “Brother Jones” and “Brother Smith,” and they meant it. And the women were called “Sister Jones” and “Sister Smith” and they felt it. They felt that they had all jointly fused together all their hopes, their aspirations, and their desires and longing for a chance to have equality and the right to determine their own future.

So the feeling was not one that they had not gained everything. They thought they had gained the world at the end of the strike. These stewards’ actions, these job actions in the plant continued right up until the time that the steward system was lost.

Skeels: Just for confirmation, I know you have not looked at this, but this is your diary. It does cover the period of January 1 on. For example, on January 20, you have here, “Picket line around bus garage until 7:00-8:00 a.m.; sleep; speech at Mt. Morris 8:00 p.m.; see Reuther about meeting with Trager.”

Mrs. Dollinger: When the Saginaw members of the factories up there were trying to organize, it was an impossible situation for those few men up there to do it by themselves because Saginaw was such a tight-knit little town and they had such a large vigilante group that had gone into action and were beating up the people individually each day. They decided to send organizers from Flint to go up there to address their meetings instead of letting the Saginaw people speak publicly and get retribution for organizing the meeting, although they called it. So the first group that went up, went up in a taxi and on the way back they were driven into a telephone pole by the vigilantes and wound up in the hospital. One of them had had a brain concussion and it was a pretty bad experience. When Travis tried to get someone else to go up, everybody was afraid because they knew that the vigilantes in Saginaw were so well organized that they would stop at nothing. He did not

have success in trying to get other organizers up there. But we all felt that it had to be done. So I indicated that I would be willing to go, as did four other SP co-workers. Kempton Williams, UAW organizer who was a member of the SP and a big guy, decided that he would drive the car. We took Merlin Bishop's new Chevrolet because we felt that that had more power to get away than any of our little old cars. Kempton Williams drove Merlin Bishop's car. The others were Fania Fish, who was the wife of the SP organizer here in Flint and now the present wife of Roy Reuther, Merlin Bishop UAW Educational Director, and Mary Donovan Hapgood. We were the five who went up there in this car. We addressed the meeting which was held in the basement of an old building. While we were addressing the meeting, people were peeking in the windows. We looked at the audience which was small, perhaps about 40 or 50 people, many of them with bandages on their eyes and on their heads or on their arms from being beaten up, and we realized what great courage these people had. Of course, they inspired us, and we in turn inspired them by our experiences in Flint and the experience we had gained in working with other UAW locals.

When we got ready to leave, instructions were given to everybody there. "Do not leave for your homes by yourself but three or four cars travel together." Then we had two cars that were going to pace us to the city limits for protection, loaded down with union men with clubs. The workers then, of course, in Saginaw, as in Flint, just had old cars. When we pulled out of the parking place, one of these little cars got in front of us and one little car in back and we were to remain in this formation until we hit the city limits, to be escorted safely out and perhaps beyond if it looked like there was danger. After we got out a ways, we had to turn a corner. As the little car turned the corner, a great big black limousine zoomed in ahead of our car and another black limousine zoomed in in back of us, meaning that the one in back would have had a crash up if it had not put on the brakes, and

we proceeded on down the road knowing that we were being paced by the vigilantes and not our union people. It was getting dark when the meeting was over with. We drove for some time and nobody in the car said a word. I do not think we could have. We were very, very tense. We knew what had happened to the previous car, and we fully expected that this was it. At this time they could have really given the Saginaw workers something to worry about by injuring or killing us in a second “accident.”

So we did not say a single word and then there came a little widening in the highway we were on. It was not the modern highway that we drive down today. Kempton Williams was a quick thinker. He turned off his lights and zoomed out into the open. Eighty miles an hour then was like someone going 120 now. We went 80 miles an hour down that road all the way to Flint and a good share of it with our lights off, zooming in and out, passing cars and it was the most dangerous ride of our lives. Nobody said anything in that car. We got close to Flint and we got into a little traffic. We did not see the limousine any more. (They were big black Buicks or Cadillacs. I do not remember but they were long jobs.) Finally, not seeing a big black limousine, we heaved a big sigh and I can remember that Mary Donovan Hapgood started out and she sang a song. I am telling you, we were so relieved that we laughed, we cried for joy, we just did everything and it broke out all of a sudden— well, this is one trap we got out of. Two men and three women. We felt awfully, awfully lucky.

