

# DETROIT REVOLUTIONARY MOVEMENT RECORDS

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THE RATE OF  
UNEMPLOYMENT COUNCILS  
OF THE 30S

## THE ROLE OF UNEMPLOYMENT COUNCILS IN THE GREAT DEPRESSION OF THE 30'S



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## UNEMPLOYMENT COUNCILS DURING THE 1930's

In 1929 the bottom of the U.S. economy burst, sending the country straight into Depression. The whole vast economy of the nation, its mills, factories, mines, its stores, transport and distribution, came to a slow, grinding stop or at best, proceeded at about one half speed. Wage cuts came one after the other until they averaged 45% for all industry. Industrial production dropped by almost 50%. By 1933 there were anywhere from 12,000,000 to 17,000,000 unemployed. (1) In 1929, when 9% of the white work force was unemployed, 15.7% of the black work force was jobless. By 1931, unemployment rates for whites and blacks were 24% and 35% respectively. In 1932, the figures rose: 39.7% of the white work force and 56% of the blacks were unemployed. (2)

What was the cause of this?

Henry Ford declared (on March 18, 1931) that the depression came about because "the average man won't really do a day's work unless he is caught and cannot get out of it. There is plenty of work to do if people would do it." A few weeks later he closed down the Ford plant, throwing 75,000 men out of work. (3)

The real reason for this situation is, as banker Frank Vanderlip admitted: "Capital kept too much and labor did not have enough to buy its share of things." While employers kept the wages of most Americans low, they drove their workers to speed up production, thus producing more and more at less and less cost to themselves. As a result of such speed-up and low wage policies, employers saw their profits zooming. But the American people were unable to buy back what they had produced. Although there was food, millions of tons of it, people were starving while food was destroyed, or left to rot, because it could not be sold at a profit. Warehouses were filled with clothing, but people had no money to buy it. It was a crisis of overproduction, and the American people suffered dearly. The absence of any kind of social insurance, and totally inadequate relief for the unemployed brought almost immediate poverty and even starvation to workers as soon as they lost their jobs or exhausted their meager savings.

When Pennsylvania Governor Pinchot testified in front of a Senate Committee on Jan. 4, 1932 he read many letters he had received. One said: "My four motherless children and I, the father, are on the verge of freezing and starving. Being several months out of work, I have no money to buy coal, food or winter clothes for my school children. Being many months back with my rent the landlord attempts to evict me from his premises. Two of my children are ill. So please, Mr. Governor, be kind and render your assistance as soon as possible, for my children are hungry and I with them; please assist us from cold and hunger. Mr. Gov. Pinchot." (4)

The American people, however, did much more than merely write to their governors. They organized!

From Jan. 1930 to June 1932 nearly 100,000 eviction orders were issued against families in 5 industrial cities of Ohio. In New York City, 185,794 families were served with eviction notices during an 8 month period ending June 30, 1932. But

77,000 of these families were moved back into their homes by the people of the Unemployed Council.(5)

"There were quite a bit of evictions taking place. As good fortune would have it the Unemployment Councils developed. They were a bunch of Robin Hoods. They would wait until the bailiff put the furniture out in the street and put it right back where it came from. If there was a padlock in the way, well then, it was removed, you see? The people were placed back into the despair of the landlord.

Sometimes these Robin Hoods were so forthright and brazen, they put up a table, stick it on the door: This furniture was moved back by Local 23 of the Unemployment Council"(6)

"A woman living in a certain block in Chicago has 5 children, her husband is a stockyards workman who has been out of a job a year and a half. But on \$10 a month sent by her brother in-law and borrowing now and then from the neighbor's pantries, she has fed her family. There is no money left for rent. So after two warnings from the landlord--a crisis. She is to be evicted next Tuesday at 5:30.

