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CHAPTER

2

The Unemployed Workers' Movement

The depression movements of the unemployed and of industrial workers followed a period of economic breakdown that produced distress and confusion in the daily lives of millions of people, and produced contradiction and confusion in the posture of elites. For those still working, the discontents released by economic collapse during the 1930s were expressed in struggles within the factory system, which we will turn to in the next chapter. But the men and women for whom life had changed most drastically and immediately were no longer in the factories. They were among the masses of the unemployed, and their struggle had to take another form, in another institutional context. The depression saw the rise and fall of the largest movement of the unemployed this country has known, and the institution against which the movement was inevitably pitted was the relief system.

At the time of the Great Depression, formal arrangements for relief of the indigent were sparse and fragmented. In many places, including New York City and Philadelphia, there simply was no "outdoor" relief (the term used to describe aid given to people who were not institutionalized). Even where public relief agencies existed, what little was actually given was usually provided by private charities. But niggardly aid and fragmented administration did not signify an underdeveloped institution. To the contrary, a national relief system did exist. Despite the diversity of administrative auspices, the norms that guided the giving of relief were everywhere quite similar. The dole was anathema to the American spirit of work and self-sufficiency. Therefore, it should be dispensed to as few as pos-

sible and made as harsh as possible to discourage reliance upon it. Accordingly, very little was given, and then only to a handful of the aged and crippled, widowed and orphaned—to “deserving” people who clearly were not able to work.

These practices were not only a reflection of harshly individualistic American attitudes. They were also a reflection of American economic realities. Work and self-reliance meant grueling toil at low wages for many people. So long as that was so, the dole could not be dispensed permissively for fear some would choose it over work. Thus, most of the poor were simply excluded from aid, ensuring that they had no alternative but to search for whatever work they could find at whatever wage was offered. And if they found no work, then they would have to survive by whatever means they could.

But this much could have been achieved without any relief arrangements at all; the threat of starvation was sufficient. The more important function of the relief system was accomplished, not by refusing relief, but by degrading and making outcasts of those few who did get aid. At the time of the Great Depression the main legal arrangement for the care of the destitute was incarceration in almshouses or workhouses. In some places the care of paupers was still contracted to the lowest bidder, and destitute orphans were indentured to those who would feed them in exchange for whatever labor they could perform. The constitutions of fourteen states denied the franchise to paupers (Brown, 9–10; Woodroffe, 154). By such practices the relief system created a clearly demarcated and degraded class, a class of pariahs whose numbers were small but whose fate loomed large in the lives of those who lived close to indigence, warning them always of a life even worse than hard work and severe poverty.

The meaning of these relief practices was thus not only in their inhumanity but in the functions they performed in legitimating work in the face of the extreme inequalities generated by American capitalism. For many people work was hard and the rewards few, and the constraints of tradition weak in the face of the transformations wrought by industrial capitalism. The discontent these poor might have felt was muffled, in part, by the relief system and the image of the terrible humiliation inflicted on those who became paupers. The practices called charity were shaped, in short, by economic imperatives, by the need for cheap and docile labor on the farms and in the factories of a burgeoning capitalist society. For the

practices of relief to change, this subordination of the institution of charity to the institution of profit had to be ruptured.

The wonder of this relief system, however, was that it generated such shame and fear as to lead the poor to acquiesce in its harsh and restrictive practices. In part the poor acquiesced simply because they shared American beliefs in the virtue of work and self-sufficiency, and in the possibility of work and self-sufficiency for those who were ambitious and deserving. But any doubts they might otherwise have felt about this judicious sorting out of the worthy by the American marketplace were dispelled by the spectacle of the degraded pauper displayed by the relief system. Even when unemployment was endemic, most people endured in silence, blaming themselves for their misfortunes. They did not demand relief, for to do so was to give up the struggle to remain above the despised pauper class. Most of the time, the unemployed poor obeyed the prohibition against going on the dole, and by doing so collaborated in their own misery and in the punitive practices of local relief officials.

Occasionally, however, unemployment reached calamitous levels and the jobless rebelled. At the depths of each of the recurrent depressions of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, people joined together and demanded some form of aid to ease their distress. In the slump of 1837 some 20,000 unemployed in Philadelphia assembled to demand, among other things, that the national government relieve distress among the unemployed by a public works program (Foner, 162), and in New York City, a crowd of thousands in City Hall Park protested against the “monopolies” and the high cost of food and rent. The crowd then paraded to the wholesale flour depot, and dumped flour and wheat in the streets (Gutman, 1976, 60–61). In the panic of 1857 protests of the unemployed emerged in several big cities. Ten thousand Philadelphians rallied “to stimulate their representatives in the State House to an appreciation of their troubles,” and a system of ward associations was set up to issue food to the needy (Feder, 32). In New York a meeting of 15,000 in Tompkins Square to demand work culminated in the destruction of fences and benches and the seizure of food wagons, although in this instance the workers got neither jobs nor relief, and federal troops were called in (Feder, 35). The depression of 1873 stimulated new demonstrations. In New York City, rallies drew 10,000 to 15,000 people who were dispersed by mounted police, and in Chicago, mass meetings of the unemployed, organized by anarchists under the slogan “Bread or Blood,” culminated in a march

of 20,000 on the City Council (Feder, 52; Boyer and Morais, 86). Subsequently, unemployed workers stormed the offices of the Chicago Relief and Aid Society, swamping the Society with applications for aid. The Society surrendered, and about 10,000 were given relief over the next year (Feder, 52; Seymour, August 1937, 8).¹ In the depression of 1884 the unemployed in Chicago marched again, this time into better-off neighborhoods (Montgomery, 20), and in 1893 a new and bitter depression led to a series of marches on Washington by the unemployed, the best known of which was of course "Coxey's army." Coxey's marchers got nothing, but mass demonstrations in the big industrial cities did succeed at least in getting soup kitchens and, in some places, local public works projects as well.

These experiences suggest that when unemployment is severe and widespread, at least a partial transvaluation may occur among the poor. The prohibition against the dole may weaken, if only because the extent of distress belies the customary conviction that one's economic fortunes and misfortunes are a matter of personal responsibility, of individual failure. At such times large numbers of the poor demand relief, the relief of work or the relief of food and money. This transvaluation occurred again in the Great Depression, and just as the scale of the calamity in the 1930s was unparalleled, so too was the protest movement that arose among the unemployed.

The Great Depression:

Preconditions for Insurgency

The depression came suddenly, at a time when the American belief in unprecedented and unbroken prosperity had never been so fervent, earlier depressions notwithstanding. People were taken by surprise, the rulers as much as the ruled, and it took time for the political forces set in motion by the calamity to emerge. Then, as the depression continued and worsened, the harshening and disordering of a way of life began to take form in rising popular discontent. The actions of elites added momentum to this process, for they too were shaken and divided, and their cacaphonic accusations

¹ Gutman describes these 1873 protests and the organizations that led them in a number of industrial cities (1965).

and proposals heightened the sense of indignation that was spreading. In the period of general political uncertainty that ensued, protest movements emerged among different groups, focusing on different institutional grievances. The earliest uprisings occurred among the unemployed.

THE ECONOMIC COLLAPSE

The decade preceding the depression had been a boom time for American business. National income rose from about \$60 billion in 1922 to \$87 billion in 1929, and by June of 1929 the index of industrial production reached its highest point ever (Bernstein, 1970, 54, 251). For the nation as a whole prosperity had never seemed so assured.

These were not nearly such good years for many workers and farmers, however. Rising productivity and profits in the twenties were largely the result of increasing mechanization rather than the expansion of the labor force. Meanwhile depressed farm prices (the result of overproduction stimulated by heavy immigration earlier in the century, followed by the demand for food during World War I when the United States was feeding its allies) were forcing millions of people off the land and to the cities. The resulting labor surplus meant that for the first time in the American experience, prosperity was accompanied by continuing high unemployment throughout the decade (Lescohier and Brandeis, 137-151). The labor surplus also accounts for the fact that wages remained relatively fixed, while profits soared. Moreover, some industries, particularly mining and textiles, were in a slump throughout the decade, and these workers suffered sharp wage cuts. But the hardships of particular groups remained submerged, because the people who bore them were subdued by the aura of prosperity that symbolized the era. These were self-evidently good times in America; anyone who really wanted to work could ostensibly earn a livelihood.

Then, in 1929, the production index began to slip from its June high, and by October, after a dizzying burst of speculation, the stock market reacted in the panic known as Black Thursday. The impact on unemployment was immediate. One government official judged that the numbers out of work rose by 2.5 million within two weeks of the crash, and President Roosevelt's Committee on Economic

Security later estimated that the number of unemployed jumped from 429,000 in October 1929 to 4,065,000 in January 1930 (Bernstein, 1970, 254). The number rose steadily to 8 million in January 1931, and to 9 million in October (Bernstein, 1970, 254-257).