Of course, this was a little victory. We had held a meeting and they had not been able to threaten the Saginaw people by banging us up and we felt very pleased when we got back to Flint. We gave this report, “Here we are. This is what they attempted to do. Those people up there are standing firm.” Then we got more people that were willing to go up there and to help them organize.

I was in so many other places, just picketing and organizing in other places that I cannot remember. I really cannot. I was on the Ford picket line. I was on the Briggs picket line when I was presented with a beautiful blackjack that was made in their plant. That was not as good a job as they turned out in Fisher 1 in Flint. They were laced with seat leather, you know. This was a nice job but it was not as pretty as what we turned out, at Fisher 1, but anyway, it was presented as a gift of honor at the Chrysler because I and our women had become well known by this time. We participated in Pontiac. In Michigan then, wherever there was a threatening situation, the Flint people knew that help was needed, carloads would be dispatched to help whatever strike situation or whatever union organization was developing. Many of these places, many of these people and times and events and what happened, I have forgotten. But I certainly was involved with our Flint crews in that period long after our strike here had been won.

Skeels: Was it usually that the Flint people went down to bolster these lines because often the union was only a minority at the time and had a problem of keeping its line intact?

Mrs. Dollinger: Yes. Whenever a picket line or any meeting was being held, all they would have to say is "Flint is coming." Flint was known as the victors that took on General Motors. When the Flint crew got there, well that bolstered them up and made them feel like they could lick lions. "Flint is coming," whenever we would walk in and we would come in carloads and unpack and our speakers would take places up in front and the rest of our people would come and sit in the meeting, everybody in these other situations felt, "Well, they have done it. If they have done it, we can do it."

Skeels: You mentioned earlier that you had gone on a speaking tour which was much the same sort of thing that you were referring to here, the Flint people coming in to tell about their experiences.

Mrs. Dollinger: Yes, the labor movement was on the upswing, of course, throughout the whole nation and the settlement of the GM strike was a powerful incentive to all kinds of industries to organize the workers in these industries and so it was proposed to me because I had gotten so much publicity in the press which had not given me appellation of "The Joan of Arc of Labor" that I go on a public speaking tour to tell them the story of the GM strike in Flint (and this was the heart of the auto strike.) This is where it was won, even though we had other plants in other parts of the country on strike in General Motors, this was the heart of GM empire. This is where the crucial battles were and where the strike was won. So I agreed to do this in April. On April 28, I left for the speaking tour that had been organized. I arrived in the eastern part of the country never having seen it and terribly impressed by the enthusiasm of workers, wherever I went, for what had been done in Flint and what they felt they could do by emulating our example here. It was a great experience.

Skeels: Could you give us a little idea of what you spoke about at these meetings and what was the reception of going into these various union locals?

Mrs. Dollinger: Yes, well, in the first place I did not go in as a rank and file observer. I went in as the main speaker at all of these meetings. And these meetings were tremendous in size. I was shocked, because when we were trying to organize here, we started out with very small numbers. And of course, as the strike went on, our Pengelly Building became overcrowded and then we had big meetings. But here the enthusiasm of the workers all over the country had boiled over and with the victory of the GM strike, it just heightened their determination. So I walked into great big huge meetings and I would see thousands of people at one meeting. Of course, they had much bigger auditoriums in the East, too, than we were used to here, and better facilities.

I first was scheduled to address a May Day demonstration in Philadelphia. I did address a couple of other unions first, but preparations were being made for this big May

Day meeting and I went into Rayburn Plaza in Philadelphia. I say this huge demonstration which I had never seen in Michigan and I was so impressed and after I gave my speech the organizers of the SP rushed me from the platform and from this great big demonstration and took me straight to New York City. I got off at the train station and was driven immediately to Union Square where I was scheduled to speak at the point when the Socialist Party contingent was going by. At this time it was a considerable organization in New York and they had the big Women's Color Guard with huge flags and the Y.P.S.L. They were workers and thousands of people marching under the banner of the Socialist Party there. This I was unprepared for, completely unprepared for, and I was timed to get there to speak at this point of the big parade and I just arrived and this section was coming up when I was placed there on the platform and all I could do was stand there and gasp for breath. I could not get enough breath. It is a good thing they got me up there a couple of minutes early. It is a good thing they got me up there a couple of minutes early. Then when the Socialist Party delegation went through, they introduced me and, of course, everybody shouted and yelled and whistled and so on and I still to this day feel as if I was in a dream. It did not seem real to me. I was tremendously awed with the power of the workers when I saw that May Day demonstration and then one meeting right after another was organized, banquets in my honor and teas and appointments to speak to college groups, the girls at Vassar. Of course, you have to always adjust your speech to your audience and I was always at my best in speaking before the big meetings of the workers, the Shipbuilding Workers, and the American Crane Workers and all kinds of unions in the East. I felt right at home and I always was applauded and given tremendous standing ovations of enthusiasm and labor solidarity.