In the same block lives a member of the local branch of the Unemployed Council, who has been through it all before. He talks to the men and women and together they call a meeting of all the families on the block. Most of them have known Mrs. MacNamara for years. At 4:30 on Tuesday you find them in an organized body outside the MacNamara flat. The sheriff arrives and in the face of protest does his work. Mrs. MacNamara's bed, bureau, stove, and children are translated to the street. Then the Council acts. Then the neighbors proceed to the local relief bureau, where a council spokesman displays the children, presents the facts, and demands that the Relief Commission pay the rent or find another flat for the MacNamaras. The local relief worker expresses dismay but says the rent fund is exhausted. The spokesman goes through the MacNamara story again with a new emphasis, and repeats his demands. If the Commission is adamant, he leaves and reappears at general headquarters with a hundred Council members instead of fifty. Usually the Commission digs up the \$6 a month rent, or the landlord throws up his hands, and Mrs. MacNamara's children have a roof over their heads."(7)

#### Activities of Unemployment Councils

Charles R. Walker, a labor expert, wrote in 1932: "The Unemployed Council is a democratic organ of the unemployed to secure by very practical means a control over their means of subsistence. The councils are organized democratically, and the majority rules. In Chicago, there are forty-five branches of the Unemployed Council, with a total membership of 22,000".(8)

These Unemployment Councils organized and led hundreds of demonstrations and conferences on a local and national scale throughout the Depression.

The first nationwide unemployment demonstrations took place on March 6, 1930 (just 4 months after the stock market crash). Over 1 million unemployed took

part in these demonstrations, which were held in most of the major cities throughout the country. Demanding relief and unemployment insurance, huge crowds gathered in Milwaukee, Cleveland, L.A., San Francisco, Denver, Seattle, Philadelphia, Chicago (50,000), Detroit (100,000), and New York (110,000). In N.Y. the demonstrators were attacked by 25,000 police. A N.Y. World reporter described the assault: "women (were) struck in the face with blackjacks, boys beaten by gangs of 7 and 8 policemen, and old man backed into a doorway and knocked down time and time again, only to be dragged to his feet and struck with fist and club."(9) But the unemployed movement strengthened and grew.

At the end of the month (March 29, 1930), a National Conference on Unemployment took place in New York. 215 delegates from industrial unions, A.F.L. locals, and unemployment councils met, calling for the organizations of unemployment councils in all industrial cities, along with joint committees of these councils and union locals. City committees of the unemployed were to be co-ordinated with employed workers (who were suffering severe wage cuts, speed up and a general erosion of their working conditions). Besides the general demand for social insurance, demands for immediate relief adopted to the local situation were to be raised. One of the cornerstone principles put forth in these demands was against discrimination towards black or foreign-born workers in the administration of relief. Complete equality for these workers was adhered to in these organizations.

The next step was the founding of the National Unemployment Council, which took place in Chicago on July 4, 1930. In its Preamble, the N.U.C. stated: "Mass unemployment has now become a permanent feature of the economic system under which we live. Millions are denied the opportunity to work and earn a livelihood for themselves and their families. The menace of unemployment hangs over the head of every worker in every industry and occupation.

Ownership of the wealth and means of production--the mines, mills, factories, railroads and land--is concentrated in the hands of an ever diminishing number of bankers and industrialists.

Only the organized mass pressure and struggle of all victims of mass unemployment and insecurity, Negro and white, can force the owners of wealth and their governmental agents to provide the means of safeguarding the home, the family and the very existence of the masses who face and suffer poverty in the midst of plenty.

Our task is to see that not one unemployed worker or his family shall be without decent food, housing and clothing.

Our aim is to win security by forcing enactment of the Workers Unemployment and Social Insurance Bill.

As the means to this end we direct ourselves to the development of a mighty united fighting movement, that shall include all workers and poor farmers, regardless of sex, race, nationality, religious or political faith or other affiliation. This unity for militant and determined struggle shall be effected through the National Unemployment Council of the United States."(10)

The major event of the unemployed was the National Hunger March on Washington D.C., which began Dec. 7, 1931. "The delegates traveled in trucks and autos, borrowed or hired. The march was in four columns, starting from St. Louis, Chicago, Buffalo and Boston. Far Western contingents assembled at St. Louis and Chicago. Each column had its specified route. At Pittsburgh the two western columns joined forces and at Philadelphia the two from the Northeast came together. In Baltimore these two fused columns united to march into Washington.