Particular industries were devastated, as were the towns where they were located. Bernstein reports, for example, that by January 1930, 30 to 40 percent of the male labor force was out of work in Toledo, where Willys-Overland had cut its payroll from 20,000 to 4,000. In Detroit a personal loan company discovered in March that half its outstanding commitments were from people who had lost their jobs. By the end of that year almost half of New England's textile workers were unemployed, and the Metropolitan Life Insurance Company reported that 24 percent of its industrial policy holders in forty-six larger cities were jobless. The Ford Motor Company employed 130,000 workers in the spring of 1929; by the summer of 1931 there were only 37,000 left on the payroll (Bernstein, 1970, 255-256). Sidney Hillman reported that at the height of the season in January 1932 only 10 percent of his New York garment workers were employed (Bernstein, 1970, 317). The chronic unemployment of the 1920s had become catastrophic unemployment.

Most of the nation's public figures were stubbornly unwilling to recognize the disaster, at least at first. The White House issued messages of reassurance that "the fundamental strength of the Nation's economic life is unimpaired," that recovery is "just around the corner," and that in any case the temporary downturn was being stemmed by modest public works expenditures. Official refusal to recognize the disaster early in the depression also took form in White House denials that there was very much unemployment at all. If the 1930 census of unemployment did not support such contentions, Hoover argued that it was because the enumerators "had to list the shiftless citizen, who had no intention of living by work, as unemployed" (cited in Edelman, 184).² If there was not very much unemployment, it followed that there was not very much need for unusual measures to aid the unemployed. Hoover limited himself mainly to offering rhetorical encouragement of local charity efforts.

² When Congress required the Bureau of the Census to count unemployment in the census of 1930, the bureau reported some 3 million out of work or laid off, a figure that was treated as absurdly low by experts. Hoover found the need to further reduce the figure by explaining away 500,000 to 1 million as people who had no intention of seeking jobs, and another 500,000 to 1 million as people who were simply between jobs (Bernstein, 1970, 268).

In October 1930 he established an Emergency Committee for Employment, but ignored the recommendation of Colonel Arthur Woods, head of the committee, that the White House seek substantial appropriations from Congress for public works. A second committee, appointed in August 1931, was called the Organization on Employment Relief. But while its name revealed some dim acknowledgment of the problem, its activities, consisting of "coordinating" local efforts and exhorting American citizens to contribute to local charities, did not.

Nor, at first, were local officials much better attuned to the scale of the problem. City leaders in Buffalo, Cincinnati, Kansas City, Milwaukee, and Louisville initiated "make a job" or "man a block" campaigns, assigning the jobless to do snow removal or street cleaning while at the same time allowing them to canvass households for small donations. Philadelphia's mayor appointed a committee to organize the peddling of fruit (Colcord, 166), clubs and restaurants in some places began to participate in schemes for saving food leftovers for the unemployed, and some communities set aside plots of land so that the jobless could grow vegetables to ease their plight. The problem was defined as minor, and temporary, and so were the gestures made to deal with it. Until 1932 even the newspapers carried little news of the depression. Middletown newspapers made their first mention in April 1930 under the caption "Factories are Recovering from Bad Slump" (Lynd and Lynd, 17).

As the depression worsened in 1930 there were stirrings in Congress for federal action to alleviate unemployment by reviving and expanding the United States Employment Service and by expanding federal public works projects. The measures proposed were modest and the Congress elected in the fall of 1930 passed both bills. Hoover, ever staunch, vetoed the first and emasculated the second by appointing administrators hostile to federal public works. Nothing had been done to deal with the disaster except, perhaps, to begin to acknowledge it.

THE IMPACT ON DAILY LIFE

The habit of work, and the wages of work, underpin a way of life. As unemployment continued to grow, and the wages of those still employed shriveled, that way of life crumbled. Despite denials by

the public figures of the nation, the evidence was there in the daily lives of the people. One dramatic sign was the spread of malnutrition and disease. Surveys of school children showed that one quarter suffered from malnutrition, new patients in tuberculosis clinics almost doubled, and a study by the U. S. Public Health Service revealed that the families of unemployed workers suffered 66 percent more illness than the families of employed workers. In 1931 New York City hospitals reported about one hundred cases of actual starvation (Bernstein, 1970, 331). Another sign was the weakening of family life as ties wore thin under the strains and humiliations of poverty. Desertions became common and divorce rates rose, while marriage rates and the birthrate dropped.³ And as poverty deepened and morale weakened, the crime rate rose, as did drunkenness and sexual promiscuity, and the suicide rate (Bernstein, 1970, 332).

Without work, and with family life weakened, men and women, especially the young, took to the road. At first the movement was back to the farms. But soon farm income fell precipitously as well, and then there was no place to go except to move on, shunted from town to town. Just how many transients there were is not known, but the Southern Pacific Railroad reported that it had ejected 683,457 people from its trains in 1932 (Bernstein, 1970, 325). Everywhere shanty towns built of packing cases and junk sprang up. In Oklahoma City the vagrants lived in the river bottom; in Oakland, they lived in sewer pipes that a manufacturer could not sell; in New York they built shacks in the bed of an abandoned reservoir in Central Park and called it "Hoover Valley."

The Rise of Protest

Most of the people who were thrown out of work suffered quietly, especially at the start of the depression, when official denials helped to confuse the unemployed and to make them ashamed of their plight. Men and women haunted the employment offices, walked the streets, lined up for every job opening, and doubted themselves for

³ See Bernstein, 1970, 327-328; Lynd and Lynd, 147, 544; Bakke, 1940, 17, 115. Several depression studies provide extensive evidence of the destructive impact of unemployment on family relations. See Cooley; Komarovskiy; and Stouffer and Lazarsfeld.

not finding work. Families exhausted their savings, borrowed from relatives, sold their belongings, blaming themselves and each other for losing the struggle to remain self-reliant. But as the depression worsened, as the work forces of entire factories were laid off, as whole neighborhoods in industrial towns were devastated, and as at least some political leaders began to acknowledge that a disaster had occurred, attitudes toward what had happened and why, and who was to blame, began to change among some of the unemployed. They began to define their personal hardship not just as their own individual misfortune but as misfortune they shared with many of their own kind. And if so many people were in the same trouble, then maybe it wasn't they who were to blame, but "the system."⁴

MOB LOOTING, MARCHES, AND DEMONSTRATIONS

One of the earliest expressions of unrest among the unemployed was the rise of mob looting. As had happened so often before in history during periods of economic crisis, people banded together to demand food. By and large, the press refrained from reporting these events for fear of creating a contagion effect. In New York bands of thirty or forty men regularly descended upon markets, but the chain stores refused to call the police, in order to keep the events out of the papers. In March 1,100 men waiting on a Salvation Army bread line in New York City mobbed two trucks delivering baked goods to a nearby hotel. In Henryetta, Oklahoma, 300 jobless marched on storekeepers to demand food, insisting they were not begging and threatening to use force if necessary (Bernstein, 1970, 422; Brecher, 144). Indeed, Bernstein concludes that in the early years of the depression "organized looting of food was a nation-wide phenomenon" (1970, 421-423).

⁴ Bakke provides vivid accounts of the demoralization and shame experienced by both unemployed American and English workers during this period. It was the sense of being *different*, if one was unemployed, that was so shameful: "And if you can't find any work to do, you have the feeling you're not human. You're out of place. You're so different from all the rest of the people around that you think something is wrong with you" (1934, 63). But clearly once people realized that by being out of work they were just the same as people around them, demoralization could more easily turn to indignation.

More consciously political demonstrations began as well. By early 1930, unemployed men and women in New York, Detroit, Cleveland, Philadelphia, Los Angeles, Chicago, Seattle, Boston, and Milwaukee were marching under such Communist banners as "Work or Wages" and "Fight—Don't Starve" (Karsh and Garman, 87; Leab, 300). Len de Caux, a labor journalist, was living in Cleveland at the time and described what was happening there:

Marching columns of unemployed became a familiar sight. Public Square saw demonstrations running into tens of thousands. . . . The street-scene is etched in memory. It was in the heart of working-class Cleveland, during a communist-led demonstration. Police had attacked an earlier demonstration. In the street battle, several unemployed had been injured, and one had since died. In the same neighborhood, the Unemployed Councils had called a mass protest, a solemn occasion that brought out thousands. The authorities, under criticism and on the defensive, withdrew every cop from the area, many blocks wide . . . (163–164).

The crowds did not always stay in their own neighborhoods, and the authorities were not always judicious. On February 11, 1930, for example, some 2,000 unemployed workers stormed the Cleveland City Hall, dispersing only when the police threatened to turn fire hoses on them. A few days later the unemployed demonstrated at City Hall in Philadelphia, and had to be driven off by the police. A week later mounted police with nightsticks dispersed a crowd of 1,200 jobless men and women in Chicago. On February 26 a crowd of 3,000 was broken up by tear gas before the Los Angeles City Hall (Bernstein, 1970, 426–427).

