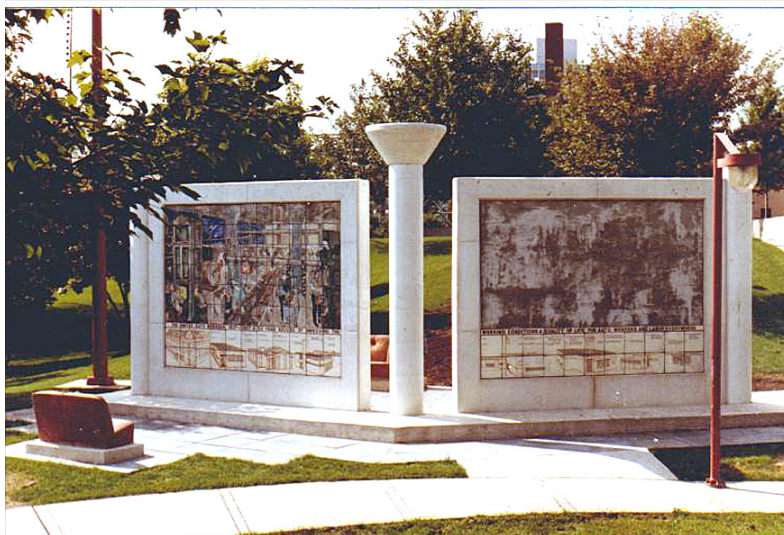


# The Flint Sit-Down Strike Memorial

Michael Padwee

“In 1937 our gallant strike electrified and mobilized an entire nation. All of working-class America thrilled to our victory. They knew our fight was their fight. We proved again, as the railroad and coal workers had proved before us, that in union there is strength. We fought against our own intolerable conditions, but our fight was the fight of the entire nation of exploited men and women.” (Genora Johnson Dollinger, “Where Did the Labor Movement Go Wrong? Lessons from the Flint Sit-Down in 1937”, *The Searchlight*, February 10, 1987; [http://www.sjvgreens.org/archive04/sitdown\\_lessons.shtml](http://www.sjvgreens.org/archive04/sitdown_lessons.shtml))



## Background:

“The General Motors Corporation Sit-Down Strike of 1936-1937 remains probably the most significant historical event which has taken place in Flint. Its success, in making the United Auto Workers the bargaining agent for the employees of General Motors Corporation, has been discussed in numerous studies of the labor wars of the 1930s and inspired several books on the strike itself. Sidney Fine's **Sit-Down** (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1969) resulted from a detailed analysis of archival sources and interviews, and Henry Kraus's **The Many and the Few** (1947) was an insider's account of one of the chief labor activists involved in the strike.”

