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Volume 1

Strike! Revised and Updated Edition
Jeremy Brecher

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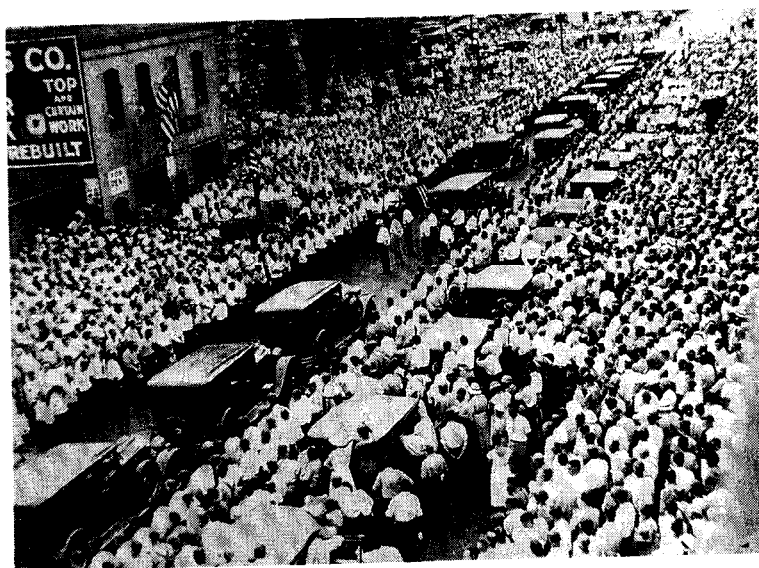
Strike!

Revised and Updated Edition

Jeremy Brecher



**South End Press
Cambridge, MA**



Funeral of Henry Ness, a striker killed during the 1934 Minneapolis general strike. (Photo courtesy of the International Brotherhood of Teamsters.)



A demonstrator injured by a flying missile during the Toledo Auto-Lite strike, May 23, 1934. (Photo permission of Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University.)

How would you describe the strikes? what was common to all of them? what made each a very distinct strike with its own general character?

Chapter 5

Depression Decade

Don't Starve-Fight

what prompted the strikes?

The 1920s were a period of great expansion for American capitalism. For the trade unions, it was a period of decline, which they met by trying to persuade employers to establish unionism to guarantee labor peace. By the late 1920s, one of America's leading economists was widely seconded when he declared that the country had entered an era of "permanent prosperity." Already, however, serious constriction had begun in such industries as coal and textiles, and with the collapse of the stock market in October 1929, depression—long believed a thing of the past—set in.

With the Depression came enormous misery—loss of jobs, homes, farms, savings, even the means to eat. Within three years, some fifteen million workers were unemployed. By early 1932, according to a New York journalist, groups of thirty or forty men would enter chain grocery stores and ask for credit: "When the clerk tells them business is for cash only, they bid him stand aside; they don't want to harm him, but they must have things to eat. They load up and depart."¹

Out of this kind of desperation the unemployed began improvising a variety of forms of direct action to meet their needs. The most dramatic was direct action to stop evictions. A reporter described a typical anti-eviction "riot" in Chicago:

A woman living in a certain block in Chicago has five children; her husband is a stockyards workman who has been out of a job a year and a half. But on ten dollars a month sent by her brother-in-law, and borrowing now and then from the neighbors' 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 five.

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 and know that the baby has tonsillitis. 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. With great gusto the bed, bureau, stove, and children are put back in the house. 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.²

Organizations of the unemployed sprang up city by city around the country, often with initiative coming from Communist, Socialist, or other leftist groups. Labor writer Charles R. Walker, who studied them in various parts of the country, wrote:

The Unemployed Council is a democratic organ of the unemployed to secure by very practical means a control over their means of subsistence. I find it is no secret that Communists organize Unemployed Councils in most cities and usually lead them, but the councils are organized democratically and the majority rules. In one I visited at Lincoln Park, Michigan, there were three hundred members of which eleven were Communists. The Council had a right wing, a left wing, and a center. The chairman of the council, who was of the right wing, was also the local commander of the American Legion. In Chicago there are forty-five branches of the Unemployed Council, with a total membership of 22,000.

The Councils' weapon is democratic force of numbers and their functions are: to prevent evictions of the destitute, or if evicted, to bring pressure to bear on the Relief Commission to find a new

home for the evicted family; if an unemployed worker has his gas or his water turned off because he can't pay for it, to investigate the case and demand their return from the proper authorities; to see that the unemployed who are shoeless and clothesless get both; to eliminate through publicity and pressure discriminations between Negroes and white persons, or against the foreign born, in matters of relief; for individuals or families and children of the unemployed who have no relief as a penalty for political views or have been denied it through neglect, lack of funds, or any other reasons whatever, to march them down to relief headquarters and demand they be fed and clothed. Finally, to provide legal defense for all unemployed arrested for joining parades, hunger marches, or attending union meetings.³

By direct action the unemployed were able to stop many evictions. In Chicago and other cities, the public authorities were finally forced to suspend them entirely. Further, Walker reported, the amount of relief in cities he visited was directly proportional to the strength and struggle of the local unemployed council.

In many places the unemployed also made attempts to reorganize economic life on their own. In Seattle, the Unemployed Citizens' League organized self-help on a large scale. The unemployed were loaned fishing boats by the fishermen's union, allowed to pick unmarketable fruits and vegetables by nearby farmers, and permitted to cut wood on scrub timberland. Members throughout the city organized twenty-two locals, each with its own commissary at which the food and firewood thus acquired was exchanged with barbers who cut hair, seamstresses who mended clothes, carpenters who repaired houses, and doctors who treated the sick. With the end of the harvest season, however, self-help in Seattle lost its already marginal economic basis. The UCL then became the machinery for distributing relief. It also became a major political power in the city. Its candidate for mayor, named John Dore, won with the largest plurality in the city's history, whereupon he took relief administration away from the UCL and threatened to use machine guns against demonstrations of the unemployed; he quickly became known as "revolving Dore."⁴

By the end of 1932, there were 330 such self-help organizations in thirty-seven states with membership over 300,000. But by early 1933,

most of them, including the Seattle UCL, were in disarray, as they began to discover the limitations of a self-help movement living off the scraps of an already collapsed economy.

The most dramatic—and illegal—form of self-help was the bootleg coal industry in Pennsylvania. Small teams of unemployed coal miners simply dug small mines on company property and mined out the coal, while others took it by truck to nearby cities and sold it below the commercial rate. A miner named William Keating composed a ballad in 1932 that typifies the attitudes of the “coal-leggers”:

While the woes of unemployment were increasing,
While the price of foodstuff swelled the grocer's till,
For to fix 'gainst next winter's chill breeze,
Lest our poor families do freeze,
We dug a wee coal hole on God's hill.

But our terrible toil was wasted; we worked in vain,
Two Cossack-mannered coal and iron cops came.
On next winter's cold nights,
We'll have no anthracite,
'Cause the cops caved in our wee coal hole.

My mule-driving record proves at Oak Hill mine,
I'm unfairly unemployed for four years' time.
To no soup house I'll be led,
Because I'll dig my family's bread,
Or by cops be killed, in my wee coal hole.

Right demands I keep my family fed and warm,
God put coal 'neath these hills; here I was born.
So call it bootleg or what,
I'll have coal in my cot,
While there's coal in Good God's coal vein.⁵

By 1934, coal bootlegging was an important industry, producing some five million tons of coal worth \$45 million and employing 20,000 men and 4,000 vehicles. The coal companies fumed, but community opinion solidly backed the bootleggers—local officials would not prosecute the miners, juries would not convict, and jailers would

not imprison. When company police tried to stop the bootlegging, the miners defended themselves by force. In Shamokin, when the company started stripping operations on the “Edgewood Bootleggers' Tract,” where 17,000 illegal miners dug coal, the men promptly dynamited the steam shovel and told the company men to “beat it”; nobody was arrested. At Tremont, a thousand bootleggers prepared to battle fifty police until the latter withdrew. The private police of another company blew up more than 1,000 holes in 1934, but in that time at least 4,000 new ones were dug on the same property. An investigator reported several bootleggers telling him, “If they close our holes, we'll gang up on their collieries and close them.”⁶

In coal bootlegging the miners took over use of private property and began producing for themselves. But as long as the rest of the economic system remained unchanged, bootleg mining had severe limitations. Miners had little equipment save shovels, ropes and buckets; the primitive technology required much more labor for a given amount of coal. With bootleg coal priced below commercial coal, the bootleggers ended with a wage of about \$14 a week. Had the bootleg competition cut seriously into regular producers' profits, the companies would have had to cut their workers' wages, thus worsening conditions of employed miners and turning them against the bootleggers. And with no money for safety devices, the bootleggers faced an accident rate far higher than that of ordinary miners.