I remember especially one huge meeting. It must have been a thousand people of the Reverend A.J. Muste Fellowship of Reconciliation. At that time I had not heard of this

organization. It was held in a huge church and I thought they were mainly parishoners. I remember I was trying to adjust here to a more religious group. At one point in my speech when I wanted to tell them about looking up Chevrolet Avenue and seeing the city police, I referred to them as "lousy flatfeet." Then I stopped because everybody went up in a big ovation. Of course, the shop talk and the expressions that we used here in Michigan had slipped out but it was appreciated because the GM laboring men, at this point, had become glamorized figures. I did not realize it but these expressions that came out quite naturally for me would stop a speech dead cold by their applause. When I attempted to make a grammatical correction of explanation, this would get the biggest applause of all. They thought this was "humorous" or had "flavor," especially in such meetings as Vassar College or other groups outside of the unions.

I think my biggest adjustment had to be made at the Vassar College for girls. I can remember Norman Thomas' daughter was a student in that group and they sat around on the floors and in chairs and draped themselves around very graciously. I looked at them and I thought that these were representatives of the pampered daughters of the wealthier families. I was little bit nonpulsed at first but they, too, felt the historic drama of the GM sit-down, and they looked upon me as if I was some kind of heroic representative of the auto workers. These girls plied me with questions until the organizer of the tour had to drag me out, literally. The tour organizers took me to many spots in New York where I met C.I.O. leaders of the union movement, Zimmerman and all these garment workers, and ILGWU. I cannot remember all the people or all the meetings that I made, but I know it was a terrific experience for me.

I always tried to give them the understanding too, that you cannot pick any one leader in a development like this and glamorize them or give them a lot of honorary degrees as they gave me and present you with orchids and so on and so forth. You cannot take any

one leader because the ordinary woman who had never been out of her home before, with a whole a family of kids, and had nothing washings and ironings and maybe never read a newspaper did not know about what was going on, the elections, or what was going on in the world, these women responded as you could not believe a woman today would respond. You could not believe that a woman could be torn out of her home and always so isolated and yet come down and say, "I am standing beside my man," and make arrangements for relatives to come in for the kids and do the things they had done. I myself was surprised at this at the time it happened and I have been delighted ever since and my belief that this saying that the female is the deadlier of the species was confirmed then and there because when these women determined that they were going to fight for something, it was just like when they started childbirth, they knew they had to go through with it, they came on through with this. They could withstand, I have seen this so many times, pressure that men could not. Now there may have been a factor that the men knew that the cop would bop them over the head a lot quicker than a woman but the woman, fully expecting it, was not going to be swayed and my confidence in women was reinforced a thousand times and this I tried to convey in my speeches.

I felt a little guilty, you know, getting all these plaudits and honors and publicity. I felt guilty that I was the one having these wonderful experiences and being honored and being feted. There were actually times that I would feel a little sick at my stomach because I wished I could have pulled some of those women out of their homes who had never been out of Flint, Michigan, and given them the chance to see some of these sights. To stand up there in her working-class clothes, the symbol of the courage and spirit of the GM strike victory. I had money given to me to buy a gray suit. Just to stand up there in their housedresses and their frayed coats and let them honor that real representative, you know, instead of me in my new suit. I tried to relay the idea that there would be no such thing as

any “heroes,” if it were not for the economic and historical developments that created the will to dare and to challenge GM. Those who had read books about labor history or had previous experience ones who, naturally, came to the fore as the spokesmen.

Skeels: Then after you made the tours you came back to the Flint area?

Mrs. Dollinger: Yes. I think that was in June, 1937. And my health began to fail very rapidly. The tear gas and icy cold weather during the strike period had not done any good. So the labor movement took up a collection to send me to Trudeau Sanatorium which was then the foremost T.B. sanatorium in the United States. I was up there for six months and the labor movement paid for the treatment. This diary here has some dates in it. I have here, for instance, on January 15, 1937, that we had plans for a Women’s Auxiliary meeting on January 15 and we had plans for a women’s campaign of a door-to-door picket brigade. We had plans that these women were going to be marked off with red arm bands. This is in my diary.