In March the demonstrations became a national event. The Communists declared March 6, 1930, International Unemployment Day, and rallies and marches took place in most major cities. Many of the demonstrations were orderly, as in San Francisco where the chief of police joined the 2,000 marchers and the mayor addressed them, or in Chicago where some 4,000 people marched down Halsted and Lake Streets, and then dispatched a committee to petition the mayor (Lasswell and Blumenstock, 196). But in other places, including Washington, D.C., and Seattle, local officials grew alarmed and ordered the police to disperse the crowds with tear gas. In Detroit, Cleveland, Milwaukee, and Boston, the crowds resisted, and fierce battles broke out between the demonstrators and the police (Keeran,

72–73; Leab, 306–307).⁵ The worst clash occurred in New York City,⁶ an event which was reported by the *New York Times*:

The unemployment demonstration staged by the Communist Party in Union Square broke up in the worst riot New York has seen in recent years when 35,000 people attending the demonstration were transformed in a few moments from an orderly, and at times a bored, crowd into a fighting mob. The outbreak came after communist leaders, defying warnings and orders of the police, exhorted their followers to march on City Hall and demand a hearing from Mayor Walker. Hundreds of policemen and detectives, swinging night sticks, blackjacks and bare fists, rushed into the crowd, hitting out at all with whom they came into contact, chasing many across the street and into adjacent thoroughfares and rushing hundreds off their feet. . . . From all parts of the scene of battle came the screams of women and cries of men, with bloody heads and faces. A score of men were sprawled over the square with policemen pummeling them. The pounding continued as the men, and some women, sought refuge in flight.

The demonstration was sufficiently threatening to prod the mayor to agree to form a committee to collect funds to be distributed to the unemployed.⁷ In October 1930 the unemployed gathered again in a mass rally at City Hall plaza to demand that the Board of Estimate appropriate twenty-five dollars a week for each unemployed person. The police again attacked the demonstrators, and two of the organizers were injured, but the Board of Estimate appropriated one million dollars for relief (Naison, 72–73).

⁵ "In Detroit, despite police warnings to avoid the area, between 50,000 and 100,000 people gathered in the streets and on the sidewalks of the downtown district. Police Commissioner Harold Emmons mobilized the entire Detroit police force of 3,600. . . . For two hours the fighting raged, until in desperation the police ordered city buses and street cars to drive through the protesters in order to clear the streets. . . . A riot comparable to Detroit's disturbance took place in Cleveland after the mayor informed 10,000 to 25,000 demonstrators that he was powerless to adjust their grievances. A three hour riot in Milwaukee led to forty-seven arrests and four injuries" (Keeran, 72–73).

⁶ The *Daily Worker* reported 37 arrested and 130 injured in New York; 45 arrested and 25 injured in Detroit; 60 arrested and 20 injured in Los Angeles; 12 arrested and 16 injured in Seattle; 11 arrested and 6 injured in Washington (Rosenzweig, 1976a).

⁷ The Communist organizers of the demonstration, however, were charged with "unlawful assembly" and "creating a public nuisance," and served six months on Blackwell's Island (Leab, 310). The demonstrations on March 6 also sparked enough concern in the Congress to justify the creation of what was to become the House Un-American Activities Committee (Bernstein, 1970, 427–428).

The demonstrations were branded as riots by the press; it was the Communist and Socialist organizers who misnamed them unemployment demonstrations, said the *New York Times* (October 17, 1930, 1). But the unemployed came, whatever the labels of the leaders, and despite the castigation of the press. Len de Caux suggests why:

The communists brought misery out of hiding in the workers' neighborhoods. They paraded it with angry demands. . . . In hundreds of jobless meetings, I heard no objections to the points the communists made, and much applause for them. Sometimes, I'd hear a communist speaker say something so bitter and extreme, I'd feel embarrassed. Then I'd look around at the unemployed audience—shabby clothes, expressions worried and sour. Faces would start to glow, heads to nod, hands to clap (162–163).

For some people at least, distress was turning to indignation, an indignation strong enough to withstand official scorn or state force.

Communist agitators were helping in that transformation, but the unemployed were ready to respond to any leader who articulated their grievances. When Father James R. Cox, a Pittsburgh priest known as the Mayor of Shantytown, called a rally at Pitt Stadium to protest unemployment and demand public works and relief measures, some 60,000 people turned out, and 12,000 followed him on to Washington where he presented their demands to Hoover (Bernstein, 1970, 432).⁸ And later, in the spring of 1932, thousands of unemployed veterans and their families descended on Washington, D.C. Their songs expressed their disaffection:

Mellon pulled the whistle
Hoover rang the bell
Wall Street gave the signal
And the country went to Hell

The veterans had in fact not come in a revolutionary or even in a very belligerent spirit. They had come only to plead with the Congress for early payment of pensions due them by law in 1945. The Congress turned them down, Hoover refused to meet with their

⁸ It should be noted, because much is often made of it, that two Communist-led hunger marches on Washington, D.C., in 1931 and 1932 failed to attract many followers. However, Herbert Benjamin, who organized the marches, argued in a talk given in April 1976 in New York City that the marches were not intended to be large, but recruited only delegates from local groups, and that the marches themselves were executed with "careful military planning." In any case, there is no denying the successful mobilizations by the Communists in the big cities.

leaders, and when they still did not leave, he sent the Army to rout them. "What a pitiable spectacle," said the *Washington News*, "is that of the great American Government, mightiest in the world, chasing men, women and children with Army tanks. . . . If the Army must be called out to make war on unarmed citizens, this is no longer America" (Schlesinger, 1957, 265).

RENT RIOTS

The rising anger among the unemployed took other forms than street marches and riots. Jobless men and women began to defy the local authorities—and the rules upheld by these authorities—associated with specific hardships. One such kind of defiance was mass resistance to evictions. As unemployment rose, large numbers of families in many places could not pay their rents, and the number of evictions increased daily.⁹ In 1930 and 1931 small bands of people, often led by Communists, began to use strong-arm tactics to prevent marshals from putting furniture on the street. Sometimes they were successful. Even when they were not, physical resistance was the only resort for people forced from their homes. The rent riots began on the Lower East Side and in Harlem,¹⁰ but quickly spread to other parts of the city. The *New York Times* described an eviction of three families in the Bronx on February 2, 1932:

Probably because of the cold, the crowd numbered only 1,000 although in unruliness it equalled the throng of 4,000 that stormed the police in the first disorder of a similar nature on January 22. On Thursday a dozen more families are to be evicted unless they pay back rents.

Inspector Joseph Leonary deployed a force of fifty detectives and mounted and foot patrolmen through the street as Marshal

⁹ In New York City some 186,000 families were served dispossession notices during eight months ending in June 1932 (Boyer and Morais, 261). Bernstein reports a Philadelphia study published in 1933 that found 63 percent of the white families and 66 percent of the black were in rent arrears (1966, 289). A study conducted at about the same time in the San Francisco area also found widespread rent defaults (Huntington). In five industrial cities in Ohio eviction orders were issued against nearly 100,000 families between January 1930 and June 1932 (Boyer and Morais, 261).

¹⁰ The *Daily Worker* carried numerous accounts of apparently successful eviction resistance actions, beginning in the fall of 1930.

Novick led ten furniture movers into the building. . . . Women shrieked from the windows, the different sections of the crowd hissed and booed and shouted invectives. Fighting began simultaneously in the house and the street. The marshal's men were rushed on the stairs and got to work after the policemen had driven the tenants back into their apartments.

Boyer and Morais claim that such tactics succeeded in restoring 77,000 evicted families to their homes in New York City (261).

Chicago was also the scene of frequent "rent riots," especially in the black neighborhoods where unemployment reached catastrophic proportions and evictions were frequent. In the brief period from August 11 to October 31, 1931 there were 2,185 cases before Renter's Court, 38 percent of which involved blacks (Gosnell, 1967, 321-329). Small groups known as "black bugs" marched through the streets to mobilize large crowds to reinstall evicted families, sometimes even when the family was not present.¹¹ Police repression in Chicago was so thorough¹² that these actions of necessity were virtually spontaneous:

During the last part of 1930 the Unemployed Councils had established headquarters in many of the poorer sections of the city. The meeting-halls served as clubhouses where jobless men tired of tramping the streets in search of work came to rest and talk rather than face the trying tensions of the home. These men, establishing mutual relations of identification on the basis of their common misfortune, began to act together to prevent evictions. The demonstrations were entirely unplanned and could not be throttled at the source because the men themselves never knew in advance when or where they would next demonstrate. Someone might come into the hall and tell of a person blocks away who was at that moment being evicted. Their indignation aroused, the men would march in a group down the street, adding the sympathetic and the curious to their number as they marched, until by the time they reached the scene of the eviction, the crowd would have grown in size and temper. The furniture of the unfortunate family would be replaced and the crowd, delighted with its success, would disperse gradually, in small groups (Lasswell and Blumenstock, 170-171).

¹¹ For descriptions of the Chicago rent riots see Abbott, Chapter 14; Bernstein, 1970, 428; Hofstadter and Wallace, 172-175; Lasswell and Blumenstock, 196-201.

¹² With one exception—a funeral procession—every outdoor demonstration planned by the Communists in 1930 in Chicago was cut short by the police (Lasswell and Blumenstock, 168-169).

Horace Cayton describes a Chicago rent riot in which he participated. One day in 1931 Cayton was sitting in a restaurant on the South Side and saw through the window a long file of black people, marching in deadly earnest. He joined them and later described what happened:

We were met at the street by two squad cars of police who asked us where we were going. The black crowd swarmed around the officers. . . . No one moved. Everyone simply stood and stared at them. One officer lost his head and drew his gun, levelling it at the crowd. . . . No threats, no murmurs, no disorder; the crowd just looked at him. There the officer stood. Just then a siren was heard—the whisper went around—the riot squad was coming! . . . four cars full of blue-coated officers and a patrol wagon. They jumped out before the cars came to a stop and charged down upon the crowd. Night sticks and "billies" played a tattoo on black heads. "Hold your places!" shouted the woman. "Act like men!" answered the crowd. They stood like dumb beasts—no one ran, no one fought or offered resistance, just stood, an immovable black mass.