Desperate revolt was by no means limited to the unemployed. As wages were cut again and again, strikes broke out and spread with little previous planning or organization. In High Point, North Carolina, for example, a few hundred stocking boarders walked out at six hosiery mills one July morning in 1932 when the second wage cut of the year was posted at their mills. Other hosiery workers joined and by the end of the day 1,600 had walked out. The next day bands of strikers and unemployed workers marched through High Point and nearby Kernersville, Jamestown, Lexington, and Thomasville, closing 100 factories of all kinds employing 15,000 workers. The next day twenty-five unemployed workers forced their way into a High Point movie house and demanded admission, saying that they were out of

work and entitled to entertainment. When the police drove them out, they wrecked a motor and turned off the town's electricity, "to teach the big fellows that we ain't going to stand for no more bad treatment." The hosiery strike was finally settled through the intervention of the governor, with a revocation of the wage cut. Out of the conflict developed the Industrial Association of High Point, a union open to all industrial workers in the city, with 4,000 members and committees in each of the mills.⁷

Although trade union strikes were rare and ineffectual during the early years of the Depression, such spontaneous revolts developed in all parts of the country. As Charles R. Walker foresaw, there were

increasing outbursts of employed and unemployed alike—a kind of spontaneous democracy expressing itself in organized demonstrations by large masses of people. I use the word organized and I use the word democracy advisedly. They will not be mobs—though the police will often break them up—but will march and meet in order, elect their own spokesmen and committees, and work out in detail their demands for work or relief. They will present their formulated needs to factory superintendents, relief commissions, and city councils, and to the government at Washington.... Another social tendency ... is to suppress by any means at hand this rough-and-ready democracy. Meetings, marches, unions, and councils will be greeted in many cases—as they were in Detroit—with bullets and not relief.... As long as the American crisis lasts these two political tendencies—"spontaneous but organized" protest, and suppression by violence—will fight it out.⁸

Leftist organizations received little support in the early years of the Depression, but it was widely felt that such spontaneous mass action would become a revolutionary movement if conditions continued to worsen. As one unemployed organizer wrote of the coal bootleggers,

All that is really necessary for the workers to do in order to end their miseries is to perform such simple things as to take from where there is, without regard to established property principles or social-philosophies, and to start to produce for themselves. Done on a broad social scale it will lead to lasting results; on a local, isolated plane it will be either defeated, or remain an unsuccessful attempt unable to serve the needs of the working class. When the large

masses face a similar general situation as the Pennsylvania miners faced in their specific case, we have every reason to assume that they will react in the same way. The bootleg miners have shown in a rather clear and impressive way, that the so much bewailed absence of a socialist ideology on the part of the workers, really does not prevent workers from acting quite anti-capitalistically, quite in accordance with their own needs. Breaking through the confines of private property in order to live up to their own necessities, the miners' action is, at the same time a manifestation of the most important part of class consciousness—namely, that the problems of the workers can be solved only by themselves.⁹ ←

At this point President Franklin Delano Roosevelt, the New Deal, and the National Recovery Administration offered many workers the hope that they would not have to solve their problems by themselves. From the day of his first inaugural address, Roosevelt captured the imagination and confidence of the nation with the promise of government action to meet the social crisis created by the Depression. He acted quickly to end the financial panic that had closed the nation's banks by putting the credit of the U.S. government behind them. He created a national relief system, which effectively prevented mass starvation in the face of the virtual breakdown of local welfare resources, and established public works programs to provide employment, going far to pacify the unemployed. Many workers developed an almost religious faith in the new president. From the Carolinas, Martha Gellhorn wrote: "Every house I visited—mill worker or unemployed—had a picture of the President. These ranged from newspaper clippings (in destitute homes) to large colored prints, framed in gilt cardboard. The portrait holds the place of honour over the mantel; I can only compare this to the Italian peasant's Madonna."¹⁰

One central feature of the early New Deal was the National Recovery Administration. The NRA was largely modeled on the War Industries Board of World War I, of which its head, General Hugh S. Johnson, had been an official. The National Recovery Act was in essence a suspension of the anti-trust laws, allowing trade associations for each industry to fix prices and establish production quotas for each company. A "Code of Fair Competition" was established for each industry, with a Code Authority to enforce the agreements and

set minimum wages and maximum hours. Following the precedent of World War I (and with the tacit support of the U.S. Chamber of Commerce), labor support for the program was won by including as Section 7A of the National Recovery Act the provision that "employees shall have the right to organize and bargain collectively through representatives of their own choosing, and shall be free from the interference, restraint or coercion of employers."¹¹

Until the formation of the NRA, the American trade union movement had become practically defunct. The AFL had failed to combat the layoffs and wage cuts that accompanied the Great Depression, and membership, far from increasing with popular discontent, went down with the slump. Workers had largely lost interest in trade unions and had turned on a considerable scale to various forms of direct action. But with Section 7A guaranteeing the right to organize and appearing to make trade unionism part of the president's plan for economic recovery, workers throughout the country rushed to join unions, with high hopes that Roosevelt and the AFL would cure their ills. In the Appalachian hills they sang:

When you all work for the NRA
You work shorter hours and get the same pay
Sweet thing, baby mine.¹²

The great mass of unorganized industrial workers flooded into such industrial unions as the United Mine Workers, and where none existed, they joined the newly formed "federal locals" directly under the AFL. In 1933, the United Mine Workers used the NRA to sign up tens of thousands of members simply on the slogan, "The President wants you to join the union"—admitting only if challenged that they meant the president of the union, not of the United States.

Nineteen Thirty-Four

With the passage of Section 7A, longshoremen in San Francisco, like workers elsewhere, began pouring into the available unions. During July and August 1933, nearly 95 percent of the San Francisco longshoremen joined the International Longshoremen's Association.¹³

Their greatest grievance was the shape-up, a system of hiring that the longshoremen referred to as "the slave market." Every morning at 6 a.m., everyone seeking a day's work longshoring would crowd along the Embarcadero, where the foremen would pick out those they wanted for the day. The effect was that longshoremen could never count on steady work, had to suck up to or even bribe the foremen, and had to work to exhaustion or not be hired again. *

When the ILA made no attempt to challenge the shape-up, the more militant workers began forming a rank-and-file movement within the union. (Its most prominent figure was an Australian, Harry Bridges, and it included many members of the Communist Party.) The rank-and-file movement forced the calling of a West Coast convention in February 1934, from which paid officers of the union were excluded as delegates, and pressured union officials to accept a program for which they had no desire to fight: abolition of the shape-up and its replacement by a union hiring hall, with a strike if this demand was not accepted within two weeks.

Faced with a strike, the Waterfront Employers Association made a somewhat vague offer to recognize the ILA and set up a dispatching hall whose control was not specified. The ILA leaders accepted the proposal, but the membership repudiated it and suspended the local president for being "too conservative." On May 9, longshoremen in Bellingham, Seattle, Tacoma, Aberdeen, Portland, Astoria, San Francisco, Oakland, Stockton, San Pedro, and San Diego struck, cutting off nearly 2,000 miles of coastland.