Skeels: Does it give you any time when the Emergency Brigade began?

Mrs. Dollinger: Yes, these were the plans here. I have got it marked down. Then I have a Saturday, January 16, and this you can check with the papers. I have down here, clipping bureau at 9:00 a.m. I was in the press clipping bureau in the morning and the Battle of Bull’s Run is entered under that date here. So these plans were being discussed for the Women’s Brigade organization right then at that time.

Then on January 17, I have down here that the Fisher sit-downers decided to stay in the plants. There were negotiations to get them to come out of the plants and enter into negotiations with GM, but they took a vote and decided to stay in the plant; and it was on this same date, January 17, 1937, that this big meeting was held at the Durant Hotel when I was pulled off a picket line to speak to an organization called Conference for the Protection of Civil Rights, so we have the date on that.

Now on January 18, here comes the formation of the Women's Auxiliary.¹ I have down here: mimeograph application cards for Women's Auxiliary; give to men at mass meeting. Then I have: spoke at mass meeting. Now this is the first time that we had received the okay to form a women's organization officially and I went in to speak to the men to have them take these cards to persuade their women to come down for a meeting. January 18, I went in and spoke to the mass meeting. That night I mimeographed the application cards.

Under January 19, I have here that we got red material to make up arm bands. I have under January 19, as I mentioned, the red material for bands and plans for the songs to open meetings with. At this point we always had an agenda as we went into the meeting and this was the first meeting at 7:00 p.m. of the Women's Auxiliary election on January 19. The press was called in and they had called in and they took a picture of the first elected officers. We just elected them right there on the spot. Later on that evening then, they had called a mass meeting and after a few remarks they went right into showing a movie of Charlie Chaplin's called "Modern Times."

At that time the policy of the leadership was that they felt that they had gone as far as they could in the strike. This was the whole leadership, Travis and all of them. Walter Reuther and every one of them had felt that perhaps they had gone as far as they dared to

¹We had been functioning as two separate women's groups up to that time: The group operating out of the union headquarters in the Pengelly Building (organized by women of the SP and CPO) and the group working in the strike kitchen in the south end of the city opposite the Fisher Body plant #1 (organized by women of the C.P.). Though members of the Auxiliary, their functions remained separated by demands of the kitchen work. Eve Stone was appointed by Martin as Director of the newly formed UAW Women's Auxiliary.

CP=Communist Party

SP=Communist Party Opposition - An active group that broke from the Socialist Party a short time before the sit-down strike.

go without suffering a great loss, without the workers' defecting because of economic pressure brought on by the corporation and that they had better see if they could negotiate a settlement. They had avenues and suggestions for negotiations. At this time it was known that Gov. Frank Murphy did not want any bloodshed in Michigan and that it would be best to settle the nationwide strike for the time being. We had to learn how to creep from here on, according to our leaders.

The men saw this movie, "Modern Times" shown for the first time on January 19, and they went out of the meeting grumbling, feeling like all direction had been lost. They were not given any assignments. They were not given reports on what had been done and what was to be done next. They were very wary and dissatisfied. These men were ready for action. It was not the rank and file, at any time, that wanted to back down. This was true right straight through to the end, the rank and file was militant. They were convinced. They were sold. They were dedicated. They were willing to give their lives. When you get people in that state, you do not suddenly say, "Well, let's take a half loaf." They feel that they have a chance for victory and they want to fight through to the end. So this was another point of disagreement between the policy of the Communist Party and the leadership and Walter Reuther, Kermit Johnson and myself and half of the members of the Socialist Party here in Flint. This also dates the letter that was sent to Norman Thomas because I have under January 20, Wednesday, "See Reuther about meeting with Trager." Now that meant that Trager was either on his way in or he was in here.

Skeels: Now how about the movie, "Modern Times"? What role did that play with relation to this policy?