These tactics frequently culminated in beatings, arrests, and even killings,¹³ but they also forced relief officials to give out money for rent payments (Seymour, December 1937, 14). A rent riot in August 1931 left three people dead and three policemen injured: "News of the riot screamed in the headlines of the evening press. The realization of the extent of unrest in the Negro district threw Chicago into panic" (Lasswell and Blumenstock, 197). Mayor Anton Cermak responded by promptly ordering a moratorium on evictions, and some of the rioters got work relief.¹⁴

Karsh and Garman report that in many places the Communists organized gas squads to turn the gas back on in people's houses and electric squads to string wires around the meter after it was shut off by the local utility (88). In Detroit, it took one hundred policemen to evict a resisting family, and later two Detroit families who protected their premises by shooting the landlord were acquitted by sympathetic juries (Bernstein, 1970, 428).

¹³ The American Civil Liberties Union reported fourteen dead as a result of protests by the jobless (cited in Rosenzweig, 1976a).

¹⁴ As one official tells the story, the riot ". . . flared up the whole community. I spent the next forty-eight hours in the streets down there, trying to quiet things down. I went to see Ryerson and the Committee of leading businessmen. . . . I said the only way to stop this business is to put these evicted men back to work at once. This was on a Saturday. They said, 'We don't have the money.' I said, 'You better get some.' By Monday morning, they had the money, and we put three hundred of those men to work in the parks that day" (Terkel, 396).

RELIEF INSURGENCY

There is surely reason to think that it is easier for people to defend their homes against the authorities than to demand relief, simply because Americans are more likely to believe they have a right to their homes than to believe they have a right to handouts, no matter how overwhelming the economic disaster that confronts them. Most of the unemployed resisted the final degradation of asking for relief for as long as they could. A study of those who applied for aid in 1932 in San Francisco and Alameda counties, for example, reported:

Nearly two-thirds did not apply for relief until at least a year had elapsed after the chief breadwinner had lost his regular employment, and nearly one-third of these families had managed to get along for two years or longer. . . . By the time they applied for relief, many of these families were in debt to the grocer and the landlord; they had used their pitifully small savings; they had borrowed sums which though small, could probably never be repaid. Finally, they were defeated in their valiant struggle to maintain their independence . . . (Huntington, 66, 74).¹⁵

For many, sheer desperation finally forced violation of the prohibition against the dole. For others, it was more than desperation; it was anger. Some people came to believe that if there were no jobs—if the factories and offices and workshops turned them away—then they had a right to the income they needed to survive anyway. Fired by this new indignation, crowds of jobless men and women descended on relief offices, cornered and harassed administrators, and even took over the offices until their demands were met—until money or goods were distributed to them.¹⁶ Lasswell and Blumenstock describe these early relief actions in Chicago:

Hearing that some family had been refused relief or that some particularly needy case was being denied immediate attention,

¹⁵ Bakke in his survey of New Haven also reported that three-quarters of the unemployed had not applied for relief until after two or more years of unemployment (1940, 363).

¹⁶ Just how many people participated in unemployed actions remains a matter of speculation. Rosenzweig, who has done extensive work on the movement, says that "easily two million workers joined in some form of unemployed activity at some point in the thirties" but he does not give the evidence for this estimate (1974, 43).

groups would gather and march on the relief stations, demanding action. Social workers in many of the offices, having intimate knowledge of the misery behind such demands, hesitated to call the police. . . . Hence at first the relief offices met the demands of the demonstrators, giving Mrs. Jones the food basket which she should have had a week earlier. With success, demonstrations of this sort increased in number and size. The relief stations found themselves unable to deal with this type of mass pressure. For example, on the afternoon of August 31, 1931, a group of 400 persons began to march on the United Charities offices located at 4500 Prairie Avenue. By the time they reached the relief station, the number had grown to fifteen or sixteen hundred. A speaker addressed them in front of the station, and the tension grew so high that when Joel Hunter, Chief Administrator of the Charities, asked for the selection of a committee to present the grievances of the crowd, there was a move to storm the station. A police squad arrived, and a general riot ensued (171).

A study published by the American Public Welfare Association later in 1937 described similar demonstrations across the nation:

Relief offices were approached by large committees, numbering ten, fifteen, twenty, and sometimes more persons, which demanded immediate audience, without previous appointment and regardless of staff members' schedules. . . . Frequently these large committees were buttressed by neighborhood crowds which gathered outside the relief office and waited while committees within presented "demands" (Seymour, December 1937, 15).

Relief officials, who were accustomed to discretionary giving to a meek clientele and were not much governed by any fixed set of regulations, usually acquiesced in the face of aggressive protests. With each abrasive encounter, officials in local and private charities gradually forfeited the discretion to give or withhold aid. Mark Naison reports some of the incidents: "I stood in the rain for three days and the Home Relief Bureau paid no attention to me," a woman declared at a neighborhood meeting in New York City. "Then I found out about the Unemployed Council. . . . We went in there as a body and they came across right quick." "The woman at the desk said I was rejected," another woman added. "I was crying when Comrade Minns told me to come to the meeting of the Unemployed Council. One week later I got my rent check" (152).¹⁷

¹⁷ Even in dealing with cases of individual hardship, the contrast between the approach of the Unemployed Councils and that of private charity agencies was striking. As late as

As the unemployed became more disruptive, even cherished procedures of investigation and surveillance of recipients were relinquished. A news sheet put out by an unemployed group in Port Angeles, Washington, exemplified the new spirit:

"Home Visitors" or "snoopers" are only relief workers on a cash basis. They are picked for their ability as snoopers and stool pigeons only. They ask you so damn many questions that there is nothing personal left to you anyway (cited in Seymour, December 1937, 15).

As indignation mounted, in other words, some people not only defied the prohibition against going on the dole, but some even began to defy the apparatus of ritualized humiliation that had made that prohibition so effective. And as they did, the movement gathered momentum.

Naison describes the unemployed movement in Harlem (where unemployment affected 80 percent of heads of household) during this period:

To force the relief system to function more effectively, the unemployed movement settled on a strategy of stimulating disorder. Harlem Council activists organized large groups of jobless workers, took them to the local relief station, and demanded that they receive aid. If the relief bureau officials refused to see them or claimed they were out of aid, the demonstrators camped in the bureau offices and remained there until they received aid or were removed by the police. If police tried to remove the demonstrators or prevent them from entering the bureaus, Council tactics became more violent. At one demonstration in late June of 1932, the *Amsterdam News* reported a group from the Harlem Council broke down the bureau's doors and "overturned desks and chairs" before the police could arrest them. Other demonstrations ended in pitched battles between police and Council activists that resulted in bloodied heads and numerous arrests (137).

In Chicago, "spontaneous outbreaks grew in size and frequency, and through them the accumulated tensions and effects resulting from economic deprivation and from newspaper neglect or criticism and police repression became 'collectivised.'" The number of demon-

December 1932, an official of the Urban League explained how the league dealt with relief problems as follows: "We find that we are able to settle about 75 percent of the complaints which come to us without even calling the district office. This is done by patiently explaining to the complainant the situation as we see it after listening to him" (quoted in Prickett, 234).

strations increased, from 408 in 1931 to 566 in 1932 (Lasswell and Blumenstock, 172-173). The demonstrations were also becoming more massive and well-organized. On January 11, 1932, simultaneous demonstrations were held at all the relief stations of Chicago.¹⁸ Later that year, some 5,000 men who had been forced to take refuge in municipal lodging houses marched on relief headquarters to demand three meals a day, free medical attention, tobacco twice a week, the right to hold Council meetings in the lodging houses, and the assurance of no discrimination against Unemployed Council members. Their demands were granted. Later in 1932, when relief funds were cut 50 percent by a financially strangled city administration, some 25,000 of the unemployed marched again, this time through the Chicago Loop in a cold, driving rain. The authorities quickly managed to borrow funds from the Reconstruction Finance Corporation, and the cut was rescinded.

In Detroit hundreds of people organized by the Unemployed Councils gathered at City Hall in August 1931 to demand better food and better treatment from the police at the municipal lodging houses. Just a few months later, the Young Communist League led a march of several thousand on one of the Briggs auto plants to demand jobs and unemployment insurance (Keeran, 77). Then in March 1932, after the severe winter, unemployed workers in Detroit who had been assembled by Communist organizers to march on the Ford River Rouge plant were fired on by Dearborn police. Four of the marchers were killed, many more were wounded. The press was divided: the *Detroit Mirror* savagely attacked the "riotous" marchers, but the *Detroit Times* accused the police of having "changed an orderly demonstration into a riot with death and bloodshed as its toll" (Keeran, 82-83; Prickett, 119). Two days later, some sixty thousand Detroit workers marched behind the coffins to the tune of the Internationale.