The marchers touched at almost every big industrial center east of the Mississippi and north of the Ohio, where the millions of starving unemployed were congested.

The columns traveled with machine-like precision. The night stop-overs, carefully scheduled weeks in advance, were about one hundred and fifty miles apart. Well-organized local committees arranged for food, beds and auto supplies for the marchers and they organized local mass demonstrations. The number of delegates picked up at each point was strictly limited. No stragglers were allowed to join the march.

The columns themselves were highly organized. Each truck had its captain and each column its governing committee and leader. There were also volunteer doctors, dentists, nurses and auto mechanics. Each was traveling and camping. Column movements were regulated by whistle and horn signals. Strict discipline prevailed. The march was financed by each locality providing the funds for its own delegation by popular subscription.

The 1931 march aroused national attention. Everywhere great masses turned out to meet it. At many places local police and vigilante thugs tried to break it up; but the solidarity of the local workers and the good discipline and fighting spirit of the marchers defeated them. With clock-like regularity, the four columns moved forward, making all the scheduled stops without a hitch the entire way to Washington. In various towns so great was the employed and unemployed workers' support that the local city officials had to furnish the marchers with food, lodgings and gasoline free.

Great throngs greeted the marchers in Washington, and there was a huge police mobilization. As the marchers moved along Pennsylvania Avenue they were flanked by two solid rows of policemen probably one thousand in all. The hunger marchers were virtually under arrest. At the Capital building it looked as though the authorities expected a revolutionary attack. Two to three thousand more police were banked there with machine guns planted openly at strategic points. There were hundreds of plainclothesmen in the crowd. Besides all this, there were also about a thousand soldiers brought in from neighboring forts and held in readiness close by. The police and soldiers outnumbered the marchers at least three to one.

The hunger marchers, undeterred by these sinister threatenings, sang and shouted slogans, while their committee, headed by Bill Dunne, tried in vain to present the demands of the millions of starving unemployed upon the floor of Congress. Only a minor government official would meet them. Meanwhile, the workers staged a thrilling demonstration in front.

The marchers remained two days in Washington, and held a big conference to better organize the national struggle for unemployment insurance and relief. Then came the homeward journey, with each column making its regular night stops, scheduled weeks ahead. The marchers were received by enormous crowds everywhere."(11)

On March 7, 1932 the unemployed workers of Dearborn marched to the gates of the Ford Plant to present their demands for work and relief. Organized by the Auto Workers Union and the Detroit Unemployed Councils, 5,000 people were met by tear gas by the Dearborn police. They marched on anyway. Then came the bullets. The marchers fell back but returned to pick up their wounded (almost 60). "A machine gun, inside the Ford gates, sent out a roar of death. More marchers fell...3 more lay dead...23 others lay seriously wounded."(12) On March 12, at least 40,000 marched to the cemetery (which is located in view of the Ford plant) where the 4 victims of the Massacre were buried. A monument, funds for which were donated by workers all over the country, marks the grave of Ford's victims.

As unemployment grew during 1931-1932, the activities of the unemployed increased and many councils were organized. The amount of relief that city and state governments and private charitable institutions were forced to disburse rose in direct proportion to the activity of the workers themselves. Hundreds of demonstrations were held on a neighborhood as well as state-wide scale.

In October of 1932 the administration of Chicago attempted to cut relief by 50%. The struggle initiated by the Unemployed Councils of Chicago was so militant that not only was the cut defeated, but the right to demonstrate on the streets (which had been denied them) was also gained.

When Congress convened in December, 1932, they were faced with a second National Hunger March, organized by the Unemployed Councils and composed of 3,000 marchers representing 250,000 organized unemployed and employed workers. Local preparations for the march had included struggles for relief and against evictions, as well as numerous local and state hunger marches and demonstrations. In spite of every effort to prevent them, the delegates marched through the streets of Washington and presented their demands to Congress.