Mrs. Dollinger: It served two purposes. If you remember, it was a masterpiece showing the speed-up in the plants and how it was driving this poor worker crazy. It was something that was in line with what GM workers were going through. But it was

diversionary in line with the leadership thinking. At the same time within the SP an intense discussion was going on whether or not to pull Plant #4, to throw in everything. Walter Reuther was opposed to it, "we would lose everything at one gamble." "We were not prepared." We knew what our forces were and they were small in Chevrolet, so help me. We had been talking big and the public thought we had a lot more members but we had sense enough to know what a handful we had in there. According to those opposing the attempt of pulling Plant #4 Chevrolet it would be suicide. We could lose everything that we had gained to this date, lost the days that had been put in at Fisher #1 and the rest of the country and Fisher #2. We would lose everything if we lost this big gamble at Plant #4. This was at the time that they brought in the movie. That night at an overflow meeting they gave a couple of speeches and then put the movie on instead of giving any further plans for action. These mass meetings held nightly were for laying out plans for a group to be on certain picket line assignments, to squad cars out to speak before AC, or other locations. Wherever they were needed, assignments were given, reports of activities, and any reports from the governor's office, or management and so on. So on the 20th, I made a speech in Mt. Morris at 8:00 p.m. and then I said, "See Reuther about meeting with Trager." Maybe this gives you some idea that even though this big policy question was here being fought out with strong convictions within the SP, nevertheless we had to drop to go out and speak in Mt. Morris to keep momentum. We had to continue commitments made for the strike action we wanted to continue.

Now, here it is January 21, in the morning I recorded Frank Trager here for SP meeting at 3:00 p.m. He came in on January 21.

Skeels: Here is the big question that is going to disturb people who are going over this. How do you account for the fact that you had arrayed against you the entire CP leadership and they were joined by the Reuthers and the other big luminaries of the Socialist Party.

Against them were actually you and Kermit and a few other people plus, of course, the sentiment in the ranks. How do you explain your victory in this situation?

Mrs. Dollinger: How do I explain it? I have to give credit here to one individual who fully appreciated and felt the sentiment of the workers and this is Frank Trager. He felt it when he came into Flint. Imagine being in Chicago, being called into this situation, talking with Reuther, talking with Kermit and me and Carl Johnson and some of these people and Roy Reuther at this point. Roy's sentiments were all on our side, but he did not dare to say anything. He said, "I am in agreement with you. But you know we can't have a split in our ranks." He was afraid of coming in on a head-on conflict with Walter. Walter was much stronger, but he was also vicious when he got in a battle with you. People were afraid of getting into a battle with Walter. He could cut and he knew how to operate. Roy's sentiments were with us but he was not going to come in a head-on conflict with Walter even then. You have to give an awful lot of credit to Frank Trager, coming in and getting this feeling of the rank and file who were feeling that they were gaining day by day by day and they were not going to quit when they were winning a fight. They felt that they had General Motors on the run. It was actually on the 21st then that Frank Trager was here for the meeting of the SP and that the decision was made.

Skeels: By the time you had gotten back to Flint I would imagine that the factional battle had pretty well gotten going?

Mrs. Dollinger: You mean between the Martinites and the Unity group? Yes, it was getting hotter by the day. It had gotten started early during the strike, you know. And this was due to Martin's being a very weak person and wavering in his decisions. Here in Flint the factional fight started over the election of the presidency of 156. I do not remember who the first candidate was. I know that we here in Flint wanted Roy Reuther to be the president in 156 which would have put him on the Executive Board also by virtue of his

being president of this big amalgamated local and here is where Walter Reuther stepped in and said, "No, two Reuthers will not be put on the Executive Board." Walter Reuther made the decision through the SP, which stuck, that Roy could not run. Who that candidate was that we put up, I do not know. However, "little Jack Little," as he was called, was popular with the Unity people. He was more or less a Martin follower, but he was an intelligent guy and a guy that you could talk with. And he is remembered pretty fondly by a number of people around here yet.

Skeels: Did the breakup of Local 156 have factional reasons behind it or was it simply because each plant wanted to be its own local?

Mrs. Dollinger: Well, there were aspects of both. You had factional differences. There is no question about it. Buick was a big group that never actually participated, in numbers, in the strike. It was affectionately called the old ladies' home out there. But you did have people active in it and people who were eager for political posts. They were anxious to have their own bailiwick because they were the biggest, numerically, as far as potential membership was concerned of all the locals and then, of course, the factionalism was always behind every move that was made. And this is another reason why they wanted it split up. Plus it was a pretty unwieldy situation. Local 156 was in different stages of organization. You had the high and well organized groups of Fisher #1 and #2. You had the higher political experience and bloody battles of Chevrolet grouping which developed a lot of people that were capable of taking office. AC was very backward organizationally. You had very few people there and yet they wanted to come in on what few there were. So there were factional differences, but also it was an unwieldy situation because of the various stages of development of each one these groupings and making specific demands on their plant management.