In Atlanta in June 1932 city and county authorities decided to drop 23,000 families from the relief rolls, claiming there were no funds. To maintain a degree of order in the face of this decision, local authorities proceeded to arrest hundreds of farm workers (who had come to Atlanta in search of work) on charges of vagrancy, in order to send them back to the countryside. But when a thousand of

¹⁸ Lasswell and Blumenstock provide a blow-by-blow account of this and other demonstrations, many of which resulted in arrests, injuries, and killings (204-210).

the unemployed rallied at the courthouse, the order to cut the families was rescinded, and additional money was appropriated for relief (Herndon, 188–192).¹⁹ In St. Louis 3,000 of the jobless marched and forced the passage at City Hall of two relief bills (Boyer and Morais, 263). Each such protest that succeeded in getting people money added morale and momentum to the movement, and further undermined the doctrine that being “on the county” was a confession of personal failure, a badge of shame.

Local Fiscal Breakdown

The number of jobless continued to rise. In the big industrial cities, where unemployment was especially severe, the unemployed sometimes comprised voting majorities. Faced with mounting protests, local officials could not remain indifferent. Clearly the private agencies which had in many places handled whatever relief was given could not meet the surging demand, and various *ad hoc* arrangements were quickly invented, often with the cooperation of local businessmen and philanthropists. Committees were set up, local citizens were exhorted to contribute to charity drives, and in some places city employees found their wages reduced for contributions to the relief fund. By these methods, expenditures for relief rose from \$71 million in 1929 to \$171 million in 1931 (Chandler, 192).

But this amount of relief in cities like New York, Chicago, Detroit, and Philadelphia barely scratched the surface of the need. The city manager of Cincinnati reported on the relief methods used there at the end of 1931, when about one-quarter of the city's workers were unemployed, and another quarter worked only part-time:

Relief is given to a family one week and then they are pushed off for a week in the hope that somehow or other the breadwinner may find some kind of work. . . . We are paying no rent at all. That, of course, is a very difficult problem because we are continually having evictions, and social workers . . . are hard put to find places

¹⁹ Subsequently Angelo Herndon, one of the Communist organizers of the Atlanta demonstration, was indicted and convicted for inciting insurrection under a century-old Georgia statute. His sentence to a twenty-year term by the Georgia courts was finally overturned by the Supreme Court in 1937.

for people whose furniture has been put out on the streets (quoted in Chandler, 43).

In New York City, where the charter of 1898 prohibited “outdoor” relief as distinct from relief in workhouses or poor houses, disruptions by the unemployed had led to the creation of an arrangement whereby the police precincts distributed direct relief to the most destitute from funds contributed by city employees. In 1931, on Governor Roosevelt's initiative, New York State established an emergency program which supplemented local relief funds with an initial outlay of \$20 million. Even so, by 1932, the lucky among the unemployed in New York City were receiving an average grant of \$2.39 per week, and only one-quarter were getting that (Schlesinger, 1957, 253). Testimony before the Senate Committee on Manufactures in the summer of 1932 reported that 20,000 children in New York had been placed in institutions because parents could not provide for them.

In Chicago in October 1931 40 percent of the work force was unemployed, but help was being given only to the completely destitute. A local official reported:

In the city of Chicago there are 1,000 men eating in the breadlines food that costs 4½ cents a day, and these men are from the so-called Gold Coast of Chicago. These resources are about to end, and they are confronted with one meal a day within, say 30 days after the city funds will become exhausted (quoted in Chandler, 45).

Since Chicago was a railway hub, officials also had to deal with large numbers of transients, some of whom lived in a shanty town at the foot of Randolph Street, scavenging garbage for a living. Others were crowded in asylums and poor houses. Bernstein reports that the Oak Forest poor house, having filled its corridors, turned away 19,000 people in 1931 (1970, 297–298). By June 1932, Mayor Cermak told a House committee that if the federal government didn't send \$150 million for relief immediately, they should be prepared to send troops later. And Chicago's leading industrialists and bankers joined in an appeal to Hoover for federal relief funds (Bernstein, 1970, 467).

In Philadelphia, public relief had been abolished in 1879,²⁰ and

²⁰ The Pennsylvania constitution explicitly forbade appropriations for “charitable purposes” but eventually the pressure was so great that the legislature made an appropriation anyway under the “general welfare” clause (Bernstein, 1970, 459).

so it fell to a committee of leading philanthropists and businessmen to deal with the problem. They inaugurated a diversified program of work relief, shelters, and loans, but their efforts were dwarfed by the need. Some 250,000 were out of work in Philadelphia. "We have unemployment in every third house," the executive director of the Philadelphia Children's Bureau told the Senate Subcommittee on Manufactures. "It is almost like the visitation of death to the households of the Egyptians at the time of the escape of the Jews from Egypt" (Bernstein, 1970, 299-300).

In Detroit, Frank Murphy had won the mayoralty in 1930 with a campaign that pledged aid to the unemployed, and a public relief program was established with the result that the costs of relief rose from \$116,000 in February 1929 to \$1,582,000 two years later. But even so, Detroit provided only \$3.60 for two adults per week, and a study in 1931 of those dropped from the rolls showed that average total income per person was \$1.56 a week. Not surprisingly, Mayor Murphy reversed his belief in local responsibility, and told the Senate Manufactures Subcommittee that there ought to be federal help.

These cities were actually the more liberal ones. In most places, people got only a little food: Baltimore, for example, provided an average weekly relief allotment of eighty cents in commodities (Greenstein). In Atlanta, white recipients received sixty cents a week, while blacks got less, when they got anything at all (Herndon, 188). *Fortune* summed up local relief efforts in the fall of 1931:

The theory was that private charitable organizations and semi-public welfare groups . . . were capable of caring for the casualties of a world-wide economic disaster. And the theory in application meant that social agencies manned for the service of a few hundred families, and city shelters set up to house and feed a handful of homeless men, were compelled by the brutal necessities of hunger to care for hundreds of thousands of families and whole armies of the displaced and jobless. . . . The result was the picture now presented in city after city . . . heterogeneous groups of official and unofficial relief agencies struggling under the earnest and untrained leadership of the local men of affairs against an inertia of misery and suffering and want they are powerless to overcome (cited in Bernstein, 1970, 301).

In November 1932 a distinguished group of California citizens serving on the State Unemployment Commission published a report of its findings:

Unemployment and loss of income have ravaged numerous homes. It has broken the spirits of their members, undermined their health, robbed them of self-respect, destroyed their efficiency and employability. . . . Many households have been dissolved; little children parcelled out to friends, relatives or charitable homes; husbands and wives, parents and children separated, temporarily or permanently. Homes in which life savings were invested and hopes bound up have been lost never to be recovered. Men, young and old, have taken to the road . . . the army of homeless grows alarmingly. . . . Precarious ways of existing, questionable methods of "getting by" rapidly develop (cited in Bernstein, 1970, 321).

And in 1932 the New York *Evening Graphic* ran a series on starvation cases that year. The depression was no longer being denied.

However pathetic local relief programs were compared to the scale of the need, the cost of even that puny effort had brought many cities close to bankruptcy, and other municipal services were taking the brunt of the fiscal squeeze. A Detroit official reported that essential public services had been reduced "beyond the minimum point absolutely essential to the health and safety of the city," and this despite the fact that municipal salaries had been sharply cut. Chicago (whose finances had been in a shambles even before the depression) owed its school teachers \$20 million dollars in back pay (Hopkins, 92-93). Boston had not paid its police for months (Bird, 108).

With local disturbances increasing, and local finances on the verge of collapse, other urban states followed New York's example. New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Ohio, and Wisconsin provided emergency outlays of relief funds, and other states began to underwrite municipal borrowing for relief. As a result of state and local efforts, total expenditures for relief rose by another \$71 million between 1931 and 1932, to reach a total of \$317 million. This amount of relief provided less than \$27 that year for each of the 12 million unemployed. Even so, the effort was taking a heavy toll from local governments; to meet relief debts in the face of sharply declining tax revenues, spending on other programs fell by \$966 million between 1931 and 1932. Increasingly, local governments turned to borrowing, but they found fewer purchasers for their bonds, partly because many municipalities were no longer credit-worthy. On April 15 *Survey* magazine published reports from thirty-seven large cities and concluded that "the industrial cities of the Middle West and the large cities of Pennsylvania are in desperate plight. . . . Complete breakdown is imminent."

By early 1933 nearly one thousand local governments had defaulted on their debts (Chandler, 48–50).

In February 1932, as part of a campaign for his bill to provide federal loans for unemployment relief, Senator La Follette sent out a questionnaire to mayors all over the country asking about current numbers of people on relief, anticipated increases, the amounts of relief aid being given, whether the city was in a position to float bond issues to meet relief needs, and whether the mayors favored federal appropriations to “aid in providing more adequate relief for the needy or in lessening the burden on local taxpayers.” In their replies, the mayors described widespread distress and clamored for federal aid. Not only were they administering relief on a starvation basis, but virtually every municipality claimed to be close to bankruptcy and faced the prospect of having to cut off relief altogether.²¹

Unable to resist the political pressures of the unemployed, local elites had brought their cities to the brink of fiscal collapse. But even so, city budgets could not handle the demand for relief, and so the pressure was not abated, but worsened as unemployment rose. Driven by the protests of the masses of unemployed and the threat of financial ruin, mayors of the biggest cities of the United States, joined by business and banking leaders, had become lobbyists for the poor.