The lines of the conflict rapidly began to spread. The employers imported large numbers of strikebreakers—eventually 1,700, many of them recruited from the University of California—to unload the ships. The strikebreakers were housed in floating boarding houses (where union employees refused to work) and thus protected from pickets; those who sneaked ashore, however, were systematically brutalized by the strikers. Strikebreaking would have seriously threatened the strike, but within four days, mass meetings of Teamsters in San Francisco, Los Angeles, Oakland, and Seattle decided overwhelmingly not to haul goods to and from the docks, thus making the strikebreakers' efforts fruitless; many of the Teamsters joined

The longshoremen strike would punish
 been broken of 40% for the Teamsters honor
 their picket lines - why ~~couldn't~~ did the
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the picket lines as well. In San Francisco, as much as 70 percent of the Teamsters' work was on the waterfront. The feelings stirred by seeing the struggle of the longshoremen, combined with their own fear that if the longshoremen were broken the Teamsters would be attacked next, gave them strong motivation for sympathetic action. Soon the strike began to idle unrelated industries; lumber mills shut down in Oregon, for example, because they were unable to ship their products.

At the same time, the strike spread to other maritime workers. As ships came to port, entire crews walked off and joined the longshoremen. By May 21, 4,500 sailors, marine firemen, water tenders, cooks, stewards, and licensed officers had struck. They established a Joint Marine Strike Committee with five representatives from each of the ten unions involved. Breaking a tradition of scabbing on each other, each agreed not to return to work until the others had settled.

Meanwhile, the longshoremen resisted numerous efforts by government and union officials to get them to work without the union hiring hall. At the outset, the strike had been postponed at the request of President Roosevelt, who appointed a Federal Mediation Board; the proposal this board worked out with the employers and West Coast leaders of the ILA was repudiated by the rank and file, who went ahead and struck anyway. Next, Assistant Secretary of Labor Ed McGrady, Roosevelt's top mediator, flew to San Francisco and asked the longshoremen to empower their negotiating committee to enter a final settlement; but the San Francisco local voted unanimously to refuse and to require any agreement to be ratified by the strikers themselves. Then Joseph Ryan, president of the ILA, flew to San Francisco and announced absurdly that "the only vital point at issue" was "recognition of the ILA." When Ryan negotiated a settlement similar to past proposals, he was met with catcalls and voted down almost unanimously by the ILA locals in Portland and San Francisco.¹⁴

Two weeks later, Ryan signed a new agreement to send the longshoremen back to work; Michael Casey and Dave Beck, San Francisco and Seattle Teamster bosses, guaranteed the agreement by promising to resume working on the docks; but Ryan was again booed by his

own membership, which rejected the agreement by acclamation at a mass meeting in San Francisco. Finally, President Roosevelt appointed a National Longshoremen's Board to mediate the conflict.

Despite the efforts at pacification, the conflict grew steadily more violent. On the first day of the strike, police broke up a 500-strong picket line. On May 28, pickets armed with brickbats fought police, who ended the battle by firing directly into the pickets with sawed-off shotguns after failing to quell them with billy clubs and tear gas. As *The Clarion*, the organ of the conservative Central Labor Council, put it, "To parade strike-breakers through the streets on the way to the docks under police guard and to use public property and city employees in conveying these outcasts to their nefarious work was an invitation to violence."¹⁵

After forty-five days, San Francisco's economy was reeling and the business community decided the time had come to break the strike. At a meeting on June 23, representatives of the Employers' Industrial Association, the Chamber of Commerce, police commissioners, the chief of police, and harbor commissioners agreed to open the port, with the assurance of the chief of police that "every available police officer in San Francisco will be detailed to the waterfront to give the necessary protection."¹⁶

On July 3, a cordon of freight cars was set up, guarded by 700 policemen armed with tear gas and riot guns. A police captain brandishing a revolver declared, "The port is open," and five trucks manned by strikebreakers rolled from the pier toward the warehouses. Thousands of strikers and sympathizers on the picket line attacked the police lines. As *The New York Times* described it, "Mounted and foot police swung their clubs and hurled tear-gas bombs, strikers hurled bricks and rocks, battered heads with clubs and railroad spikes and smashed windows.... Mounted and foot police relentlessly drove the pickets behind these freightcar barriers. The safety line remained intact but on its fringes pandemonium raged."¹⁷ Twenty-five people were hospitalized as a result of the battle, about half pickets and half police.

After the Independence Day holiday, the battle resumed July 5. In the morning, police charged 2,000 pickets who had gathered to stop

trucks coming off the pier, and dispersed them after an hour and a half of street and barricade fighting. By the afternoon, a crowd of 5,000 gathered. When the police could no longer control them with gas, they switched to guns on a large scale. The crowd grew increasingly furious in the face of police shootings, and when the word spread that the National Guard would take over the waterfront that evening, pickets made a last concerted effort to seize the belt-line railway on the waterfront before the troops arrived. Unarmed demonstrators were no match for the police, however, and were driven back in a bloody battle. One reporter wrote, "It was as close to actual war as anything but war itself could be."¹⁸ Two strikers and a bystander were killed and 115 people were hospitalized.

That night the governor of California ordered in 1,700 National Guard soldiers, who enclosed the Embarcadero with barbed wire and machine gun nests, patrolled the area with armored cars, and were given orders to shoot to kill. Under this protection, freight moved steadily from the docks to the warehouses. The balance of forces had shifted decisively against the strikers. As Harry Bridges said, "We cannot stand up against police, machine guns, and National Guard bayonets."¹⁹

But the conflict had generated a whole new body of allies for the strikers. In the early weeks of June, the feeling had begun to spread among San Francisco workers that a general strike might be necessary to back up the longshoremen. The strikebreaking activities of the police daily roused their ire. A general strike was felt to be a way of expressing their power against all employers. Even relatively conservative workers felt the need to protect themselves against the employer offensive. *The Clarion* reported: "Workers in other groups have been impelled to stand behind the marine and waterfront workers under the general belief that they represented the 'shock troops' in a general defense of the Trade Union position against the assault upon the union shop and for the installation of the 'open shop,' even in industries which had recognized union contracts for generations."²⁰

In mid-June, the painters' local circulated a letter among AFL unions requesting support for a general strike if necessary. On June 20, the machinists' local voted to join such a strike if it were called. The

longshoremen began sending small committees and then mass delegations of fifty to four hundred workers to other unions asking for support by a vote for a general strike.

The movement for a general strike received its strongest encouragement, however, from the violent opening of the port. The street fighting itself had roused a spirit of combat, and the killing of unarmed strikers by police roused the resentment of virtually all the city's workers; the sending in of the National Guard to break the strike aggravated them still further. With every other tactic defeated, many workers saw a general strike as the only way to save the longshoremen from defeat.

The day after the entry of the National Guard, the Joint Marine Strike Committee appealed for a general strike. The next day, fourteen unions in San Francisco voted to strike in sympathy with the longshoremen, while similar sentiment developed in Portland and Seattle. At the crucial meeting of the Teamsters, Local President Casey warned the drivers that their contract restricted and their union constitution forbade sympathetic strikes; but Teamsters voted 1,220 to 271 to strike Thursday, July 12 if the maritime strike had not been settled. "Nothing on earth," Casey said, "could have prevented that vote. In all my thirty years of leading these men I have never seen them so worked up."²¹

On July 9, a mass funeral procession for the strikers killed in the opening of the port rallied tens of thousands. As Paul Eliel, director of industrial relations for the Employers' Industrial Association, later wrote, "the funeral was one of the strangest and most dramatic that had ever moved along Market Street." It created a "tremendous wave of sympathy for the workers," and with it "a general strike ... became for the first time a practical and realizable objective."²² By July 12, twenty-one unions had voted to strike, most of them unanimously. At a second mass meeting, Teamsters sang, "We'll hang Michael Casey from a sour apple tree," and shouted him down when he argued passionately against a strike.²³

A partial general strike was under way by July 12. Four thousand Bay Area Teamsters walked out and picketed the roads entering the city, stopping all trucks except those carrying exempted goods, such

What events ~~lead~~ common workers to participate in a general strike? Depression Decade 171

as milk, bread, and laundry. In the city, Teamsters established a system of strike exemptions, as in Seattle in 1919:

San Francisco's food and gasoline problems ... were taken to the Teamster's Union.... Emissaries of corporations and hospitals made their way through the crowd of striking truck drivers up the dingy stairs and waited their turn at the door behind which union officials sat.... Anyone not a representative in some way of a charitable institution or hospital was turned away with curt words before he reached that door, usually to the accompaniment of jeering laughter.... Union truck placards were granted without ado to the hospitals.²⁴

Restaurants began to shut down. The next day, 2,500 taxi drivers were scheduled to walk out. Cleaners and dryers struck for their own demands. Boilermakers in sixty shops left their jobs.