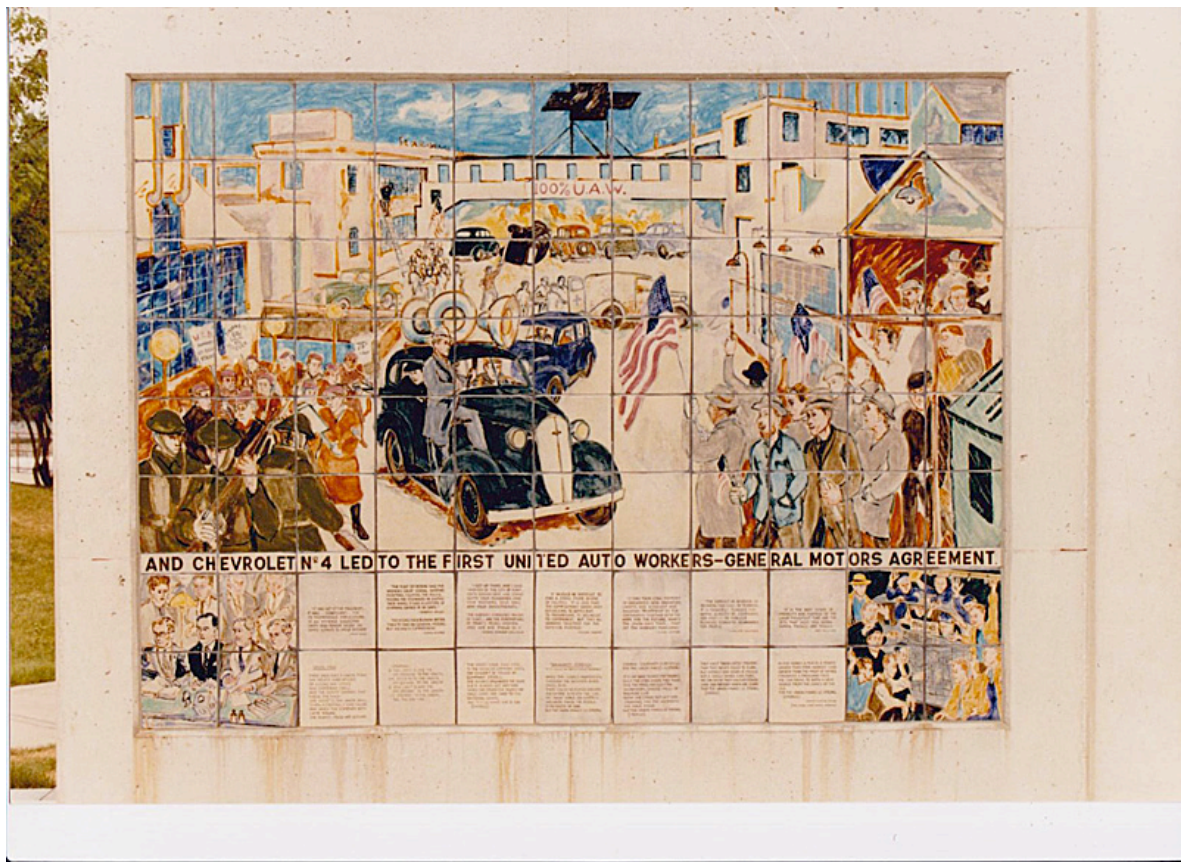
(<http://www.umflint.edu/library/archives/labor.htm>)



Tile mural #1. From the inside looking out. (Photo courtesy of Pewabic Pottery)

“On Dec. 30, 1936, management in the Fisher II factory in Flint, MI tried to fire three UAW members. Fellow and sister workers stopped work and occupied the factory. ...Several hours later, on the afternoon of Dec. 30, workers at the Standard Cotton Products Co. a supplier for GM, sat down. Then around 10 p.m. that night, workers at the big Fisher I factory in Flint took over their plant. ...Thus began the first great auto

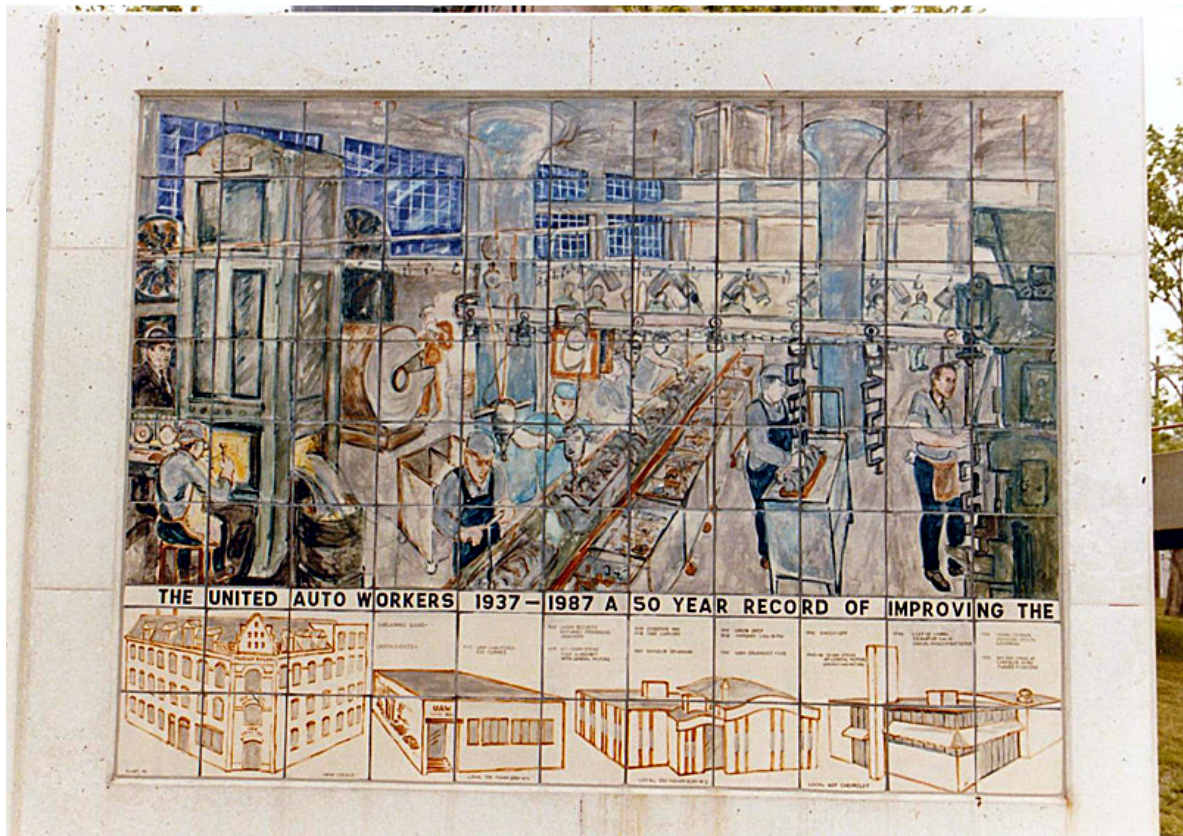
strike... ." (Taken from "The Story of The Searchlight" by Ronda Hauben, Flint, 1987;  
<http://history.eserver.org/flint-sit-down.txt>)



Tile mural #2. Outside the plant. (Photo courtesy of Pewabic Pottery)