Electoral Instability and Federal Response

By November 1932 the political unrest that had spurred local leaders to try to respond to the unemployed spread upward to produce a national political disturbance—the electoral upheaval of 1932. In the avalanche of new legislation that followed, concessions were made to each group in a volatile constituency. What the unemployed got was federal relief.

²¹ Senator La Follette had these replies read into the *Congressional Record*, 1932, 3099–3260. La Follette was head of the Senate Subcommittee on Manufactures that held hearings on proposals for federal relief early in 1932. The testimony at these hearings provided overwhelming evidence of the devastating effects of unemployment. Nevertheless, the bill that emerged from the committee was defeated by a coalition of Republicans and conservative Democrats. Later that year, as the pressure mounted, Congress finally authorized federal loans to the states for relief through the Reconstruction Finance Corporation. Hoover reluctantly supported the measure as not interfering with private and local responsibilities for relief. In a way, he was right; the loans that resulted were too minuscule to be called interference.

The Republican Party had been in power since the toppling of the Wilson Administration in the election of 1920, when Harding carried every major nonsouthern city. With eastern businessmen at the helm, the Republicans ruled securely thereafter, receiving substantial majorities in each election until 1930, their strength concentrated particularly in the urban North. Hoover had won the presidency with a majority of 6.5 million votes.

As for the Democratic Party, after the debacle of 1924 during which the agrarian wing had been defeated, it too had come firmly under the control of eastern conservatives, businessmen like Bernard Baruch and John J. Raskob, and machine politicians like Alfred E. Smith. But the depression created the shifting currents that would bring new leaders to the forefront of the Democratic Party, and would then force the massive realignment of voters that brought these leaders to national power. The realignment was first signaled in the election of 1928 when big city wage earners began to switch to the Democratic Party and the candidacy of Al Smith.²² The shift of urban working-class voters became more evident as the depression worsened; the Republicans suffered reversals in the congressional elections of 1930. But it was the presidential election of 1932 that produced one of the most sweeping political realignments in American history, and it was the election of 1936 that confirmed it.

The man who rose to power through these dislocations was, of course, Franklin Delano Roosevelt; he won the Democratic nomination from a divided and uncertain Democratic Party on the fourth ballot, and then went on to campaign by making promises to everyone who would listen.²³ What working people listened to were the promises to “build from the bottom up and not from the top down, that put their faith once more in the forgotten man at the bottom of the economic pyramid” (Roosevelt, 159–206, 625). Roosevelt won with a plurality of almost seven million votes, capturing the largest electoral majority since 1864, and sweeping in an overwhelmingly

²² In some cities—Boston, New York, Milwaukee, and San Francisco—the shift in 1928 was dramatic; the Democratic percentage of the vote doubled in these places (Bernstein, 1970, 78–79).

²³ Raymond Moley writes of the campaign as follows: “I was charged in 1932 with mobilizing personnel and ideas to promote the presidential ambitions of Governor Roosevelt. I welcomed all points of view, planners, trustbusters, and money wizards. I expanded the so-called Brain Trust very considerably and maintained contact with a great variety of people from Bernard Baruch to Huey Long. The task was to win an election in an electorate comprising many ideologies, and mostly no ideology. The issue was recovery, and the therapy used was a combination of many prescriptions” (559–560).

Democratic Congress. And much of Roosevelt's majority was concentrated in the big cities of the country, where unemployment and hardship were also concentrated. Economic catastrophe had resulted in a mass rejection of the party in power.

In the interim between the election and Roosevelt's inauguration, the index of industrial production sank to its lowest point ever, and the number of unemployed was increasing at the rate of about 200,000 a month (Lescohier and Brandeis, 163), to reach at least 12 million by March 1933. The clamor for federal relief was virtually irresistible. A Social Science Research Council Bulletin characterized the situation this way:

By the time the new federal administration came into power in 1933, the pressure for more money had become so nearly unanimous that it was politically desirable for congressmen and senators to favor large appropriations for relief; candidates were elected often on a platform which predicated adequate relief appropriations by Congress (White and White, 84).

In a message to Congress three weeks after the inauguration, Franklin Delano Roosevelt called for a Civilian Conservation Corps, a public works program, and a massive program of federal emergency relief. The Civilian Conservation Corps provided jobs at subsistence wages for a mere 250,000 men. The Public Works Administration was slow in getting started, and in any case it was designed not so much to provide jobs for the unemployed as to stimulate the economy, so that most of the jobs went to skilled workers. By contrast the Federal Emergency Relief Act, drawn up by Senators Edward P. Costigan, Robert F. Wagner, and Robert N. La Follette, Jr., allocated \$500 million for immediate grants to the states for relief of the unemployed, half of which was to be spent on a matching basis. The act was signed on May 12, Harry Hopkins was sworn in as administrator on May 22, and by the evening of that day, he made the first grants to the states. By early June, forty-five states had received federal grants for relief, and total expenditures on relief rose to \$794 million in 1933, to \$1,489 million in 1934, and to \$1,834 million in 1935 (Brown, 204). When the program was terminated in June 1936 the federal government had spent \$3 billion as its share of relief expenditures.²⁴

²⁴ On May 23, the day after he took office, Hopkins notified the states that the federal government would make grants-in-aid equal to one-third of the relief expenditure in

It had taken protest and the ensuing fiscal and electoral disturbances to produce federal relief legislation, and it took continued protest to get the legislation implemented. By 1934 many people had been without work a long time—an estimated 6 million for more than a year (Karsh and Garman, 86). And during 1933, 1934, and 1935, groups of the unemployed continued to agitate, and were at least partly responsible for the fact that many states and localities participated in federal emergency relief programs at all. In August 1933, when state appropriations were needed in Ohio, 7,000 jobless marched on the state capitol (Rosenzweig, 1975, 58). In Colorado, when the federal relief funds were discontinued in the winter of 1934 because the state had repeatedly failed to appropriate its share of costs, mobs of the unemployed rioted in relief centers, looted food stores, and stormed the state legislature, driving the frightened senators from the chamber. Two weeks later, the General Assembly sent a relief bill to the governor, and federal funding was resumed (Cross). An attempt in Chicago to cut food allowances by 10 percent in November 1934 led to a large demonstration by the unemployed, and the city council restored that cut. In the spring of 1935 the federal government withheld relief after Illinois failed to provide its share of funding. When relief offices closed down, the unemployed marched and demonstrated in Chicago and Springfield until the state legislature appropriated funds. Relief was cut in Kansas City, Kansas, later that year and 2,000 of the unemployed assembled in front of the courthouse where they remained and prayed and sang hymns until a new relief appropriation was voted (Gilpin).

These were only the publicized protests. A survey conducted in New York City revealed that almost all of the forty-two district relief administrators in New York City reported frequent dealings with unemployed groups, most of them led by Communists. These groups were disruptive—shouting, picketing, refusing to leave the relief offices—and the groups frequently won their demands. Five of the relief offices were observed continuously over a thirty-day period during which 196 demands by unemployed groups were recorded, of which 107 were granted (Brophy and Hallowitz, 63–65).

By the winter of 1934 20 million people were on the dole, and

the state during the first quarter of the year. But this ratio was disregarded as time went on, and the proportion of relief paid by the federal government increased until it was as much as three-quarters of the relief expenditure in some states (White and White, 82).

monthly grant levels had risen from an average of \$15.15 per family in May 1933 to an average of \$24.53 in May 1934, and to \$29.33 in May 1935. Harry Hopkins explained the new government posture toward the unemployed:

For a long time those who did not require relief entertained the illusion that those being aided were in need through some fault of their own. It is now pretty clear in the national mind that the unemployed are a cross-section of the workers, the finest people in the land (Kurzman, 85).

From Disruption to Organization

From the onset of the depression, the potential for unrest among the unemployed attracted organizers and activists from the left. Their approaches to work with the unemployed varied. But they all deplored the loose and chaotic character of the movement, and they all strove to build organization.

The Communists were first in the field—indeed, they had been in the field as early as 1921, trying to organize the unemployed into “Councils of Action,” but without much success. In 1929 they began a new campaign to form “Unemployed Councils.”²⁵ During the winter of 1929–1930, Communist organizers worked vigorously, on the breadlines, in the flop houses, among the men waiting at factory gates, and in the relief offices. By mid-1930 the unemployed had become the chief focus of party activity. The party’s theoretical journal, *The Communist*, asserted that those out of work were “the tactical key to the present state of the class struggle” (cited in Rosenzweig, 1976a).

During this early period, Communist activists concentrated on direct action rather than on organization, and the actions they led in the streets and in the relief offices were generally more militant and disruptive than those of other unemployed groups. Communists, many of whom were unemployed workers,²⁶ seized upon every griev-

²⁵ The Unemployed Councils were officially launched under that name at a National Conference of the Unemployed in Chicago on July 4, 1930 (Bernstein, 1970, 428). The Councils were renamed Unemployment Councils in 1934.