Skeels: How did factionalism fit in with the quickie, unauthorized, wildcat sit-downs that shut down on the line?

Mrs. Dollinger: From my very dim memory of this, we do know that our big complaint was that Martin was going in and having conferences with management that the other Board members were not aware of. They were often faced with commitments that Martin had made as president of the union. Martin was making agreements that these plant strikes had to be stopped and the Unity Caucus felt, of course, that this was an outright betrayal of trying to straighten out conditions in the plant that had not been used to having any union grievances presented and worked out. This was a big factor, Martin's talking to GM management behind the backs of his Board, not reporting to the Board and his reluctance at coming in and explaining and getting the Board to go along with the things that he was doing. But he was not reporting. He did not trust them. They did not trust him.

Skeels: Were you elected as a delegate to the '37 Convention in Milwaukee?

Mrs. Dollinger: No, I was not a delegate. Kermit Johnson was a delegate, but I was a representative of the women's organization and I was seated on the floor. And I sat in on all of the caucus meetings. I had a lot to say with what was being done (through the SP faction, especially.)

Skeels: The whole Convention was not lined up in two caucuses. There was a large group that was not lined up in either one, is that right?

Mrs. Dollinger: Yes, that is true. The Milwaukee Convention was trying to reach agreements not by power cliques so much as genuinely trying to get a leadership out of this in order to be in a position to talk officially to the corporation.

Skeels: What role did Lewis play with respect to your caucus?

Mrs. Dollinger: Lewis did not consider Martin a trustworthy man at all. Of course, he always spoke through his representatives that were circulating around, but he definitely

was on the side of the Unity Caucus at that time. He did not trust Homer Martin and he let it be known to our people.

Skeels: Was there someone that appeared at your caucus to tell you that?

Mrs. Dollinger: Yes, and I cannot remember his name.

Skeels: Did you people at the time feel that you had a majority?

Mrs. Dollinger: Yes, we did. Of course, this was mainly from our closeness here in Flint and Detroit. We felt that we had a majority at the time. We did not collect a majority of Board of members, though. That was a big disappointment on the part of the Unity people that Kermit was not eligible because he did not have his dues paid up because Kermit was acceptable to both sides. They had reached the agreement on him and it was a big blow.

Now how many did that put them short? I think it put them short just one, didn't it?

Because this was a big disappointment on Kermit who who was acceptable and after the agreement had been worked out, he was ineligible and then that gave them the majority.

Skeels: Would you say that your group went out of the '37 Convention with the feeling that it had lost or gained?

Mrs. Dollinger: Now I would have to speak I think more from the local viewpoint. We felt that we had the situation pretty well under control and that the Martin people would be won over eventually. I do not think that we expected that this thing was going to blow right up in our faces.

We were feeling that Martin was acceptable as a president but he surely needed some strong vice-presidents and people on that Board to hold him in line. We did not want to present a face of disunity and disharmony among our own ranks to the corporation right then. There was this feeling of union loyalty, you know. But locally I think that we felt that we had been reasonable. We had tried to work it out in the Unity group and that we would win them over.

Skeels: Can you recollect how the delegates struck you? Were they relatively unskilled in parliamentary procedure?

Mrs. Dollinger: A noisy Convention! Every time a proposal or a resolution was read that they liked, they would take the table tops and bang them. They were a boisterous group. They had just come from a big victory and were full of enthusiasm. We just felt confident that we were going to work out these problem, the internal union problems. Then you must remember, too, that we had not broadcast our differences. We always were talking about them within our leadership circles but sort of holding back on the rank and file because we wanted this to be a strong union. We had been talking about solidarity and the strong unionized C.I.O. At this period of the Milwaukee Convention it was not known in the ranks as generally as a lot of people might suppose, what Martin had been doing, and how much we distrusted him, how much we were leery of his leadership of this organization.

Skeels: In the Convention itself, the delegates had voted down a convention every two years, increase of pay for the union officers, and a few other things that would have given Martin tremendous power. So you people probably felt that you had quite a bit of backing on those things.