The Central Labor Council was now faced with a general strike of which it wanted no part. Three weeks before, it had passed a resolution condemning the "Communist" leadership of the maritime strikers, and resolutions calling for a general strike had been ruled out of order at its meetings week after week. After the forcible opening of the port, when the Joint Maritime Strike Committee had appealed for a general strike, the Central Labor Council did not even take up the question. Instead, it appointed a "Strike Strategy Committee" of seven conservative union officials, none of them from the striking unions.

"The action of the conservative element in the labor council in naming the strike strategy committee ... successfully sidetracked the plan of more radical groups to incite and promote a general walkout immediately," *The New York Times* reported.²⁵ The committee was appointed to kill the strike, not to organize it.

The momentum of general strike sentiment was too great, however, for the city's AFL leadership to head off. When a convention called by the Strike Strategy Committee met Friday, July 13, the general strike, though not yet complete, was already a fact. The convention, with five members from each union, voted 315 to 15 for a general strike. By Monday, the strike deadline, virtually all San Francisco unions except the bakery wagon and milk wagon drivers—who

was the general strike supported by all of the unions?

Why were "conservative" union leaders opposed to the General Strike?

Depression Decade

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were instructed to stay at work—had voted to join the strike. The Oakland Central Labor Council similarly voted for a general strike. The movement spread up the Pacific Coast. In Portland, the Central Labor Council voted for a general strike but left the date to a strategy committee.

Unable to stop the strike, the leadership of the San Francisco Central Labor Council decided to assume direction to bring it to an end as quickly as possible. They established a General Strike Committee of Twenty-five, all conservatives. The head was Edward Vandeleur, who as chairman of the Central Labor Council had consistently opposed the strike, and the vice-chairman was C.W. Deal. Deal was head of the ferryboatmen's union, one of the few in the city not to join the strike. Vandeleur was head of the municipal streetcar workers' union. When his members walked out on Monday, he ordered them back to work on the grounds that they were breaking civil service contracts; thus on the very first day of the strike he initiated the first return to work. The General Strike Committee made no provision for meeting the needs of the strikers and the city's population; instead it issued an ever-increasing number of strike exemptions, which created the impression that the strike was dissolving. The General Strike Committee also organized its own strike police to keep pickets from interfering with workers it had sent back to work.

According to the press, Harry Bridges planned to recommend "the immediate establishment of food distribution depots in every section of the city, with sub-committees of strikers to prevent profiteering, to regulate distribution of vegetables and fruit, and to prevent hardship."²⁶ But this system never developed. "The general strike was broken by the return of the carmen and the lifting of restrictions upon food and gasoline," Bridges concluded. And as an article in *Editor and Publisher* pointed out, the bitterly anti-strike newspapers fully understood and abetted the objective of the labor leaders: "Newspaper editorials built up the strength and influence of the conservative leaders and aided in splitting the conservative membership away from the radicals."²⁷

Nevertheless, the strike effectively crippled the life of San Francisco. Some 130,000 workers were out. With taxis, trolleys, and street

What Role did the media play in undermining the General Strike?

why would small shops close
in sympathy with the
strike?

Strike

railway workers out and gasoline for private cars embargoed by the strikers, transportation in the Bay Area virtually stopped. Many small shops closed down in sympathy with the strike or because delivery of goods had been halted. Food trucks were given permits to enter the city and markets remained open; a limited number of restaurants were permitted to run; gasoline was supplied for doctors; electric power workers and newspaper printers continued to work. The violence that had raged for weeks came to a halt with the general strike.

The strike was met with a powerful counter-attack. Five hundred special police were sworn in and the National Guard contingent was raised to 4,500, complete with infantry, machine gun, tank, and artillery units. State officials were poised on the edge of declaring martial law. The leading California publishers set up a headquarters at the Palace Hotel and undertook a coordinated attack on the strike, combining a desire to weaken trade unions with an effort to embarrass President Roosevelt.

In addition, they had a real fear that the general strike was the beginning of a revolt that might sweep the country. Typical was an editorial in *The Los Angeles Times*: "The situation in San Francisco is not correctly described by the phrase 'general strike.' What is actually in progress there is an insurrection, a Communist-inspired and led revolt against organized government. There is but one thing to be done—put down the revolt with any force necessary."²⁸

The National Recovery Administration chief, General Hugh S. Johnson, arrived in San Francisco and after meeting with the publishers declared the general strike a "menace to the government" and a "civil war." The governor declared that the general strike "challenges the authority of government to maintain itself," and Senator Hiram Johnson, California's elder statesman, declared, "Here is revolution not only in the making but with the initial actualities."²⁹ President Roosevelt followed the strike closely, but felt it had been provoked by the employers and saw no need to intervene. Secretary of Labor Frances Perkins assured him that the General Strike Committee of Twenty-five was "in charge of the whole strike ... and represents conservative leadership."³⁰

On July 17, Charles Wheeler, vice-president of the McCormick Steamship Lines, said that raids on radical centers would start soon, with government consent. That day, a series of vigilante raids began up and down the coast on the Marine Workers Industrial Union, the Ex-Service Men's League, *The Western Worker*, and many other radical organizations and gathering places. According to *The New York Times*, the vigilantes were connected with the Committee of 500 organized by prominent citizens at the behest of Mayor [Angelo] Rossi.³¹ The raids followed a regular pattern: men in leather jackets drove up, broke in, smashed windows, furniture, and typewriters, and beat up those within; the police invariably arrived just after the attackers departed and arrested those they had beaten. U.S. Army and immigration officials interrogated many of those arrested and held some of them for possible deportation. Radicals faced a virtual reign of terror.

The general strike succeeded in preventing the crushing of the longshoremen for the moment, but the Central Labor Council leadership began maneuvering to bring it to an end almost before it began. On July 18, President Green of the AFL disowned the strike. On the second day of the strike, the General Strike Committee called for arbitration of all issues, thus giving up the strike's basic demand, the union hiring hall. The third day, it reopened all union restaurants and butcher shops and ended embargoes on gasoline and fuel oil. This put enormous pressure on those still striking. As the strike strategy committee in the East Bay declared, "it would be unfair to the unions to continue the strike in view of the return of some San Francisco organizations to work." By the fourth day, the General Strike Committee voted 191 to 174 to end the general strike.³²

With the end of the general strike, the longshoremen were forced to accept arbitration of all issues by the Longshoremen's Board. The board established jointly operated hiring halls with union dispatchers but employer choice among available workers. Each employer won the right "to introduce labor-saving devices and to institute such methods of discharging and loading cargo as he considers best suited to the conduct of his business."³³

This far from ended the struggle on the waterfront, however, for the longshoremen now moved to direct action on the job to fight the

why was the "union hiring hall" such a confusion issue?

speed-up authorized in the 1934 settlement. A journalist described the conflicts that followed:

[E]very dock gang elected from among themselves a so-called gang or dock steward.... There were endless disputes, some resulting in "job action" on the part of workers or quick strikes ("quickies") localized to one dock. Suddenly, in the midst of unloading a ship, the longshore gang would walk off, causing the stubborn employer sailing delay, considerable additional expense, and general irritation....

[T]he employer called the union hiring-hall for another gang, which came promptly enough, but as likely as not pulled another "quicky" an hour later; and so on, till the employer yielded to, say, a demand that the slingload be made two or three thousand instead of four thousand pounds.³⁴

Between January 1, 1937, and August 1, 1938, more than 350 such work stoppages occurred in the maritime industry on the Pacific Coast.³⁵

Another bloody struggle broke out at the Auto-Lite parts plant in Toledo, Ohio. The local AFL union struck, went back, and on April 12, 1934, struck again. Fewer than half the workers joined the strike, and the employers hired strikebreakers and kept the plants running. Under such conditions, the strike seemed doomed to failure, until a large number of unemployed workers began joining the picket lines. As a journalist in Toledo at the time wrote privately, "The point about Toledo was this: that it is nothing new to see organized unemployed appear in the streets, fight police, and raise hell in general. But usually they do this for their own ends, to protest against unemployment or relief conditions. At Toledo they appeared on the picket lines to help striking employees win a strike, though you would expect their interest would lie the other way—that is, in going down and getting the jobs the other men had laid down."³⁶

The Lucas County Unemployed League was affiliated with the American Workers Party, a small radical organization led by Rev. A.J. Muste, which emphasized mutual support of employed and unem-

ployed workers. American Workers Party leaders played an important part in the conflict.

When the strikers and unemployed blocked the plant gates with mass picketing, Auto-Lite obtained an injunction limiting them to twenty-five pickets at each gate. The Unemployed League, determined to "smash the injunction," continued picketing, and when leaders were arrested for contempt of court, hundreds of unemployed packed the courtroom and cheered and sang as the trial progressed. At noon on May 21, 1,000 rallied at the gates of the Toledo Auto-Lite plant. The next day 4,000 came to the noon rally, and the third day 6,000 rallied.

At this point, Sheriff David Krieger decided, as he later testified in court, that the time had come to take the offensive. Unwilling to rely on the local police, who were disaffected and sympathetic to the strikers, he deputized special police, paid for by Auto-Lite. Krieger then began arresting pickets, and a deputy began beating an old man in front of the crowd of 10,000 that had gathered. This was too much for the crowd, which proceeded to surround the Auto-Lite plant, holding 1,500 strikebreakers inside. The special deputies dropped tear gas on the crowd from the plant and attacked them with fire hoses, iron bars, and some gunfire. The crowd systematically collected bricks and stones, deposited them in piles around the streets, and heaved them through the factory windows. Three times the strikers broke into the factory and were driven out in hand-to-hand fighting. The battle raged for seven hours.

At dawn the next morning, 900 National Guard troops, complete with machine gun units, were rushed into Toledo from elsewhere in the state, since Sheriff Krieger was unwilling to call up the local guard. The guardsmen evacuated the strikebreakers from the plant, but failed to intimidate the crowds, who stoned them and drove them against the factory walls. The guardsmen advanced with bayonets. The crowd drove them back again, and were in turn pushed back with bayonets. As the crowd advanced the third time, the troops were ordered to fire; they let go, killing two and wounding fifteen. Even this did not disperse the crowd, which attacked again that night and was again fired on by the National Guard.

Only the sending of four more militia companies to the plant—more troops than ever before seen in Ohio in peacetime—and the agreement of Auto-Lite to close down finally pacified the protesters.

Meanwhile, eighty-five local unions pledged to support a general strike in sympathy with another dispute, growing from the demands of workers at the electric power company. The strike was headed off when the electric power company offered a 22 percent wage increase and union recognition.

Next, the militia arrested leaders of the unemployed who had supported the Auto-Lite strike; one was seized and held incommunicado. But with their plants still closed, the auto parts makers finally agreed to recognize the union, grant a wage increase, and rehire the strikers. Rehiring proceeded slowly as the plants reopened until a crowd began gathering at the Auto-Lite gates and the company, fearing a renewal of direct action, rehired all the strikers at once.

Meanwhile, in Minneapolis a conflict developed that clearly demonstrated the process of polarization of social classes occurring throughout the country. Early in 1934, Teamsters who worked in Minneapolis coal yards struck, catching the employers by surprise, and closed down sixty-five of the town's sixty-seven coal yards. The employers capitulated in three days and granted recognition to Teamsters Local 574.

The local had a catch-all charter, making it virtually industrial in character, and truck drivers and helpers in all trades began pouring in after the strike. Unofficial leadership for the unions was provided by the Dunne brothers (Grant, Miles, and Vincent Raymond) and Carl Skoglund, who were members of the Communist League, American followers of Leon Trotsky. When the trucking companies refused to sign any agreement with the union, the Teamsters voted to strike at a mass meeting May 12. Most businesses were affected by the strike. As the sheriff later put it, "They had the town tied up tight. Not a truck could move in Minneapolis." The only exceptions were the unionized milk, ice, and coal companies, which were given strike exemptions.³⁷

The key tactic of the strike was the "flying squadron," a system of mobile pickets operating out of the strike headquarters, an old garage

rented for the strike. There were never less than 500 strikers at the headquarters, day or night. In the dispatchers' room, four telephones took in messages from picket captains throughout the city with instructions to call in every ten minutes:

Truck attempting to move load of produce from Berman Fruit, under police convoy. Have only ten pickets, send help.

Successfully turned back five trucks entering city.... Am returning Cars 42 and 46 to headquarters.³⁸

On the basis of such information, the dispatchers sent cars from the garage wherever they were needed. A motorcycle squad cruised the city reporting trouble. The strikers listened to police radio instructions on a special short-wave radio, and conducted phone calls in code when their phones were tapped. Pickets guarded fifty roads into the city, turning back non-union trucks. A crew of 120 prepared food day and night; at the peak of the strike, 10,000 people ate at the headquarters in a single day. A hospital was established with two doctors and three nurses in constant attendance. And a machine shop with fifteen auto mechanics kept the 100 trucks and cars of the flying squadrons in repair. Guards policed the headquarters and stood watch on the roof with tommy guns. Constant PA announcements and nightly mass meetings attended by thousands of strikers and supporters kept strikers in touch.³⁹ A rank-and-file committee of 100 truck drivers formed the official strike authority.

Support for the strike among other Minneapolis workers was passionate. Thirty-five thousand building trades workers walked out in sympathy, as did all the taxi drivers in the city. The Farm Holiday Association, a militant farmers' organization, made substantial contributions of food, and other unions contributed to the strike fund. Hundreds of non-Teamster workers showed up at strike headquarters daily, saying, "Use us, this is our strike."⁴⁰

The city polarized as the business forces, too, began to organize. Leading them was the Citizens' Alliance, one of the most powerful employers' associations in the country, with its own corps of undercover informers. It was dedicated to keeping unionism out of Minneapolis and for a generation it had been almost completely

Timing of strike?
All 3 strikes?

successful. Business leaders developed their own strike headquarters with barracks, hospital, and commissary. As the conflict deepened, they called for a "mass movement of citizens" to break the strike and began organizing a "citizens' army,"⁴¹ many of whose members were deputized as special police.⁴²

With an unusual clarity, two organized social classes stood face to face, poised for battle. The battle was seriously joined on Monday, May 21. A group of men and women pickets had been severely beaten when they were sent into a police trap by an informer who had infiltrated the strike headquarters. One striker described the effect: "Nobody had carried any weapon or club in the first days of the strike. We went unarmed but we'd learned our lesson. All over headquarters you'd see guys making saps or sawing off lead pipe."⁴³

As the citizens' army began to occupy the market and move trucks, the strikers hit with military precision. A strike leader explained:

We built up our reserves in this way. At short time intervals during an entire day, we sent fifteen or twenty pickets pulled in from all over the city into the Central Labor Union headquarters on Eighth Street. So that although nobody knew it, we had a detachment of six hundred men there, each armed with clubs, by Monday morning. Another nine hundred or so we held in reserve at strike headquarters. In the market itself, pickets without union buttons were placed in key positions. There remained scattered through the city, at their regular posts, only a skeleton picket line. The men in the market were in constant communication through motorcycles and telephone with headquarters. The special deputies [citizens' army] were gradually pushed by our pickets to one side and isolated from the cops. When that was accomplished, the signal was given and the six hundred men poured out of Central Labor Union headquarters. They marched in military formation, four abreast, each with their clubs, to the market. They kept on coming. When the socialites, the Alfred Lindleys and the rest who had expected a little picnic with a mad rabble, saw this bunch, they began to get some idea what the score was. Then we called on the pickets from strike headquarters who marched into the center of the market and encircled the police. They [the police] were put right in the center with no way out. At intervals we made sallies on them to separate a few. This kept up for a couple of hours, till finally they drew their guns.

We had anticipated this would happen, and that then the pickets would be unable to fight them. You can't lick a gun with a club. The correlation of forces becomes a little unbalanced. So we picked out a striker, a big man and utterly fearless, and sent him in a truck with twenty-five pickets. He was instructed to drive right into the formation of cops and stop for nothing. We knew he'd do it. Down the street he came like a bat out of hell, with his horn honking and into the market arena. The cops held up their hands for him to stop, but he kept on; they gave way and he was in the middle of them. The pickets jumped out on the cops. We figured by intermixing with the cops in hand-to-hand fighting, they would not use their guns because they would have to shoot cops as well as strikers. Cops don't like to do that.

Casualties for the day included for the strikers a broken collar bone, the cut-open skull of a picket who swung on a policeman and hit a striker by mistake as the policeman dodged, and a couple of broken ribs. On the other side, roughly thirty policemen were taken to the hospital.⁴⁴

The Monday battle was not decisive, however, and the reserves on both sides mobilized in the market again the next day. An extra 500 special police were sworn in, and according to labor expert Charles R. Walker's study of the strike, *American City*, "Nearly every worker who could afford to be away from his job that day, and some who couldn't, planned to be on hand in the market."⁴⁵ Twenty to thirty thousand people showed up. No battle was planned. The melee began when a merchant started to move crates of tomatoes and a picket threw them through his store window. The pickets, armed with lead pipes and clubs, fought viciously with the police, driving them out of the market within an hour, then continuing to battle them all over the city. By nightfall there were no police to be seen in Minneapolis. Strikers were directing downtown traffic.

After the "Battle of Deputies Run," a settlement of sorts was patched together by the governor and federal mediators, leaving the real issues unsettled, and events moved toward a second strike. The chief of police requested a virtual doubling of his budget to add 400 men to the force, maintain a training school, and buy machine guns, rifles, bayonets, steel helmets, riot clubs, and motorcycles. The em-

players sponsored an enormous press and radio campaign against the union, stressing an attack by the head of the International Brotherhood of Teamsters calling the local leadership communist. The workers laid in food for a forty-day siege.

On July 5, the largest mass meeting in the history of Minneapolis, preceded by a march of farmer and labor groups with two airplanes flying overhead, mobilized support for the Teamsters and displayed the forces that would support them in the event of another show-down. When the Teamsters struck again on July 16, they re-established in still more perfected form the strike organization, published a hugely popular strike daily paper, *The Organizer* (whose circulation went from nothing to 10,000 in two days), and kept farmer support by allowing all members of farmers' organizations to drive their trucks into town and establish their own market.

The first few days of the strike were peaceful, but the police then tried to break it by terror. On July 20, a truck accompanied by fifty police armed with shotguns started moving in the market. A second truck with ten pickets arrived and cut across the convoy's path. The police opened fire, and within ten minutes sixty-seven persons, including thirteen bystanders, were wounded, two fatally. A commission appointed by the governor to investigate the "riot" later concluded:

Police took direct aim at the pickets and fired to kill.

Physical safety of police was at no time endangered....

At no time did pickets attack the police....

The truck movement in question was not a serious attempt to move merchandise, but a "plant" arranged by the police.

The police department did not act as an impartial police force to enforce law and order, but rather became an agency to break the strike.

Police actions have been to discredit the strike and the Truck Drivers' Union so that public sentiment would be against the strikers.⁴⁶

These actions were hardly accidental. As the secretary of the Citizens Alliance, whose leaders met with the police chief just before the attack, stated later, "Nobody likes to see bloodshed, but I tell you after

the police had used their guns on July 20 we felt that the strike was breaking.... There are very few men who will stand up in a strike when there is a question of they themselves getting killed."⁴⁷

That night an enormous protest meeting ended in a march on City Hall to lynch the mayor and police chief. The march was headed off by National Guard troops. This, together with a huge mass funeral for one of the killed pickets—attended by an estimated 50,000 to 100,000 workers—revealed that the massacre had strengthened rather than undermined the workers' determination and solidarity.

In this situation Farmer-Labor Party governor Floyd B. Olson—who had personally contributed \$500 to the strike fund and stated, "I am not a liberal ... I am a radical"—declared martial law. The governor's official policy was that neither pickets nor trucks (except those delivering food) would operate; but by the second day of martial law, military authorities announced that "more than half the trucks in Hennepin County were operating."⁴⁸ Faced with the imminent breaking of the strike, the workers decided at a mass meeting attended by 25,000 to resume picketing in defiance of the governor and the National Guard. The governor replied by surrounding the strike headquarters at 4 a.m., August 1, occupying it, arresting most of the top strike leaders, and instructing the rank and file to elect new leaders. The strikers replied with intensified picketing. As the press reported: "Marauding bands of pickets roamed the streets of Minneapolis today in automobiles and trucks, striking at commercial truck movement in widespread sections of the city.... National Guardsmen in squad cars made frantic efforts to clamp down. The continued picketing was regarded as a protest over the military arrest of William Brown and the Dunnes, strike leaders, together with 68 others during and after Guardsmen raided strike headquarters and the Central Labor Union."⁴⁹

Charles R. Walker wrote: "The strike's conduct had been such that a thousand lesser leaders had come out of the ranks and the pickets themselves by this time had learned their own jobs. The arrest of the leaders, instead of beheading the movement, infused it, at least temporarily, with demoniac fury."⁵⁰ "We established 'curb headquarters' all over the city," one worker said. "We had twenty of them."⁵¹

In San Francisco in the South
 Striker
 workers ignored union leadership
 why?

In the face of this situation, the governor was forced to back down. He released the captured leaders, turned back the strike headquarters, and raided the Citizens Alliance to save face with his labor constituents. The strike continued and with the city reeling after a month of conflict, the employers succumbed to the enormous pressures for a settlement and capitulated. The strike supporters celebrated with a twelve-hour binge.

The most extensive conflict of the NRA period was the national textile strike of 1934. The Depression hit the textile industry long before the rest of America and by early 1929 the mill towns, especially in the South, were seething with discontent. The great grievance was the "stretch-out." At one mill at Monroe, North Carolina, for example, spinners were required to work twelve rather than eight spindles, four doffers did the work of five, and crews of four carders were cut to three. The result, as labor researcher Herbert Lahne wrote in *The Cotton Mill Worker*, was that "a powder train of strikes flashed through an astonished South," many of them "without unionism at all and ... under purely local leadership whose main concern was ... the stretch-out."⁵² We have described above one such explosion at High Point, North Carolina.

With the coming of the NRA, textile workers flooded into the United Textile Workers union. Its paper membership went from 27,500 in 1932 to 270,000 in 1934.

The NRA Cotton Textile Industry Committee was headed by George Sloan, who happened to be the chief industry spokesman as well. The code set a minimum wage of \$12 per week in the South and \$13 in the North. It utterly failed to prevent more stretch-out, or to stop employers from firing workers who joined the union.⁵³ Further, to restrict over-production, the NRA ordered a cut-back to thirty hours a week per shift, reducing wages 25 percent. The UTW threatened to strike the industry, but withdrew the threat in exchange for a seat on the Cotton Textile Industrial Relations Board and a government "study" of the industry.

Textile workers were furious at the union's backdown. For the Southern cotton mill workers, as labor historian Irving Bernstein put

why did the NRA
 have such a positive
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 it, "NRA had become a gigantic fraud."⁵⁴ In Alabama, forty of forty-two UTW locals voted to strike, and 20,000 workers walked out on July 16, 1934. The president of the UTW advised workers in other states not to join the strike, adding to resentment at the cancellation of the previous strike. "He killed the other strike," a worker in Birmingham remarked. "We're not going to let him kill this one."⁵⁵

The strike held firmly, revealing an unexpected commitment and solidarity, and a month later a UTW national convention, with the militant Southern rank and file in control, voted without opposition for a general strike in the industry, and required the officers to call it within two weeks. The workers condemned NRA bitterly and were kept from boycotting it only by a special appeal from union officers and prominent outsiders. The strike began in North Carolina on Labor Day, September 3, 1934, when 65,000 workers walked out. National Guardsmen were ordered to guard three mills that day in South Carolina where the strike was expected the next day. The workers not only quit work, but immediately formed "flying squadrons," which moved through the area, closing non-striking mills. A reporter described a typical example: "Workers in the Shelby, N.C., mills, thoroughly organized, refused to permit the opening of their plants early today, formed a motorcade which swept into King's Mountain, a dozen miles away, and succeeded in closing eleven plants. They met with no resistance and persuaded 2,800 non-union workers to quit their posts."⁵⁶

The strikers showed creativity in other ways. For example, at Macon, Georgia (and later at various other points), a group of pickets, many of them women, sat down on a plant railroad track and prevented the movement of trains carrying finished goods. Before and at the start of the strike, mass demonstrations were held throughout the South, including a meeting of 1,000 at Charlotte, North Carolina, and a parade of 5,000 in Gastonia, North Carolina, designed to show the workers' strength.

The strike spread rapidly throughout the East Coast. Newspaper surveys reported 200,000 out on September 4 and 325,000 out the next day.⁵⁷ The flying squadrons were largely responsible: "Moving with the speed and force of a mechanized army, thousands of pickets in

trucks and automobiles scurried about the countryside in the Carolinas, visiting mill towns and villages and compelling the closing of the plants ... Strikers in groups ranging from 200 to 1,000 assembled about mills and demanded that they be closed.... The speed of the pickets in their motor cavalcades and their surprise descent on point after point makes it difficult to follow their movements and makes impossible any adequate preparation by mill owners or local authorities to meet them."⁵⁸

What happened when the flying squadrons arrived depended on conditions of the moment, the mood of the crowd, the degree of resistance, and similar factors. Sometimes they simply picketed peacefully, at other times they battled guards, and at times they entered mills, unbelted machinery, broke threads, and fought non-strikers.

Although the flying squadrons created a sensation throughout the country, they were a natural form of action in isolated mill towns. They were at first tolerated and perhaps encouraged by union officials, but as the squadrons led to confrontations, union officials tried to bring them to a halt. Francis Gorman, chairman of the UTW strike committee, repudiated their use and denied that they were ever sanctioned by the national leadership."⁵⁹

Practically from the beginning of the strike, confrontations and small-scale violence developed in numerous places. In Fall River, Massachusetts, a crowd of 10,000 imprisoned 300 strikebreakers in a mill, and in North Carolina pickets stormed a mill in which strikebreakers were working. The flying squadrons and other mass actions developed a momentum of their own, and as early as September 5, *The New York Times* warned on page one: "The grave danger of the situation is that it will get completely out of the hands of the leaders. Indications of that were in evidence today." Women were reported to be "taking an increasingly active part in the picketing, egging on the men," with "the pickets apparently prepared to stop at nothing to obtain their objectives."⁶⁰ The *Times* added ominously, "The growing mass character of the picketing operations is rapidly assuming the appearance of military efficiency and precision and is something entirely new in the history of American labor struggles. Observers ... declared that if the mass drive continued to gain momentum at the

speed at which it was moving today, it will be well nigh impossible to stop it without a similarly organized opposition with all the implications such an attempt would entail."⁶¹

The opposition was not long in starting. On September 5, the governor of North Carolina called out the National Guard to aid local authorities, declaring, "The power of the State has been definitely challenged" and "local authorities have proven unequal to the test." More National Guardsmen were ordered out in South Carolina, and on September 9, partial martial law was established in that state.⁶² The governor declared that a "state of insurrection" existed.⁶³ Mills in the Carolinas were reported to be "feverishly preparing to resist ... by mobilizing special guards equipped with shotguns and tear gas bombs and by arming workers who remained at the looms."⁶⁴ But as a reporter wrote from the strike center in North Carolina, "Despite efforts of strike leaders to prevail upon the strike pickets 'to put on the brakes,' ... picketing activity showed no abatement."⁶⁵

More than fifty strike squadrons were in action in the Carolinas, in detachments of 200 to 650. They moved south on a 110-mile front between Gastonia, North Carolina, and Greenville, South Carolina, garrisoning the towns along the line of battle to ensure that the mills would stay closed. As they approached Greenville, squadrons were met by National Guardsmen who informed them they had orders to "shoot to kill," but "the strikers, apparently undeterred by the presence of the troops, were determined to capture Greenville,"⁶⁶ where the strike had not yet spread.

The conflict quickly became more violent. Indeed, "the situation was rapidly assuming the character of industrial civil war."⁶⁷ On September 5, a striker and a special deputy were killed in a two-hour battle at a mill in Trion, Georgia (population 2,000); a policeman shot three pickets, one fatally, in Augusta; 2,500 textile workers rioted in Lowell, Massachusetts; and mill officials' cars were attacked in Danielson, Connecticut; Macon, Georgia; and other points.⁶⁸

On September 6 at Honea Path, South Carolina, sheriff's deputies and armed strikebreakers fired on pickets: "Without warning came the first shots, followed by many others, and for a few minutes there was bedlam. Striker after striker fell to the ground, with the cries of

wounded men sounding over the field and men and women running shrieking from the scene."⁶⁹

Seven pickets were killed and a score wounded in the attack. The killings were seen as marking "the beginning of the second bloody phase of the strike," as "one town after another reported completion of preparations to resist the flying squads and the picketing activity of the strikers."⁷⁰

Commissaries were set up in various textile centers, and hundreds of strikers canvassed for contributions of food and money. At Hazleton, Pennsylvania, 25,000 workers shut down the town in a one-day general strike in support of the textile workers on September 11. George Googe, chief AFL representative in the South, urged other workers to give support "without joining the strike," emphasizing that his appeal was not to be interpreted as "a move toward extending the strike to other industries."⁷¹ Workers from other industries joined in many of the confrontations that occurred at mills throughout the country, turning them into community struggles.

Meanwhile, violent conflict spread through New England. The first strike shooting there occurred in Saylesville, Rhode Island, on September 10. A crowd of 600 pickets attempting to close a mill (particularly hated for having broken previous strikes) was driven back by state troopers with machine guns. A smaller group of pickets then tried to outflank the troopers and attack the rear of the plant; deputy sheriffs opened fire on them with buckshot. The next afternoon, a much larger crowd, estimated at 3,000 to 4,000, imprisoned strike-breaking employees in the mill. As the shift was due to end, the crowd surged forward, captured the mill gate, ripped up a fire hydrant, overturned a gate house, and appeared about to take possession of the plant. In reply, deputy sheriffs began firing buckshot into the crowd with automatic weapons, hitting five. Some 280 National Guard troops then rode into the scene on caissons. They were pelted with paving stones torn up by the pickets as they clubbed their way to the mill. The crowd tried unsuccessfully to capture the pumping station and set fire to the mill.

That night the pickets deployed themselves behind the tombstones of a nearby cemetery, and shouting "Let's get the militia!" 2,000 of

them broke through police lines and battled the troops.⁷² By the next afternoon, the crowd had grown to 5,000. Hurling pieces of grave-stones from the cemetery, they charged the troops and drove them back behind the barbed-wire enclosure surrounding the plant. The National Guard troops fired into the crowd, critically wounding three. That night another crowd stoned the guard, which again fired on them. In the face of such serious disorder, the Sayles plant finally decided to shut down, giving the signal for many other plants in the area to do the same.

By September 12, National Guard members were on duty in every New England state except Vermont and New Hampshire. At Danielson, Connecticut, 1,500 pickets battled state troopers. A flying squadron of 200 from Fall River, Massachusetts, was turned back from a factory in Dighton, Massachusetts, when it found every approach barricaded with sandbags by police and seventy-five special deputies armed with shotguns. Other confrontations occurred at Lawrence and Lowell, Massachusetts, and Lewiston, Maine, but the New England violence reached its peak at Woonsocket, Rhode Island.

The mill that was the original scene of rioting in Woonsocket had been organized six months before, at which point the union members were fired, causing much bitterness. On the evening of September 12, Governor T.F. Green of Rhode Island read a proclamation over the radio urging rioters to return to their homes. Instead, ever-increasing masses began to pour down on the Woonsocket Rayon Mill in a "sullen and rebellious mood." At midnight, a crowd of about 500 let fly a barrage of bricks at the police guards at the plant, then attacked. The police replied with tear gas grenades, many of which were caught and thrown back "with telling effect" by the crowd. Word of the conflict spread, and the crowd grew quickly to 2,000. At this point, National Guardsmen took a hand, firing 30 shots into the front ranks of the crowd, hitting four, one fatally. At the shooting, a correspondent reported, "The crowd went completely wild with rage.... News of the shooting, carried back into the heart of the city, brought recruits to the strikers' forces.... Men and women and boys too, pounded up and down the business district, and where they ran the crash of broken plate glass and tearing splintering wood was heard."⁷³ The crowd

grew to 8,000 and was only quelled by the arrival of two more companies of National Guardsmen, who put the city under military rule. The Woonsocket Rayon Mill, the source of the conflict, was closed.

Declaring that "there is a Communist uprising and not a textile strike in Rhode Island," Democratic governor Green called the legislature into special session to declare a state of insurrection and request federal troops. Acting under secret orders from Washington, detachments of regular Army troops began mobilizing at strategic points, prepared to leave for Rhode Island "at a moment's notice."⁷⁴

The union leadership agreed with the governor's assessment of the riots: "Communists ... were solely responsible for the serious uprisings that took place in both Saylesville and Woonsocket.... [The Rhode Island] strike committee has instructed each union to place trustworthy men and women of their unions at strategic points in strike areas for the sole purpose of cooperating with police and all other law enforcement agencies in driving Communists not only from strike areas but from the state."⁷⁵

The textile strike—like the industry—was centered in New England and the South, but it spread through the rest of the East Coast as well. In Pennsylvania, for example, 47,000 workers struck, eleven cars filled with special guards were attacked and some of them overturned, and, in Lancaster, police charged that women strikers were using "old-fashioned hat pins" to attack non-strikers.

Meanwhile, the struggle in the South reflected "a grim determination on both sides to hold on at any cost."⁷⁶ A road approaching the Cherryville mill in Gaston County, North Carolina, was dynamited September 10, as was a mill generator at Fayetteville, North Carolina, a few days later. Five pickets in a crowd of 400 wearing "peaceful picket" badges were bayoneted by soldiers as they yelled "scab" at strikebreakers entering a mill in Burlington, North Carolina. Non-striking workers in Aragon, Georgia, armed by their employer and led by a deputy sheriff, dispersed a flying squadron by threat of force.

By September 17, the Southern textile employers were ready for their big counter-offensive. They met in advance in Greenville, North Carolina, and planned "a gigantic effort ... to break through the strike lines and start the movement back to the mills."⁷⁷ An army of 10,000

National Guardsmen was mobilized in Georgia, South Carolina, North Carolina, Alabama, and Mississippi, supplemented by 15,000 armed deputies. Numerous Southern mills tried to reopen under heavy armed guard.

The *New York Times* described as typical the response of 1,000 pickets at the Hatch Hosiery Company in North Carolina: "Refusing to budge even when a wedge of troops with bayonets tried to cross the road to break their lines, the pickets shouted 'Boy Scouts!' and 'Tin Soldiers!' ... A committee of four pickets was assured that the mill would not resume operations during the day and the picket line dispersed until tomorrow."⁷⁸ Such confrontations continued all week throughout the South. The employers' efforts to stampede the strikers back to work failed overwhelmingly. On September 18, the Associated Press reported 421,000 textile workers were on strike, 20,000 more than the week before.

In Georgia, Governor Eugene Talmadge declared martial law. National Guardsmen started mass arrests of flying squadrons and incarcerated them without charges in what was described as a concentration camp near the spot where Germans had been interned during World War I. Thirty-four key strike leaders in whose names strike funds were held were arrested and held incommunicado, thus crippling the strike relief system in the state. Organizers were beaten and arrested throughout the South. By September 19, the death toll in the South had reached thirteen. Union officials stated September 20 that "force and hunger" were sending strikers back to the mills, but only 20,000 of 170,000 on strike in the South had returned to work in the previous six days, many of them to mills still too understaffed to operate, and they were offset by many thousands of additional workers who had joined the strike.⁷⁹

On September 20, the Board of Inquiry for the Cotton Textile Industry, which President Roosevelt had appointed toward the start of the strike, issued its report. A new Textile Labor Relations Board of "neutral" members should be established; it would set up a subcommittee to "study" workloads. The Federal Trade Commission should study the capacity of the industry to raise hours and employment and the Department of Labor should survey wages to see whether

differentials had been maintained. As Irving Bernstein noted, "There was little of tangible benefit to either the textile workers or U.T.W. ... In fact, the only recommendation that was immediate and tangible in effect was imposed on the union: to terminate the strike."⁸⁰ Nonetheless, the UTW strike committee hailed the board's recommendation as "an overwhelming victory" and on September 22 ordered the strikers back to work.⁸¹ Thus ended what labor economist Robert Brooks the next year described as "unquestionably the greatest single industrial conflict in the history of American organized labor."⁸²

President Roosevelt urged textile firms to rehire strikers without discrimination, but by October 23, the UTW reported, 339 mills had refused to do so, leaving thousands of workers unemployed. Martha Gellhorn, a novelist then working as a government investigator, wrote from North Carolina that textile workers "live in terror of being penalized for joining unions; and the employers live in a state of mingled rage and fear."⁸³

The textile workers felt an extreme disillusionment with both the government and the union. As Brooks concluded:

The thousands of militiamen, sheriffs, and armed strikebreakers which were thrown into strike territories and the numerous deaths at the hands of drunken deputies and nervous guardsmen linked the forces of law and order so clearly with the interests of the textile employers that northern newspaper reporters repeatedly referred to the situation as "the employers' offensive." The significance of this was not lost upon the strikers. In the space of a few weeks thousands of workers received a practical education in the philosophy of class relations which was clearly reflected in conversation, tactics, and general attitude.⁸⁴

Mill workers were likewise extremely bitter at the union and its officials for claiming a victory, calling off the strike, and putting their faith in government boards, when the employers had conceded nothing. Herbert Lahne, author of a study on the United Textile Workers Union, reported he found that "in many interviews with Southern cotton mill workers in 1938 this resentment was clearly expressed."⁸⁵

The UTW strike netted zero for the workers. - the employers did not concede a thing - The gov for all intents & purposes backed the mill owners

Sitdown

The bloody conflicts of 1934 certified the failure of the National Recovery Act's Section 7A. By the end of the year, workers who had previously looked to the NRA for a solution to their problems were referring to it as the National Run-Around. Local radicals—Communists in San Francisco, Musteites in Toledo, Trotskyists in Minneapolis—played important parts in the strikes of 1934. Significantly, in each case it was not their particular party line and party organization that was responsible for this, but the fact that their own militance coincided with that of the workers.

Observing the strikes of 1934, United Mine Workers head John L. Lewis, according to his biographer Saul Alinsky, "read the revolutionary handwriting on the walls of American industry"⁸⁶ and moved to establish the Committee for Industrial Organization (CIO) within the AFL to utilize the recently displayed working-class militance to establish unionism in the basic mass-production industries. New Dealers in Congress began pushing for a National Labor Relations Act to enforce the system of orderly collective bargaining in industry that the NRA had promised but had manifestly failed to establish. Meanwhile, the workers themselves, largely fed up with both the unions and the NRA, began to develop their own methods of struggle. The key weapon they created was the sitdown. The crucible in which it was forged was Akron, Ohio.

By the time of the Depression, Akron was the rubber center of America, home of the enormous Goodyear, Firestone, and Goodrich plants and more than twenty factories of lesser companies. At peak production, the Akron rubber industry employed nearly 40,000 workers, but by 1933 one-third to one-half of Akron's workers were unemployed, Firestone and half a dozen smaller rubber companies were closed down, and Goodyear was on a two-day week.⁸⁷

With the passage of the NRA in 1933, Akron's rubber workers poured into unions set up by local trade unionists. As journalist and novelist Ruth McKenney wrote in her over-dramatized but perceptive account of the Akron labor movement, *Industrial Valley*, "the first

g-? Politics - The Sixth - Teams were dependent - A would always be of the town