An example of the creativity in organizing tactics used by the unemployment councils is a rally which was held in McKeesport (Pa.) in the 30's.

"Local newspapers in McKeesport and Duquesne began to report jobless marches on City Hall and County Poor Boards in New York, Cleveland and Pittsburgh. People were getting together and demanding that the government do something to provide relief for the unemployed. And McKeesport finally stirred. The McKeesport Daily News carried a banner headline, "Mayor Denies Rally Permit." The story reported a request for a jobless rally permit made by a "Joe Dallet of the Unemployed Council of Allegheny County."

Mayor George H. Lysle pompously announced that "McKeesport will care for its own needy citizens and no outside agitators would be permitted to stir up trouble." The newspaper story added that the Unemployed Council is really a "communist front."

The story stirred up more than usual interest in the town. The meeting was to be held on Water Street alongside the McKeesport bridge. Leaflets appeared all over McKeesport, Port Vue and nearby communities. They headlined phrases like "Don't Starve, Fight! Organize, Demand Relief, Jobs and Unemployment Insurance!"

Mayor Lysle repeatedly released statements to the press that his police would be on hand to arrest any trouble makers and that "no red meeting" would be held in McKeesport as long as he was Mayor.

It was 4pm and Water Street was jam-packed with people, men and women, white and black, side by side. The chief of police was in full view with a detail of uniformed and plainclothes men. They kept stretching their necks to spot strange and familiar faces.

The speaker did not appear. The crowd grew restless. For a moment it looked like a dismal flop. Just then a row boat with two men in it appeared on the river. At first few people paid attention to it, but as it neared the shore one of the men suddenly displayed a large sign, "Don't Starve, Fight!"

A loud cheer burst from the crowd. Old man Lysle had been outmaneuvered. The speaker, Joe Dallet, a tall, personable looking young

man, stood up in the boat and addressed the men. He called upon the jobless to organize and described the gains won by people in other communities. By this time the police were jumping around like jack rabbits, but they were helpless. They had no jurisdiction over the river.

During the days and weeks that followed many small gatherings were held in private homes where the unemployed signed cards, elected committees and drew up demands."(13)

An example of what could happen in an unemployment march comes from a march on Columbus (state capital of Ohio) in the Spring of 1933.

"We did not actually have to march all the way to Columbus from Warren--some 100 miles. In many counties the authorities were so anxious to be rid of us that they met us with trucks at the county line and transported us in style to the next line. But it was not like this all the way, so we did considerable walking and met many people to whom we gave our message.

We had our own softball team and would choose up games with youthful onlookers. Sometimes we stayed overnight at a county fairground and held big meetings with dramatic and musical entertainment. Progress toward the state capital was not too difficult. We had many arguments with the police but no fights. In Zanesville, a policeman became so jittery that his revolver went off by accident, but fortunately no one was hurt."

These examples give a glimpse into the spirit the struggle that Americans of the 30's waged against unemployment.

Because of their determination, we now have unemployment benefits. Perhaps a word should be said of another struggle inherent in the birth of these unemployment councils. That is the inner struggle that many workers fought within themselves, the struggle against the initial guilt of being unemployed. When the initial layoffs first hit in the 30's, many newly unemployed workers blamed themselves: "Maybe I didn't work hard enough?" "What did I do wrong to get laid off?" It took struggle to learn to quit blaming themselves for the inevitable crisis. This crisis, as earlier mentioned, was one of overproduction. This overproduction was not the fault of the workers, but the fault of the economic system.

Today we face the same problem. Unemployed people are looked upon as lazy people; be it the single mother who can't afford to work and hire a babysitter; be it the 20 year old black who has applications all over town; or be it the newly laid off worker. "They're too lazy." Are they? Or does it have to do with something else? We supposedly live in a democracy. Do we vote on how our national resources are used? Do we vote on the price of bread? The price of gas? Coal? We all live on this earth yet do we vote on how it is used? Did we vote on how many small cars would be produced, for it is the overproduction of these small cars that caused the current wave of unemployment. We are blameless victims in this unemployment. We suffer for mistakes that we have no voice in making.