Mrs. Dollinger: Well, yes! Then, too, there was so much democracy in the union then. Any rank and filer could get up and hold the floor and expound to his heart's content. We were all in this period. An idea of two or four year term would have been alien to everybody right then and there. There was such complete democracy and freedom that I do not think that the Martin forces themselves would have pushed on this point because they, too, were all for workers' democracy. Let us have a complete turnover every year if necessary. But let us right now try to work these things out and remain solid. This is the way I remember it.

Skeels: Was there any continued effort on the part of Martin to take over the Flint area?

Mrs. Dollinger: Yes. They were always behind the scenes maneuvering.

Skeels: How did that manifest itself?

Mrs. Dollinger: I would have to go back over that to tell you some of the main manifestations that were shown to us here. I cannot remember the details. I only remember general impressions now of various moves. Roy Reuther was Martin's main nemesis here. He had to get him out of Flint. Of course, that was it. Roy Reuther was removed and there was a big, big sentiment against this. They felt that Roy was a part of Flint, not Detroit. He was our Reuther. To heck with the other two. They were good. They were smart. Walter was a smart guy but Roy was up here from before the organizing days. He was with us all through everything. He was a genial friend, confidant, and advisor and good speaker. He would have been the candidate for president of 156 and our Board member and everything else if Walter had agreed to this. Of course, Roy would not run either, if he thought it was going to jeopardize Walter's chances. He always had the feeling that Walter had more on the ball because of his travels and so on than he had. But when they removed Roy, that was the signal here that there was no compromise. That was the beginning of it. Now, I cannot remember when they removed him. It seems like there was an overt act made shortly after we came back from the 1937 Convention with this feeling that we could work things out. It did not seem like it was too long because it was a real slap in the face.

Skeels: Travis got transferred, too. Did that have much of an impact up here?

Mrs. Dollinger: I wish that you could talk with him. It seemed to me that that was part of the job of not letting the factionalism get too far that he had other work to do. He was giving this out that he had other work to do. He had served his purpose here. This is what he told to the the rank and file in the meetings. And there were other jobs to be done and I

believe that was part of the agreement of trying to keep the harmony. It was Roy that really stirred things up, when they went after Roy Reuther. It is so hazy now.

Skeels: Early in '39 there was a split between Homer Martin and his opponents and I suppose this had some manifestations in Flint.

Mrs. Dollinger: In Flint it took a particularly vicious form where in restaurants workers were meeting up with members of the opposite group, or the Martin caucus would meet up with Unity fellows and they would bust up a beer garden or a restaurant and went after them with clubs and knives and everything else. Then finally we had prowling groups of the Unity caucus rank-and-filers that were going to get even with some of these people. It was a real nasty affair here. One of the main battles that stands out in my memory is the battle in front of the two separate union halls across from the Fisher Body Plant. We had a street fight and Briggs Local in Detroit had sent up a contingent to help us because this had been waging for so long that they had sent word down there to get cars up and the police and the Martin forces had us completely outnumbered and Briggs was coming up to help the Unity forces. The police were definitely protecting the Martin men and we knew that they had hired professional jujitsu experts in the Martin faction. We would see one dart out of a crowd and look as though he merely touched a great big man and he would go flat on his back and that attacker would be back in the crowd before you could even have a chance to identify him, not that the police were trying to catch these fellows. But skulls were cracked and the police were terribly rough on the Unity people. At one point they had cut the telephone wires of the Unity headquarters and had a number of people surrounded inside. Clayton Carpenter who was very active as the local financial secretary of the Fisher Local was downstairs and had barricaded the doors with all the chairs in the hall and I think he had a rifle. I do not know what he was going to do with it with that big crowd, one rifle, and we were upstairs looking out of the second story windows and watching this

battle going on and seeing that they were pressing with a wedge formation to bust into the hall. Because it had been such a vicious fight and some of the people had gone to the hospital for treatment, we thought that we were stranded. Art Case was then the regional director. He was upstairs on the second floor and several other men. I do not believe there were any more than 15 of us in that hall at the time that this huge formation (far outnumbering the Unity guys) down on the ground floor, down on the street, was ready to come in.

Skeels: Their purpose was to take over the Unity caucus headquarters, is that right?

Mrs. Dollinger: To take it over, to bust it up, and to put us out of business. A street brawl just becomes a very vicious thing where they are going to send as many people to the hospital as possible and talk about killing them all off and so on. So we dumped a pail of hot lye water out of the 2nd floor window and scattered this formation and I believe that is when the Briggs group arrived then and came over and helped the outside Unity force to come through and to save the hall.