²⁶ A high proportion of party members were unemployed during the early depression years, and relatively few of them were in basic industry. For this reason, much of the party’s emphasis at this stage was on the work of street nuclei among the unemployed. That was to change later in the depression.

ance as an opportunity for inciting mass actions, and channeled their formidable self-discipline and energy into the extensive pamphleteering and agitation that helped bring the unemployed together, and helped raise the pitch of anger to defiance. Moreover, Communists themselves often took the lead in confrontations with police; comrades were exhorted to stand firm and defend other unemployed workers when the police attacked, as they often did (Seymour, August 1937, 9–11; Leab, 300–303; Lasswell and Blumenstock, 165–213).

At this stage, there were few membership meetings, little formal structure within each group, and very little effort to establish formal linkages among the different groups. The Councils sprang alive at mass meetings and demonstrations; in between, only a cadre group constituted the organization. “But because of the temper of the times,” says Leab, “this hard core managed to bring out ever-increasing numbers of people for the various protest demonstrations” (304).

Early in the depression most Socialists had been opposed to organizing the unemployed. Instead, the National Executive Committee of the Socialist Party had, in May 1929, urged the creation of Emergency Conferences on Unemployment that would lobby for the Socialist program of old age benefits, unemployment insurance, and the abolition of child labor. Little came of the Emergency Conferences, but groups of Socialists in some localities, many of them associated with the League for Industrial Democracy, began to organize committees or unions of the unemployed despite the absence of a national mandate. They used grievance procedures and mass pressure tactics not very different from the Communist unemployed groups.²⁷ The most successful of these was the Chicago Workers’ Committee on Unemployment which was credited with raising Cook County relief payments to one of the highest in the nation (Rosenzweig, 1974, 12). By February 1932, prodded by the success of the Communist Unemployed Councils, and by the local Socialist-led organizations that had already emerged, the National Executive Committee of the Socialist Party finally endorsed direct organizing of the unemployed (Rosenzweig, 1974, 14), with the result

²⁷ There is some evidence that the Socialist groups tended to attract a more middle-class constituency than the Communists, perhaps because of their emphasis on educational programs and their more conservative tactics, and perhaps because they lacked the Communists’ zeal in mobilizing the working class.

that Socialists in other places, most importantly in New York and Baltimore, began organizing on the model of the Chicago Workers' Committee. These groups later initiated the Workers' Alliance of America, the culmination of the organizational efforts among the unemployed.

Other radicals were also active, many of them affiliated with the Conference for Progressive Labor Action formed in May 1929 by Socialists and trade unionists who were opposed both to the conservative leadership of the AFL and to the dual union approach of the Communist Trade Union Unity League. The CPLA began as a propaganda and education organization but by 1931 it began to move to the left and A. J. Muste, who had run the Brookwood Labor College in the 1920s, emerged as the leading figure, with a program to build local organizations of the unemployed. The Muste groups, usually called Unemployed Leagues, flourished particularly in the rural areas and small towns of Ohio, West Virginia, Kentucky, North Carolina, and Pennsylvania, where the approach taken by the Muste radicals, at least at the beginning, was nondoctrinaire and oriented toward the immediate needs of the unemployed. The Seattle Unemployment League, a kind of model for many of these efforts (although it was not actually affiliated with the CPLA), was a particular success, at least briefly. It claimed 12,000 members in Seattle itself by the end of 1931 and a statewide membership of 80,000 by the end of 1932. At first the Seattle group emphasized barter, working for farmers in exchange for produce. But when the harvest season of 1931 was over, and self-help came to an end, the league turned to the city for help. The city council, uneasy about the growing numbers of league supporters, voted an appropriation of half a million dollars for relief, and turned the fund over to the league to administer. During the spring elections of 1932, when an estimated one-third of Seattle's voters were league members, the league supported a slate headed by John F. Dore, who campaigned with talk of taking huge fortunes away "from those who stole them from the American workers," and won with the largest plurality in Seattle history. Once in office, however, Dore took the administration of relief away from the league and threatened to use machine guns on the unemployed demonstrations, earning himself the name "Revolving Dore" (Bernstein, 1970, 416-418).

Many of the Unemployed Leagues, like the Seattle League, did not last long as self-help efforts, if only because self-help programs could not cope with extensive and lasting unemployment. By 1933 the

leagues became more political and abrasive in outlook and tactics, joining in the general demand for public relief. Some fell under the leadership of the Communists, and later some of the leaders of the leagues, Louis Budenz among them, joined the Communist Party.

Other groups appeared in many towns, sometimes under auspices which had nothing to do with radical politics. Local politicians, for example, set up clubs in their wards to handle relief grievances on behalf of individual constituents, particularly before elections,²⁸ and in many rural or partially rural areas, groups organized around self-help and barter programs.²⁹ In Dayton, Ralph Borsodi, a utopian thinker who believed in a return to the land, was engaged by the Council of Social Agencies to organize groups that undertook to produce their own goods (Bernstein, 1970, 420). Arthur Moyer, the president of Antioch College, established the Midwest Exchange, Inc., which encouraged self-help and barter among independent groups (Glick, 13-14). In Harlem, self-help took the form of food collections and rent parties often organized by the churches or by the disciples of Father Divine.³⁰

In some places, particularly in the coal regions where unemployment was endemic, trade unions helped and even joined with the unemployed. Locals of the United Mine Workers led two hunger marches in Charleston, West Virginia, for example, and joined with the Unemployed Council in Gallup, New Mexico, in leading mass resistance against evictions of unemployed miners from homes built on land owned by mining companies. In Pennsylvania, some locals of the UMW affiliated with and gave financial support to the unemployed groups (Seymour, December 1937, 6). Elsewhere, unemployed groups occasionally provided support for striking workers. In the Toledo Auto-Lite strike and the Milwaukee Streetcar strike in

²⁸ Gosnell describes such ward activity in Chicago (1937).

²⁹ Clark Kerr provides an exhaustive description of these self-help groups, whose active membership he estimates at 75,000 in 1932.

³⁰ In Harlem even the Unemployed Councils undertook food collections to meet the immediate needs of the destitute (*Daily Worker*, April 24, 1931). In general, however, the more radical leaders of the unemployed scorned the self-help approach, as is suggested by an article entitled "Organized Looking into Garbage Cans" in the March 1st, 1933, issue of the *Detroit Hunger Fighter*, a news sheet of the Detroit Unemployed Council: "The procedure is to go to all kinds of food establishments and trade the labor of unemployed workers for unsaleable food, to gather old clothing, etc., as a means of lightening the burden of maintaining the unemployed for the bosses and evading the issue of struggle . . . 55 percent of the population cannot live on what the other 45 percent throws away. . . ."

1934, it was the support of thousands of the unemployed that finally broke employer resistance. And in Minneapolis, unemployed workers were included in the militant local 574 of the Teamsters (Glick, 13). By and large, however, the trade unions avoided the unemployed, who were dropped from the union membership rolls as their dues lapsed.³¹ Subsequently William Green and John L. Lewis sent messages of greetings to meetings of the unemployed (Seymour, December 1937, 10), but the CIO refused to permit the request of the organization of the unemployed to affiliate.

Because of the variegated character of the unemployed movement, membership cannot be accurately estimated, and in any case it probably fluctuated widely. People were attracted by the chances of getting relief, and many dropped out once the needed aid was received. Until February 1934 the Unemployed Councils did not have either dues or members; adherents were simply called supporters (Seymour, August 1937, 11-13). Still, if any gauge is provided by the groups' own claims, the numbers were impressive for a grassroots organization. By 1933 the Ohio Unemployed League claimed a membership of 100,000 distributed among 187 locals throughout the state; the Pennsylvania Unemployed League in 1935 claimed 25,000 members in twelve counties; the Pennsylvania Security League reported some 70,000 members (Seymour, December 1937); the Pittsburgh Unemployed Citizens' League claimed 50,000 dues-paying members in fifty locals (Karsh and Garman, 92). In Chicago the Unemployed Councils alone claimed a membership of 22,000 in forty-five local branches (Karsh and Garman, 90) while the Socialist-led groups had organized 25,000 jobless by mid-1932 (Rosenzweig, 1976a).

THE FORMATION OF A NATIONAL ORGANIZATION

The movement of the unemployed had originated in local communities, in sporadic street demonstrations, in rent riots, and in the disruption of relief centers. Many of the local organizations were loosely structured, held together more by the periodic demonstrations

³¹ Consistent with its historic emphasis on voluntarism, the AFL had opposed government measures to aid the unemployed until mid-1932, by which time its ranks had broken on the issue, and even some employers were pressing the federation to reverse itself.

than by regular and formal affiliations; they gathered momentum from direct action victories which yielded money or food or a halt to evictions. But most of the radical leaders of the different groups felt that the looseness of these local groups was a drawback. As early as November 1930 the Communist Party political committee criticized the absence of "organizational crystallization" in the Unemployed Councils, and a party official complained that "despite millions of leaflets and hundreds of meetings, not to speak of the half dozen demonstrations in every city, organized unemployed councils are almost nonexistent" (Rosenzweig, 1976b, 42).³²

However bitterly the Communists, the Socialists, and the Musteites disagreed about issues of international socialism, they shared the view that the victories won by the unemployed in the early depression were mere handouts. A significant political movement capable of winning major victories depended, they thought, on firmly structured local and state organizations knit together in a national body and with a national program.³³ Instead of disparate local groups disrupting relief offices or leading marches on mayors for handouts, a nationwide poor people's organization should be formed, an organization representing such massive voting numbers as to compel the Congress to enact more fundamental economic reforms. The coming of the New Deal, with a more sympathetic president and Congress, of course, encouraged this approach, for the time seemed propitious to achieve far-reaching change through the electoral system.