It would be wrong to discuss the role of Unemployment Councils in the 30's without pointing out that this laid the base for the struggles that led to the birth of the C.I.O. which dominated the rest of the 30's. The Sit-Down Strike in Flint didn't pop up in a vacuum. Many other struggles took place to set the stage for the great victory of the Flint Sit-Down Strike. One of the most important struggles happened in Toledo in 1934, and the vital factor in this struggle was the unity of the employed and unemployed workers.

"On February 23, 1934 the Toledo Auto-Lite workers, newly organized into AFL Federal Local 18384, went on strike. The company went to a friendly judge and got him to issue an injunction limiting picketing. The strike had begun to die on its feet when a committee of Auto-Lite workers came to the Unemployed League and asked for aid... Two of its officers, Ted Selander and Sam Pollock, (and several auto local members) wrote Judge R.R. Stuart, advising him that they would violate the injunction by encouraging mass picketing. They went out and did so. They were arrested, tried and released--the court warning them to picket no more. They answered by going directly from court, with all the strikers and unemployed league members who had been present, to the picket line. The picket line grew...

By May 23, there were more than 10,000 on the picket lines. County deputies with tear gas guns were lined up on the plant roof. A strike picket, Miss Alma Hahn, had been struck on the head by a bolt hurled from a plant window and had been taken to the hospital. By the time 100 more cops arrived, the workers were tremendously incensed. Police began roughing up individual pickets pulled from the line. What happened when the cops tried to escort the scabs through the picket line at the shift-change was described by the Associated Press.

'Piles of bricks and stones were assembled at strategic places and a wagon load of bricks was trundled to a point near the factory to provide further ammunition for the strikers... Suddenly a barrage of tear gas bombs was hurled from upper factory windows. At the same time, company employes armed with iron bars and clubs dragged a fire hose into the street and played water into the crowd. The sympathizers replied with bricks, as they choked from gas fumes and fell back.'

But they retreated only to reform their ranks. The police charged and swung their clubs trying to clear a path for the scabs. The workers held the plant, it was the police who finally gave up the battle. Then the thousands of pickets laid siege to the plant, determined to maintain their picket line.

The workers improvised giant slingshots from inner tubes. They hurled whole bricks through the plant windows. The plant soon was without lights. The scabs cowered in the dark. The frightened deputies set up machine guns inside every entranceway. It was not until the arrival of 900 National Guardsmen, 15 hours later, that the scabs were finally released. Then followed one of the most amazing battles in U.S. labor history. With their bare fists and rocks, the workers fought from rooftops, from behind billboards, came through alleys to flank the guardsmen. The battle lasted 6 days.

But the strikers and their thousands of sympathizers did more than shame the young National Guardsmen. They educated them and tried to win them over. Speakers stood on boxes in front of the troops and explained what the strike was about and the role of the troops were playing as strikebreakers. World War I veterans put on their medals and spoke to the boys in uniform. The women explained what the strike meant to their families. The press reported that some of the guardsmen just quit and went home. Others voiced sympathy with the workers. (a year later, when Toledo unionists went to Defiance, Ohio, to aid the Pressed Steel Co. strike, they found that 8% of the strikers had been National Guardsmen serving in uniform in the Auto-Lite strike. That was where they learned the lesson of unionism.)

On May 24, the guardsmen fired point-blank into the Auto-Lite strikers ranks, killing 2 and wounding 25. But 6,000 workers returned at dusk to renew the battle. In the dark, they closed in on groups of guardsmen in the 6-block martial law zone. The fury of the onslaught twice drove the troops back into the plant. At one stage, a group of troops threw their last tear gas and vomit gas bombs, then quickly picked up rocks to hurl at the strikers; the strikers recovered the last gas bombs thrown before they exploded, flinging them back at the troops.

On Friday, May 31, the troops were speedily ordered withdrawn from the strike area when the company agreed to keep the plant closed. This had not been the usual one-way battle with the workers getting shot down and unable to defend themselves. Scores of guardsmen had been sent to the hospitals. They had become demoralized. By June 1, 98 out of 99 AFL local unions had voted for a general strike.

A monster rally on the evening of June 1 mobilized some 40,000 workers in the Lucas County Courthouse Square. By June 4, the company capitulated and signed a 6 month contract, including a 5% wage increase with a 5% minimum above the auto industry code, naming Local 18384 as the exclusive bargaining agent in the struck plants...The path was opened for organization of the entire automobile industry. With the Auto-Lite victory under their belts, the Toledo autoworkers were to organize 19 plants before the year was out and, before another 12 months, were to lead the first successful strike in a GM plant, the real beginning of the conquest of GM."(14)

Certainly conditions are different today than they were during the 30's. To a degree, we can thank the struggles of the unemployment councils of the 30's for making our lives a bit easier in our present hard times. It was the social pressure of the many hunger marches, unemployed marches, and eviction struggles that forced the Roosevelt administration to develop that unemployment relief laws that we know accept as a natural right. It was the Unemployment Councils that taught the working people of the 30's the lessons and experiences that were necessary to form the C.I.O....we may be critical towards the leadership in these unions today, but we must admit we would be hard put if we didn't have these unions.

While working on a United Farmworker picket line at Meijers last winter we ran into an old black man who was highly active in the C.I.O. struggles of the 30's.

He said, "We laid the base, we did the groundwork. It's your generation that has to take it from there. We laid the base, you must build it up."

So this is where we stand today. We owe much to those who created the organizations and benefits we have today. Yet, we must also fight. We must struggle to assure that our unions are run democratically. Because the bureaucratic elite has formed in these unions, many rank and file workers no longer even look to the union for leadership. We must struggle to make sure that the government doesn't cut down on "people programs". We face a new crisis of overproduction. Because of this crisis many working people are now being laid off. Already 7.0% (as of Dec. 1974) of the population is "officially" unemployed. This amounts to over 6 million people (with black workers unemployed at a rate of 11.7%). Arthur Okun, former chairman of the Council of Economic Advisers, said it probably would go to 8% next summer. The Auto industry is the hardest hit, with 106,000 out of 670,000 auto workers unemployed (as of Nov. 1974). In Kalamazoo, Fisher Body has laid off 800 from the total work force of 2,700 (as of Jan, 1975).

The Unemployment Council can again be a weapon in our struggle for a decent living. Already in the UAW the issue of Unemployment Councils is being raised. The union leadership has been forced to deal with this issue and their solution has been to form Unemployment Councils that are appointed by the Union. The rank and file, however, are demanding that these Councils be elected democratically.

We need to form Unemployment Councils here in Kalamazoo. They must be in the unions and they must be in the neighborhoods. We need to stick together and help those of us who have been forced into unemployment--not because of laziness but because of the overproduction crisis. The Unemployment Council is a tool we can use to help each other.

#### Labor Donated

- (1) Labor's Untold Story, Beyer and Morais, n. 249
- (2) Pictorial History of the Black American, p. 52
- (3) Labor's Untold Story, p. 243
- (4) Labor's Untold Story, n. 251
- (5) Labor's Untold Story, p. 261
- (6) Hard Times, Studs Terkel, p. 468
- (7) Strike, Brecher, p. 144-145
- (8) Strike, Brecher, p. 145
- (9) History of American Radicalism, Lens, p. 306
- (10) Cradle of Steel Unionism, Powers, p. 306
- (11) Pages in a Workers Life, Foster, p. 188-191
- (12) Labors Untold Story, p. 266
- (13) Cradle of Steel Unionism, n. 34-36
- (14) Labor's Giant Step, P. 20-24