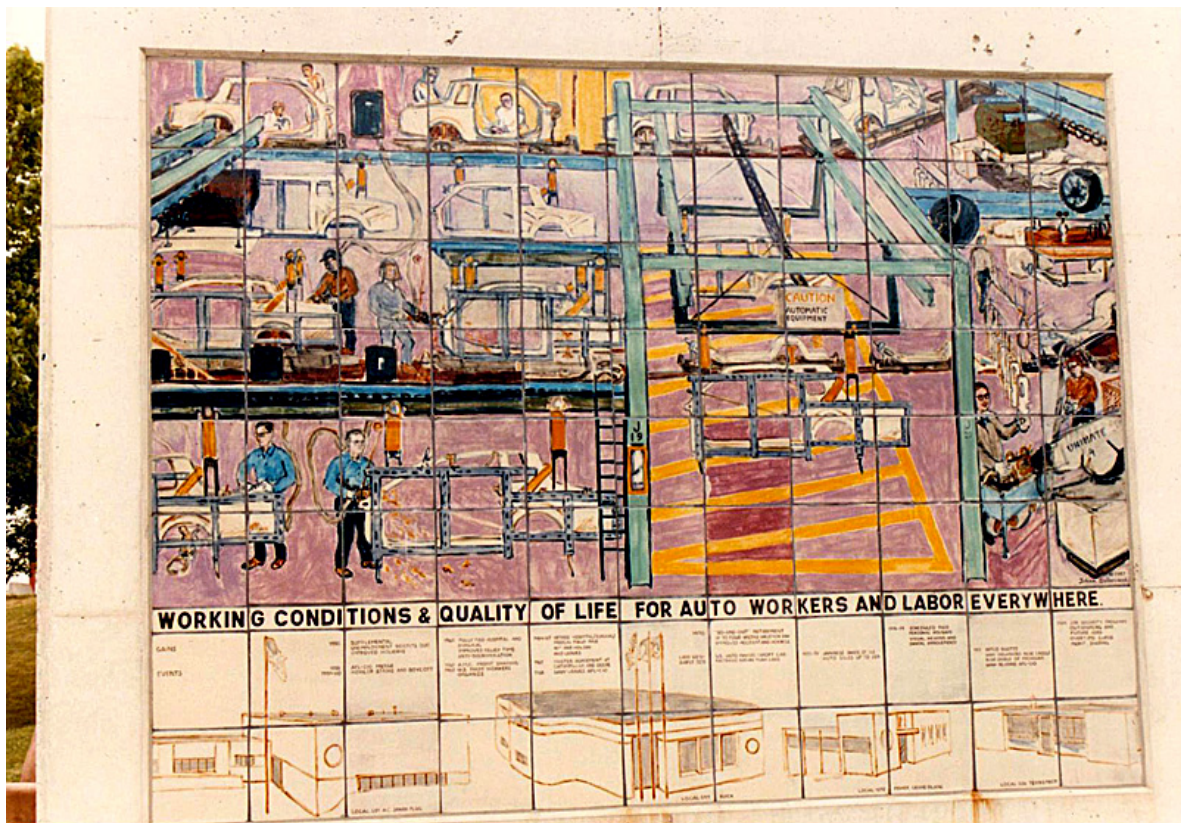
"The autoworkers were striking to win recognition of the United Auto Workers (UAW) as the only bargaining agent for GM's workers; they also wanted to make the company stop sending work to non-union plants and to establish a fair minimum wage scale, a grievance system and a set of procedures that would help protect assembly-line workers from injury. In all, the strike lasted 44 days.

The Flint sit-down strike was not spontaneous; UAW leaders, inspired by similar strikes across Europe, had been planning it for months. The strike actually began at smaller plants: Fisher Body in Atlanta on November 16, GM in Kansas City on December 16 and a Fisher stamping plant in Cleveland on December 28. The Flint plant was the biggest coup...: it contained one of just two sets of body dies that GM used to stamp out almost every one of its 1937 cars. By seizing control of the Flint plant, autoworkers could shut down the company almost entirely. ...on the evening of December 30, the Flint Plant's night shift simply stopped working. They locked themselves in and sat down." (<http://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/sit-down-strike-begins-in-flint>)



Tile mural #3. A 1950s assembly plant. (Photo courtesy of Pewabic Pottery)

GM obtained an injunction against the strike in January, which the union ignored. The judge who granted the injunction had a significant investment in GM. After several pitched battles between the strikers and police, “GM obtained a second injunction against the strike on February 1, 1937. The union not only ignored [this] order, but spread the strike to Chevrolet Plant #4. ...That development forced GM to bargain with the union. ...The two parties finally reached agreement on February 11, 1937 on a one-page agreement that recognized the UAW as the exclusive bargaining representative for GM's employees who were members of the union for the next six months. As short as this agreement was, it gave the UAW instant legitimacy. The UAW capitalized on that opportunity, signing up 100,000 GM employees and building the union's strength through grievance strikes at GM plants throughout the country.”  
([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Flint\\_Sit-Down\\_Strike](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Flint_Sit-Down_Strike))

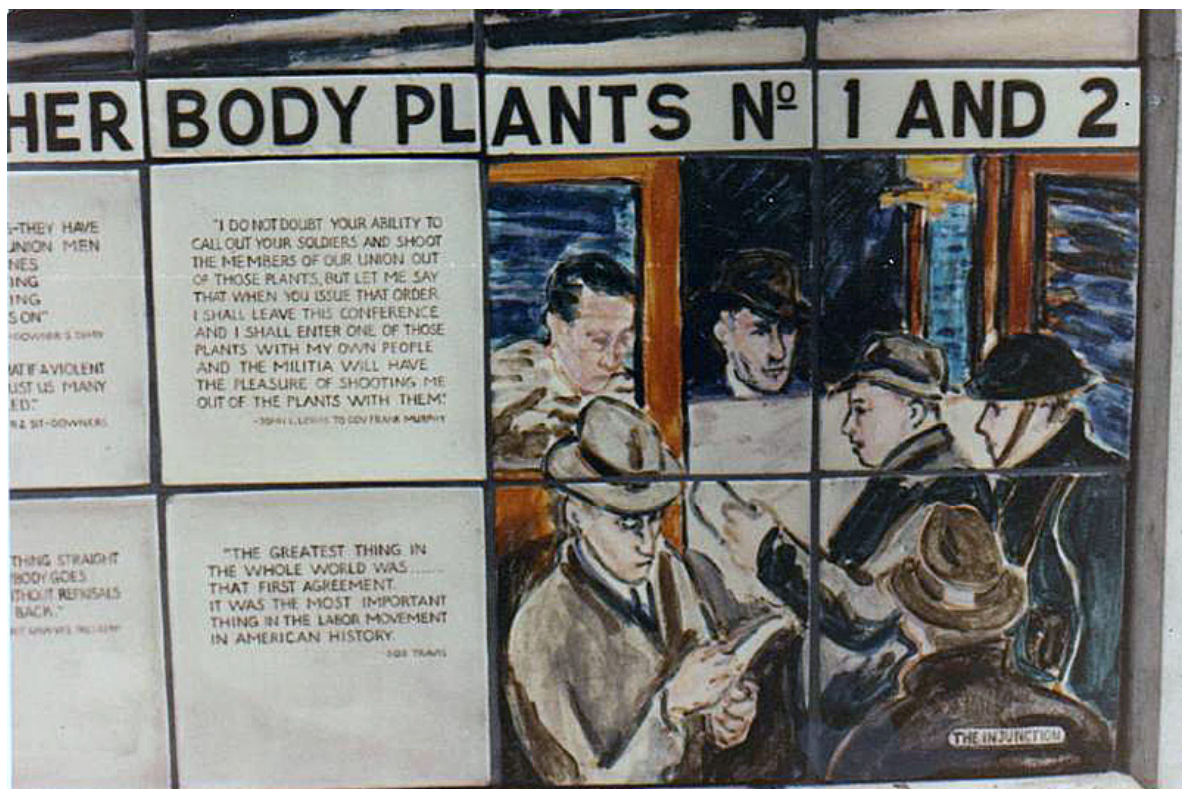


Tile mural #4. A 1980s assembly plant. (Photo courtesy of Pewabic Pottery)

### The 50th Anniversary Memorial

“In 1987, all of the gains of the past 50 years won by the hard efforts of the sit-downers and the workers who followed in their footsteps, are under attack. And the sit-down pioneers are still being treated as "subversives".” (Taken from "The Story of The Searchlight" by Ronda Hauben, Flint, 1987; <http://history.eserver.org/flint-sit-down.txt>)

In 1986 the artist, Johan Sellenraad, created a painted ceramic tile mural in Flint, Michigan, which he considered "a major public art piece...for the city and the UAW, commemorating the 50th anniversary of the 'Sit-Down Strike' that unionized the auto workers. [...The memorial] included four handmade ceramic tile murals produced at Pewabic Pottery in Detroit, set in a concrete structure based on the auto factories.” (Email from Johan Sellenraad to Michael Padwee dated 13 Feb. 2013, titled “Clark St subway murals”)



Detail, Mural #1. (Photo courtesy of Pewabic Pottery)

"Sellenraad's monument...combine[d] photographic evidence, a local ceramic tradition, and union-manufactured goods. It mark[ed] the entrance to the historic Carriage Town neighborhood where the auto industry had its roots... . [...Although the] Sit-Down Strike Memorial refers to a single event in history[,...] by giving voice to labor, it goes beyond traditional memorialization. And by integrating text and graphic techniques, it provide[d] an extraordinarily rich and complex interpretation of events." (Ronald Lee Fleming\*, "The Changing Place of Interpretation in American Public Space", p. 2; [http://places.designobserver.com/media/pdf/The\\_Changing\\_P\\_643.pdf](http://places.designobserver.com/media/pdf/The_Changing_P_643.pdf))

Ronald Lee Fleming, the founder and president of the Townscape Institute, "Created the design parameters [...for the] ceramic tile monument on the riverfront depicting significant scenes from a major labor victory. [...Fleming] developed the concept of combining literary quotations, cast cement auto seats, and cast bronze auto hinges as part of a holistic design and animation strategy for the site adjacent to the Carrigetown Historic District... . [...He then] commissioned the painter, Johan Sellenraad of New York City, to create a ceramic tile monument on the riverfront depicting significant scenes from a major labor victory." (<http://www.townscape.org/RLFCV.pdf>) The monument was a collaboration of the City of Flint, the United Auto Workers union and sit-down strike retirees, the Townscape Institute and the artist, Johan Sellenraad.

In a 1988 interview with the *Grosse Pointe (MI) News* Marieke Sellenraad Allen, Johan's sister and a member of the Pewabic Society Board of Directors, stated that "UAW retirees who...commissioned the work had to conceptualize what they wanted, but Johan would have to make it work his way. You cannot dictate to an artist[,...but you] must have continuous interplay. ...Fortunately,...the retirees...liked him and they loved his ideas. ...the whole concept of having Michigan people work on it--the pottery, the tile installers, the people of Flint, and especially the autoworkers--[was] a great one." (Peggy O'Connor Andrzejczyk, "Pointer of Interest: Marieke Sellenraad Allen", *Grosse Pointe News*, Vol. 49, No. 22, June 2, 1988, pp. 1A, 11A)



**Bronze car hinges, "strikers' ammunition", on apron under Mural #2. (Photo courtesy of Johan Sellenraad)**

Sellenraad wrote that there were "four murals and friezes of special strike events, and statements by union leaders and union songs. Seating [...was] by concrete casts of 1936 Chevy seats found in a field and on the sly at Buick City, a huge plant, since closed. ...you can sit on a Chevy seat and read or sing the frieze and see the strike take place inside and out. On the apron[, below the tiles,] bronze car hinges were mounted replicating the [strikers'] ammunition used with rubber inner tubes as sling shots to keep the company [strikebreakers] and [city] cops out." (Email from Johan Sellenraad to Michael Padwee dated 17 Feb 2013, titled "Flint Mon AB87 UAW & City of Flint commission for 'Sit=Down Strike Monument'")

Johan's sister, Marieke Allen, recalled that "People we've met seem to really study it, to relate to it. And the UAW was so excited over it. They considered Johan a hero for hav-

ing come through so well. ...The monument is styled like an open book, capable of being read on both sides. [One panel features...] a view of the sit-down strike from the inside looking out, one from the outside looking in, and [the other two depict...] 1950s and 1980s era assembly plants.”

Marieke also remembered the difficult but rewarding process of making the murals. “By spring of 1987, Pewabic...had leased an old firehouse building across [...Jefferson] and told Sellenraad to set up shop there. ...[Pewabic staff] member Diane Kulisek, who had been working on the People Mover project, developed the special colors...Sellenraad needed. [One problem was that] Johan...is a painter and used to knowing what color he wanted and just reaching for it. Now, he had to stop and wait to see how the test tiles matched up. ...The work began after the testing was completed in June. [...A small group then] worked seven days a week under tremendous pressure to finish enough tiles for at least two panels to be erected in time for the Labor Day [1987] dedication.”

“The calligraphy [on the tiles] was painstaking[--another problem]. Instead of the one stroke it normally takes, I [Marieke] had to go over each letter three or four times after doing the layout in pencil. There were 88 tiles of text and then the headlines, timelines and donor names to finish. Then everything had to be fired.

“The tiles were so big they cracked all the time during the firing. ...we had to slow the firing because of the cracking, but that meant that production was slowed. Soon we began to have the technique down to where each firing would take five days. ...It worked, but even then the tiles would shrink from their planned 11 ¼ inches. ...We had three panels up by Labor Day and put the fourth up later.” (Peggy O’Connor Andrzejczyk, “Pointer of Interest: Marieke Sellenraad Allen”, Grosse Pointe News, Vol. 49, No. 22, June 2, 1988, pp. 1A, 11A)



**Abraham Lincoln Brigade Memorial. (Photo courtesy of Michael Padwee)**

**“Spain has been etched in the hearts of our generation... and carried around like a terrible wound. Spain gave us our first taste of defeat, and because of her we discovered with an enduring shock that one can be right and still be defeated, that sheer force can trample the human spirit underfoot, and that there are times when courage goes unrewarded.” (Albert Camus)**

In 2008 another memorial--another “first of its kind”--was unveiled in San Francisco. It is similar to the Sit-Down Strike Memorial in that it commemorated an event that is still vili-



fied by some in this country--the fight by Americans in the Abraham Lincoln Brigade against the fascist onslaught in Spain in 1936-1939; those who fought were never honored by their country; and it has a similar "look" to it as the Flint Memorial. It uses translucent onyx "tiles" to show "The faces of some of the 3,000 or so men and women who broke American isolationism to volunteer in the 1936-39 Spanish war... . . .Americans who risked their lives for the values at stake were never recognized in their home country. ...The only acknowledgment most brigade members received after their return to the United States were the 1950s investigations for participation in leftist organizations... ." (<http://links.sfgate.com/nation/article/WAR-HEROES-LATE-HONOR-3286297.php#page-1>) It shows the people, their deeds and their words just as did the first Sit-Down Strike Memorial.

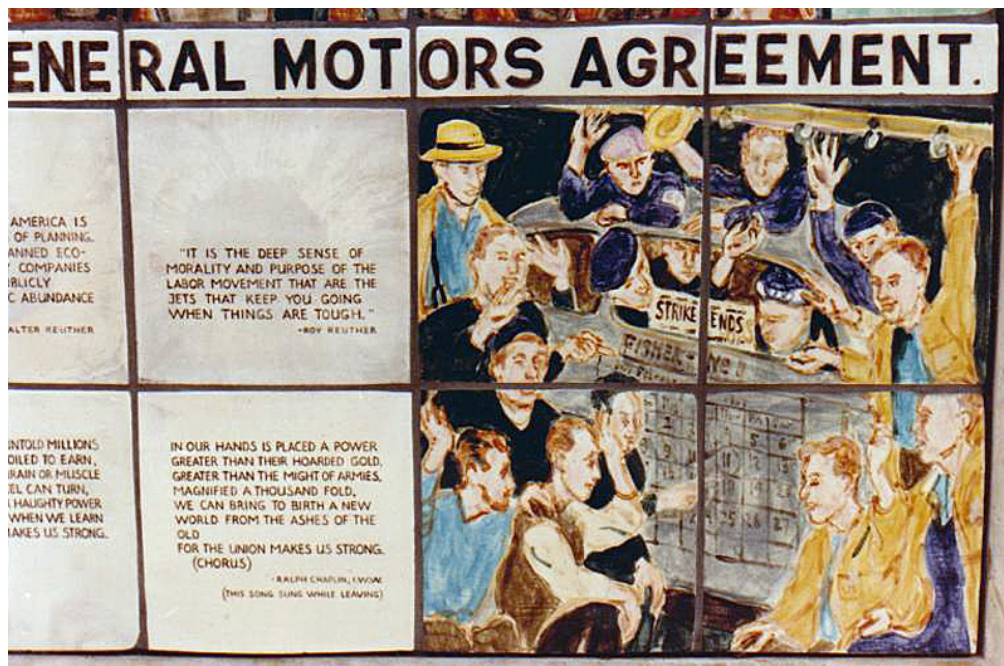
### Misfortune

"[...The Sit-Down Memorial] was [in] an outside location and unfortunately the concrete let in water behind the tiles forcing the glaze to disintegrate." (Email from Johan Sellenraad to Michael Padwee dated 13 Feb. 2013, titled "Clark St subway murals") The first year there was no problem, but the second year "water came through the concrete and built up between the tiles... . The tile installers...forgot to put in weepholes in the lower corners of the silicone caulk. I was called in from NYC...when the glaze started flaking. Opening the corners by punching holes with a screwdriver released buckets of water. [But,] it was the beginning of the end. ...Now it is gone, replaced by a bronze statue." (Email from Johan Sellenraad to Michael Padwee dated 17 Feb 2013, titled "Flint Mon AB87 UAW & City of Flint commission for 'Sit=Down Strike Monument'")

"The site is across the Flint River from the U. of MI, Flint. It was a favorite site with the Union, [but] for tiles it had lots of moisture..., weather extremes from arctic cold and sudden frosts and summer heat. This was my first major tile project after Clark Street. [See:<http://www.blogger.com/blogger.g?blogID=4215924144728285598#editor/target=post;postID=5829428467598582906>] I did research and hired a recommended local architect to do up the specs based on my design. I made a model and life-size paintings which I carted around the Union halls for approval. I worked with Pewabic Pottery which had done really nice architectural tile work in Detroit in the 1920s that still looks good (similar freeze & thaw weather as Flint). [J.T. Abernathy, a ceramic artist] in Ann Arbor was sub contracted to make the tiles, most of which were fantastic, 1" x 1' x 1'. We did kiln tests and [...Pewabic] found a building across Jefferson [Avenue] where I could do each mural on the bisque fired tile[s... ] after which they were carefully moved across the street to the large kilns. By Labor Day we had three out [of] four murals in place. There was an unveiling with...speeches by the Governor, Mayor and Union leaders including Victor Reuther, and a parade. ...Now it is gone, replaced by a bronze statue." (Email from Johan Sellenraad to Michael Padwee dated 17 Feb 2013, titled "Flint Mon AB87 UAW & City of Flint commission for 'Sit=Down Strike Monument'")



Detail, Mural #2. (Photo courtesy of Pewabic Pottery)



Detail, Mural #2. (Photo courtesy of Pewabic Pottery)

“Remember when the ‘Sit Down’ came?  
And all the papers laid the claim,  
Against each Union Member’s name?  
‘SUBVERSIVE!’

‘Twas then the ‘Big Shots’ howled with fear,  
‘The revolution now is here;  
The stand they take is naught but sheer.’  
‘SUBVERSIVE!’”\*

\*from the poem "Subversive" by Floyd Hoke-Miller, a sit-down striker, in ***A Laborer Looks at Life: Then and Now***, Flint, MI, 1984.

I would like to thank Johan Sellenraad for his insights and remembrances and photos. Also, my thanks to Sandy Koukoulas, Public Relations representative, and, especially, Hanne Fuglsang Nielsen, Archivist, of Pewabic Pottery, for copies of Pewabic’s photos and a list of local articles about the murals; and Paul Gifford, Senior Associate Librarian, Genesee Historical Collections Center, Frances Willson Thompson Library, University of Michigan-Flint for searching for photos of the murals in the Labor History Project archives. This article may be downloaded for individual, non-commercial use.