Moreover, a major shift in Comintern policy in 1935 (prompted by belated realization of the seriousness of the fascist threat and the menace it posed to world communism) encouraged this emphasis on organization and electoral strategies among the Communists, who had led the most militant and disruptive of the unemployed groups.³⁴

³² Herbert Benjamin, leader of the Unemployed Councils, commented later on directives by the party leadership to overcome these failings that "down below people weren't concerned . . . [They were] just concerned with finding any means they could of acting" (quoted in Rosenzweig, 1976b, 40).

³³ David Lasser, a Socialist and leader of a New York unemployed group who later became head of the Workers' Alliance, argued in 1934 that the demands of the unemployed had become national in scope, and that the unemployed themselves had matured so that they would not be satisfied with short run concessions, but wanted a reordering of society (*New Leader*, December 12, 1934, 1).

³⁴ The widely held assumption that the policies of the American Communist Party were simply reflexive responses to the dictates of the International has recently been disputed by a number of young historians who argue that the Popular Front was, at least in part, an authentic—if perhaps mistaken—response of American Communists to domestic political developments. See for example Buhle, Keeran, and Prickett.

The "Popular Front" line called upon Communists to seek alliances with the liberal and socialist groups they had previously denounced as "social fascists." This quite clearly meant seeking alliances within the New Deal coalition and with the New Deal itself.³⁵

In fact, there were attempts to form a national organization almost from the start. Stimulated by the successful demonstrations of March 6, 1930, the Communists held a meeting in New York City at the end of March, reportedly drawing together 215 delegates from thirteen states, and calling for the formation of an autonomous national unemployment organization.³⁶ In July a larger meeting attracting 1,320 delegates was held in Chicago to declare the formation of the Unemployed Councils of the U.S.A. A platform calling for federal unemployment insurance and federal appropriations for relief was adopted, and a formal structure describing the relationship between local, city, county, state, and national groups was elaborated. By 1934 the Unemployed Councils also adopted a written constitution (Leab, 308-311). Finally the shift in Comintern policy in 1935 set the stage not only for the development of an organization, but for the development of an organization that would embrace all of the unemployed groups.

In the fall of 1932, prompted by the upcoming election, the Socialists had also taken steps toward the development of a national organization.³⁷ The Chicago Workers Committee called a meeting of "all Unemployed Leagues that we know of except the Communist Party's 'Unemployed Councils'" (Seymour, December 1937, 7). The result was the formation of the Federation of Unemployed Workers Leagues of America, which called on the incoming president and the Congress to enact legislation for direct relief, public works and slum clearance, unemployment and old-age insurance, a shorter work day, and the prohibition of child labor. The federation itself was shortlived, but the conviction that a nationwide organization would

³⁵ Earl Browder later recalled that the party had begun working with New Deal relief agencies in 1935 (Buhle, 231).

³⁶ Prior to this, the Unemployed Councils were considered part of the Trade Union Unity League but this affiliation did not much affect the strictly local activities of the early groups (Seymour, December 1937, 3).

³⁷ Aside from this conference activity, Norman Thomas' campaign for the presidency in 1932 brought a halt to whatever direct organizing of the jobless the Socialists were doing. The election campaign was apparently considered more important (Rosenzweig, 1974, 15).

be a powerful force persisted, and the Socialist groups moved to consolidate into state federations during 1934.

Meanwhile, in July 1933, 800 delegates from thirteen states showed up in Columbus, Ohio, for the first national conference of the Unemployed Leagues. By this time, the radical intellectual leaders of the Conference for Progressive Labor Action, who had organized the Leagues, had become ardent believers in a "mass labor party" whose goal would be the "complete abolition of planless, profiteering capitalism, and the building of a workers' republic" (Karsh and Garman, 91).³⁸

Efforts to weld together a national organization continued throughout 1934. In March leaders from Socialist-led organizations in Baltimore, New York City, Westchester, Pittsburgh, Reading, and Hartford formed the Eastern Federation of Unemployed and Emergency Workers. During the summer and fall of 1934 the groups represented in the Eastern Federation met with the Socialist-led state federations from Illinois, Wisconsin, and Florida and with the Muste groups to plan a demonstration, out of which emerged a Provisional National Committee to plan for the establishment of a nationwide organization of the unemployed.³⁹

Finally, at a conference held in Washington in early 1935, a "permanent nonpartisan federation" of most of the large unemployed organizations in the United States was formed, called the Workers' Alliance of America. Delegates attended from unemployed organizations in sixteen states.⁴⁰ A constitution was adopted, a dues system and a National Executive Committee were established, and the Executive Committee was directed by the conference to negotiate unification with the Communist Unemployed Councils. A second National Workers' Alliance Convention in April 1936 drew 900

³⁸ Shortly afterwards the Unemployed Leagues became affiliated with the American Workers Party, which in 1934 joined with the Trotskyist Communist League of America to form the Workers Party of the United States, which in turn merged with the Socialist Party in 1936, until the Trotskyists were expelled in 1937 (Rogg, 14; Glick). Under the aegis of the Workers Party, issues of revolutionary strategy became pre-eminent, factional fighting was endemic, and the Unemployed Leagues lost most of their followers (Rosenzweig, 1975, 69-73).

³⁹ The demonstration on November 24 was claimed by its organizers to have turned out 350,000 people in 22 states (Rosenzweig, 1974, 24).

⁴⁰ As is usual in these matters, estimates of affiliation varied wildly. The groups at this convention claimed 450,000 members, but the Communist Unemployed Councils, who were not yet affiliated, estimated active affiliation at 40-50,000 (Rosenzweig, 1974, 26).

delegates representing organizations from thirty-six states, including the Unemployed Councils. By the end of the year the alliance claimed 1,600 locals with a membership of 600,000 in forty-three states.⁴¹ It was this convention that marked the merging of most major groups of the unemployed: the Workers' Alliance, the Unemployed Councils, the National Unemployment League, the American Workers Union, and several independent state groups. David Lasser, the Socialist who headed the New York Workers' Committee on Unemployment and who had been chairman of the first alliance, was again named chairman, and Herbert Benjamin, a Communist who had been national secretary of the Unemployed Councils, was named organizational secretary. The Communists in the Unemployed Councils, by now well into their Popular Front phase, deferred to the Socialists by settling for half as many seats on the new National Executive Board. With these matters resolved, a Washington headquarters was established, and the office and field staff expanded. State "unity" conventions followed the national meeting and new local organizations began to write the alliance for charters. To all appearances, a great deal had been achieved. A national poor people's organization had been born.

THE DECLINE OF LOCAL PROTEST

David Lasser, during his early efforts to forge what became the Workers' Alliance, had argued that a national organization would both stimulate local organizations and give them permanence (*New Leader*, December 22, 1934, 1). In fact, while the leaders of the unemployed groups had been concentrating on forming a national organization complete with a constitution and a bureaucratic structure, the local groups across the country were declining. They were declining largely as a result of the Roosevelt Administration's more liberal relief machinery, which diverted local groups from disruptive tactics and absorbed local leaders in bureaucratic roles. And once

⁴¹ Rosenzweig reports 791 delegates at this convention (1974, 33), and Seymour (December 1937, 8) and Brophy and Hallowitz (9) estimate membership in the alliance to have been only about 300,000.

the movement weakened, and the instability of which it was one expression subsided, relief was cut back. That this happened speaks mainly to the resiliency of the American political system. That it happened so quickly, however, and at so cheap a price, speaks to the role played by leaders of the unemployed themselves. For by seeking to achieve more substantial reform through organization and electoral pressure, they forfeited local disruptions and became, however inadvertently, collaborators in the process that emasculated the movement.

The ability of the local groups to attract followers had depended on their concrete victories in the relief centers. But the expanded administrative machinery, the readier funds, and the new aura of sympathy provided under the Roosevelt Administration made it possible for relief officials to regularize their agency procedures and to regain control over relief-giving. These officials often took the view that there was no true dichotomy of interest between themselves and the unemployed, but rather that conflict had been fostered by group leaders who capitalized on inadequacies to incite conflict and to exploit and manipulate the unemployed for political purposes. What was needed were standardized procedures for dealing with grievances according to "merit," rather than in response to "pressure." (Pressure, they argued, should be exerted on legislators, not on well-meaning relief administrators.) Accordingly, they began to develop precise criteria to determine who should get how much relief. At the same time, they introduced elaborate formalized procedures for negotiating with organized groups of the unemployed. In New York City, for example, guidelines for negotiations specified that unemployed delegations should be limited to three to five persons; meetings were to be held no more than every two weeks and then only with a designated staff member; unemployed delegations and the clients they represented were never to be seen simultaneously; written answers were forbidden; and finally, *no relief was to be given while the delegation was on the premises* (emphasis added, Brophy and Hallowitz, 50-53).

Throughout the country, similar rules were laid down, often through negotiations with the unemployed groups themselves. Excerpts from one, prepared by the Pennsylvania State Office of the Consultant on Community Contracts, illustrate the intricacy of the new procedures as well as the benign language in which they were couched: