

Ch. 9

Who Built America?

Working People and the Nation's History

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9

Labor Democratizes America

1935-1939



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IN THE SECOND HALF of the 1930s, America's working people — organized into new industrial unions and allied with President Franklin D. Roosevelt — moved the nation toward a more democratic political and economic order. The roots of that transformation could be seen in the wave of strikes that mobilized so many workers in the summer of 1934 and in the remarkable Democratic congressional victory in the fall elections that year. Many of the new members of Congress stood well to the left of Roosevelt, in favor of an "industrial democracy" that would curb business power, enhance labor's voice, and increase government social spending. "Boys — this is our hour," exulted Harry Hopkins, FDR's top relief official. "We've got to get everything we want . . . now or never."

FDR and his progressive supporters pushed this program through Congress in 1935 and 1936, after which the president won reelection in a massive landslide. Emboldened workers instigated strikes throughout the industrial heartland, establishing a powerful set of new trade unions and putting working-class voters at the heart of the New Deal coalition that dominated American domestic politics for almost half a century. Women and African American workers made great strides in the new activist unions and played vital roles in the surge of cultural activities tied to the New Deal. Although the New Deal would encounter bitter opposition from the late 1930s on, American political and social life and the culture that engaged it had taken a democratic leap forward.

The Second New Deal

Although production had risen by almost 30 percent since early 1933, unemployment remained high in 1935. New Dealers blamed "underconsumption" —

Just Before the Tear Gas

On September 16, 1936, at the height of the Salinas Valley, California, lettuce strike, members of the Fruit and Vegetable Workers' Union blocked a downtown Salinas street. Their intent was to stop a convoy of trucks carrying produce harvested by strikebreakers. California State Police attacked the strikers shortly after this photo was taken. Harold Ellwood, *San Francisco Examiner*, September 17, 1936 — California Section, California State Library. Copyright 1936 San Francisco Examiner. Reprinted with permission.



a chronic weakness in consumer demand caused by low wages, an inequitable distribution of income, and a capitalist system that was no longer growing. Big business and the rich, the New Dealers insisted, would have to give up some of their wealth and power. In a burst of reform that historians have since come to call the "Second New Deal," FDR and most Democrats pushed for measures that would help workers to establish trade unions, find government-paid jobs, and retire with dignity. African Americans and women did not benefit as much as white males did under many of these new social programs, yet they continued to support FDR and push for equal rights. New Dealers also sought to break up the giant utility holding companies, raise taxes, and limit the power of banks. Business and commercial interests battled furiously against these measures—they called Roosevelt's tax plan a "soak the rich" scheme—and in the end, New Dealers had to settle for laws that were less sweeping than most wanted. But the conflict made it clear that the nation's politics had tilted to the left.

An Expanded Jobs Program New Dealers tackled the unemployment issue directly, with a series of programs that were more permanent and substantive than the ones the Civil Works Administration had thrown together so hurriedly two years before. In the spring of 1935, Congress passed a \$5 billion Emergency Relief Appropriations Act that funded new agencies designed to provide useful and creative employment to millions. One, the National Youth Administration, initiated work projects for more than 4.5 million students and young workers; another, the Resettlement Administration, aided the rural homeless, agricultural tenants, and owners of small farms.

But Harry Hopkins's Works Progress (later Projects) Administration (WPA) was the most important of these new programs. Unlike the Civil Works Administration, the WPA provided productive jobs, not relief. WPA workers built or improved more than 2,500 hospitals, 5,900 schools, 1,000 airport landing fields, and nearly 13,000 playgrounds. WPA employees saw themselves as workers and citizens, not as welfare cases. They organized unions, demanded higher pay, and lobbied for the continuation of the program when Congress began to cut it back at the end of the 1930s. Roosevelt had insisted that WPA wages be pegged at a level below those in the private sector; even so, the huge jobs program fulfilled a demand that spokespeople for the unemployed had been making for nearly a century. By the time of its demise in 1943, the agency had provided employment for eight million Americans.

The WPA had its greatest impact in the hard-hit industrial centers of the Northeast and Midwest, but it also provided jobs and built schools, bridges, and roads in rural areas of the South and West. The Rural Electrification Administration, which began as part of the WPA, inaugurated a

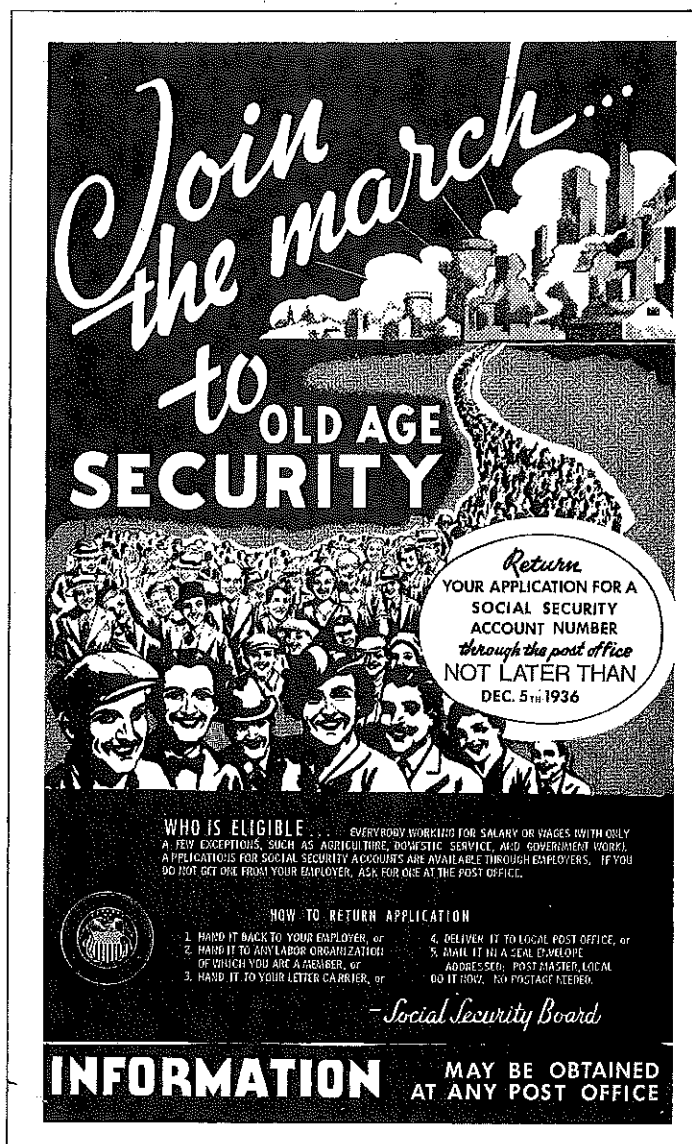
“power revolution” that transformed the lives of rural Americans. It quadrupled the number of farms that had electricity between 1930 and 1945, largely as a result of its support for rural cooperatives.

The Social Security Act During the first half of the twentieth century, many industrialized Western nations, most notably Great Britain, Germany, and the Scandinavian democracies, built “welfare states” that offered their working populations protection against the hazards of a market economy: unemployment, sickness, old-age insecurity, and the loss of the family breadwinner. American reformers had failed to establish a similar system of universal social insurance during the Progressive era. Veterans of that period, such as Secretary of Labor Frances Perkins, viewed the Second New Deal as an opportunity to compensate for that failure. A women’s network of New Dealers and social reformers (including First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt) joined forces to press for the enacting of laws that would protect women as well as male workers from destitution.

The president himself called for legislation that would provide cradle-to-grave security “against the hazards and vicissitudes of life.” This was a social, collective insurance program designed to protect the American people from the turmoil that was always present in a capitalist economy. In the late twentieth century, “Social Security” became synonymous with old-age insurance, but the Social Security Act that Congress passed in 1935 embodied a far larger conception of the government’s role. In providing social protection to all citizens, including unemployment insurance and aid for poor families, the law represented a fundamental break with traditional elitist notions that the poor and the unemployed were to blame for their condition.

The law contained two types of support for the elderly. Those who were destitute in 1935 could receive a small federal pension: \$15 a month in the mid-1930s. But in a longer time frame, many working Americans could look forward to a federal pension that was financed by a payroll tax split evenly between themselves and their employers. Under the new system, an individual’s pension check would vary according to marital status and past earnings but not according to state of residence or type of employment. This old-age insurance system accommodated two groups of Americans. On the one side were the clamorous demands of Dr. Francis Townsend’s popular old-age movement, which advocated a monthly \$200 pension for everyone over age sixty. On the other side were those representing the interests of employers, who sought to limit costly pension expenditures and to standardize benefits across states, regions, and industries.

The Social Security Act also established a federal-state program of unemployment insurance, designed to put cash in the pockets of workers during the periodic layoffs that plagued industries such as automobile,



Sign Up

A 1936 poster instructed Americans about the procedures to enroll in the new Social Security program. Social Security Administration.

textile, and clothing manufacturing and construction. A special tax also financed unemployment insurance, but unlike the pension program, the states administered it. Consequently, eligibility and benefits varied widely from state to state; payments were high in the North and low in the South.

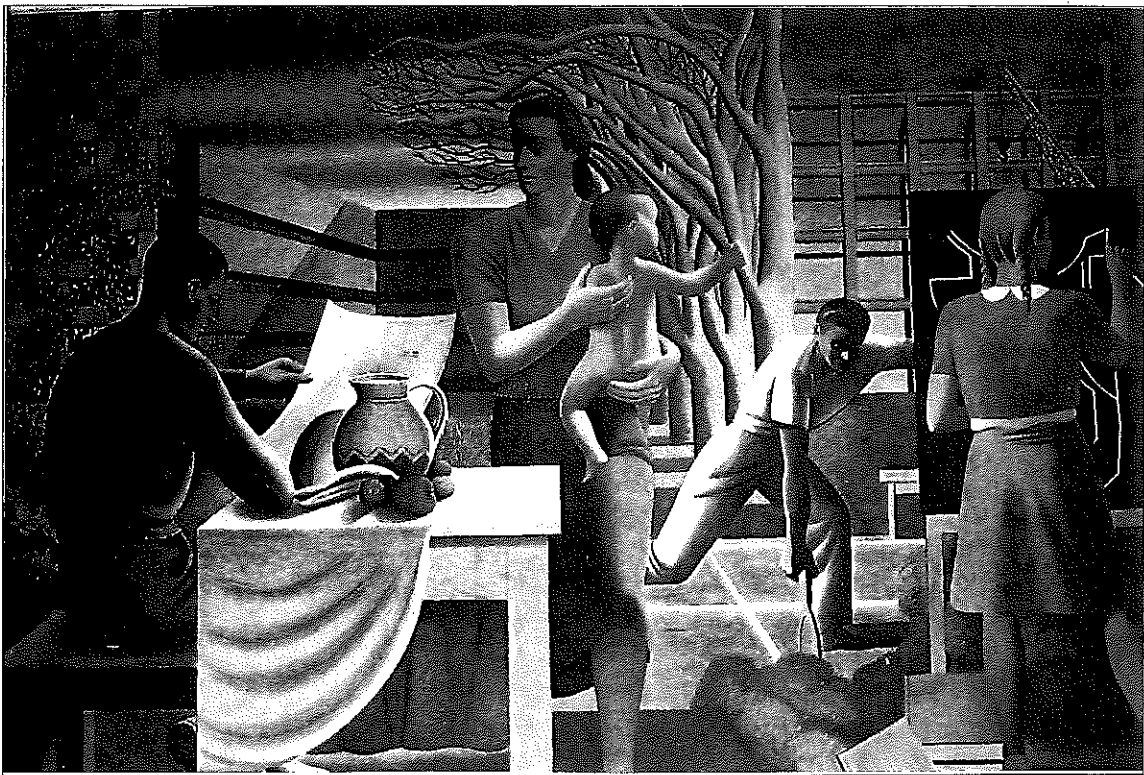
Still, the old-age insurance and unemployment programs won nearly universal support. Most Americans saw these entitlements not as relief for the poor, but as insurance that was purchased with taxes deducted from their own paychecks. Both programs redistributed income from the rich to

the poor, but their advocates, including Roosevelt, who abhorred “the dole,” downplayed this fact. The president saw the Social Security tax largely as a political rather than a fiscal issue. He told his advisers, “We put those payroll contributions there so as to give the contributors a legal, moral, and political right to collect their pensions and their unemployment benefits. With those taxes in there, no damn politician can ever scrap my social security program.”

Gender and Race in the New Deal The New Deal had a decidedly mixed record on issues of concern to women. While the New Deal effort to legitimize social insurance proved enormously successful for workers and recent

Manly Labor and the Security of the Family

New Deal public art often reinforced traditional ideas about the roles of men and women in U.S. society. Seymour Fogel's *Security of the Family*, a mural at the main entrance of the Social Security Building, shows a man seated at a plentiful table reading a newspaper, a symbol of engagement with the public world. A woman stands on the other side of the table, cradling a baby, while children conspicuously play and study nearby. Instead of acknowledging women's work outside the home, in the face of economic and social crisis Fogel's mural heralds men's productive labor as the bulwark of the American family and future of the next generation. Seymour Fogel, *Security of the Family*, 1942, mural, Wilbur J. Cohen Building — National Archives.



retirees, the moral and social biases attached to welfare would become increasingly debilitating for those who could not work. Thus, the Social Security Act provided far less generous and equitable payments for the elderly poor and for dependent children in single-parent families and required far more demeaning applications than the ones for those who had "earned" their benefits. For example, the new social insurance law provided matching funds to the states to finance an Aid to Dependent Children program, but the states did not treat these benefits as a guaranteed entitlement. A woman with dependent children received financial support only if it was approved by a social worker on the basis of the family's degree of need, the mother's adherence to a code of acceptable sexual conduct, and the stability of the home life she provided. In the 1930s, when most eligible women were white and widowed, welfare aid of this sort generated little controversy. But when an increasing number of deserving children began to come from families in which the mother was neither white nor widowed, mainstream Americans developed a negative opinion about what came to be disparaged as "welfare."

Women political activists, led by Eleanor Roosevelt, had a greater role than in any other previous presidential administration. President Roosevelt appointed the first woman cabinet member, Secretary of Labor Frances Perkins; the first woman director of the U.S. Mint; and the first woman judge on the federal Circuit Court of Appeals. But the success of these few individuals translated into only modest gains for women as a whole. Relatively few women found work in the New Deal job-creating agencies, and Social Security coverage failed to include some of the most important categories of female employees, such as waitresses and maids. Women New Dealers, moreover, generally supported an older Progressive agenda of providing "special protection" for female workers rather than demanding equal rights for them.

Many of the New Deal social programs also denied equal benefits to African Americans—in part because of the power of southern Democrats in the New Deal coalition. Southern employers worried that federal Social Security benefits would discourage black workers from taking low-paying jobs in their fields, factories, and kitchens. Thus, old-age insurance covered neither agricultural laborers nor domestic servants—a pool of workers that included at least 60 percent of the nation's black population. Furthermore, unemployment insurance excluded sharecroppers—black or white—and farm laborers (many of whom were of Mexican descent in the West). State administration of the program for dependent children resulted in huge inequities; in the 1930s, monthly payments for a typical family in Arkansas amounted to less than one-eighth those in Massachusetts. Relief programs regularly shortchanged African Americans, and many New Deal work proj-

ects assigned blacks to segregated units. The Agricultural Adjustment Act, which sent crop reduction checks to landlords and not their tenants, led to the eviction of thousands of poor farm families from lands that now earned federal dollars by lying fallow.

Nor did FDR throw his support behind an antilynching law that the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) proposed in November 1933. Roosevelt denounced lynching, but he refused to confront the power of the southern racists ensconced within the Democratic party. "The southerners . . . are chairmen or occupy strategic places on most of the Senate and House committees," FDR explained. "If I come

"Please Help Us Mr. President": Black Americans Write to FDR

Although Franklin D. Roosevelt never endorsed antilynching legislation and condoned discrimination against African Americans in federally funded relief programs, he still won the hearts and the votes of many African Americans. Yet this support and even veneration for Roosevelt did not blind black Americans to the continuing discrimination that they faced. Indeed, the two views were often combined when they wrote letters to the president asking him to do something about discrimination that they confronted in their daily lives. [Note: This letter is rendered as in original without corrections of spelling errors.]

Reidsville, Ga Oct 19th 1935
Hon. Franklin D. Roosevelt.
President of U. S.
Washington D. C.

Dear Mr. President

Would you please direct the people in charge of the releaf work in Georgia to issue the provisions + other supplies to our suffering colored people. I am sorry to worrie you with this Mr. President but hard as it is to believe the releaf officials here are using up most every thing that you send for them self + their friends. they give out the releaf supplies here on Wednesday of this week and give us black folks, each one, nothing but a few cans of pickle meet and to white folks they give blankets, bolts of cloth and things like that. I dont want to take to mutch of your time Mr president but will give you just one example of how the releaf is work down here the witto Nancy Hendrics own lands, stock holder in the Bank in this town and she is being supplied with Blankets cloth and gets a supply of cans goods regular this is only one case but I could tell you many.

Please help us mr President because we cant help our self and we know you is the president and a good Christian man we is praying for you. Yours truly cant sign my name Mr President they will beat me up and run me away from here and this is my home

[Anonymous]

Federal Emergency Relief Administration Central Files and New Subject Files, National Archives, as published in Robert S. McElvaine, ed., *Down and Out in the Great Depression* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1983): 83.



out for the antilynching bill now, they will block every bill I ask Congress to pass to keep America from collapsing.”

The same racial and regional disparities shaped the last major piece of welfare legislation that was passed during the Second New Deal: the Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA), passed in 1938. The FLSA banned child labor in manufacturing industries, established the first nationwide minimum wage, and made the forty-hour workweek a national norm by mandating that employers pay time-and-a-half for work over and above that standard. Though those in the labor movement who had sought a thirty-hour workweek to generate new jobs were disappointed, the act did end the traditional half-day of Saturday work, making the “weekend” a two-day affair.

In a concession to the increasingly conservative congressional representatives from the white South, the FLSA pegged the minimum wage to the low pay in the southern textile and lumber industries. Once again, the FLSA denied workers in agriculture, domestic service, and the restaurant trade even those minimal wage standards. But if few workers actually received wage increases under the act in the 1930s, employers and social conservatives had nevertheless conceded the ideological high ground to New Deal liberals.

In the 1930s, African Americans took important steps toward winning the civil rights and economic equality that had long been denied them. Most black leaders did not directly attack racial segregation of schools, jobs, and government programs, but African Americans nevertheless put a new set of demands on the nation’s social and political agenda. The legal strategy of the NAACP exemplified this new approach. Lawyers Charles Houston and Thurgood Marshall attacked educational segregation by insisting that southern states abide by the potentially expensive requirements inherent in the Supreme Court’s “separate but equal” doctrine (*Plessy v. Ferguson*, 1896).

Evicted

These black sharecroppers were forced off farms by landlords eager to receive federal crop subsidies. They gathered along Highway 60 in New Madrid County, Missouri, in January 1939. Arthur Rothstein — Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress.

"Don't Buy Where You Can't Work"

The women walking this picket line were asking customers to boycott one of the many white-owned stores that refused to hire black employees in West Baltimore, Maryland. Similar demonstrations appeared in New York, Chicago, and other large cities in the early 1930s. Afro-American Newspapers Archives and Research Center.



By demanding actual equality of educational opportunity, NAACP court cases opened border-state professional schools to African Americans and equalized the salaries of many black and white teachers throughout the South.

African American workers demanded economic justice as well as the rights of equal citizenship. In Baltimore, New York, Chicago, and other large cities, they launched "Don't Buy Where You Can't Work" campaigns, insisting that white owners of stores in their communities employ black clerks and salespeople. In the early 1930s, these campaigns had a black nationalist and sometimes anti-Semitic flavor. But they took on an increasingly interracial, prounion character later in the decade, especially under the leadership of Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., a charismatic young minister from Harlem whose talent for oratory would later earn him a career in Congress. By the early 1940s, thousands of African Americans had obtained employment with public utilities, municipal services, and city transit lines in the North.

This strategy had its counterpart in the New Deal, for the administration's accommodation of southern segregationists was balanced in part by the racial liberalism of top government officials. Secretary of the Interior Harold Ickes and First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt helped to recruit Roosevelt's "black cabinet," a group of subcabinet-level officials and outside advisers who fought hard against discrimination in New Deal programs. Members of this group—such as Mary McLeod Bethune, an African American educator and close friend of the First Lady, and William Hastie, the dean of the law school at Howard University—wanted to abolish segregation. But they

often had to settle for equal access to government programs, and even that was not always forthcoming.

But activists scored a great symbolic victory for racial equality in 1939, after the Daughters of the American Revolution (DAR) refused to permit the world-famous contralto and African American Marian Anderson to sing in the DAR's Washington concert hall. With the backing of Eleanor Roosevelt, a coalition of black civic leaders and NAACP officials won the Roosevelt administration's approval for Anderson to perform on Easter Sunday at the Lincoln Memorial. The performance established a powerful association between civil rights and a key symbol of American nationalism. "Genius, like justice, is blind," said Ickes, as he introduced Anderson to an audience of 75,000 people.

The Wagner Act Undoubtedly the most radical and far-reaching piece of legislation that was passed during Roosevelt's "second hundred days" of 1935 was the National Labor Relations Act, known as the Wagner Act, for its sponsor, New York's Senator Robert Wagner. The president was not initially an advocate of Wagner's bill, but he reluctantly put it on his agenda because the legislation would encourage the growth of trade unions, which seemed to offer a solution to two problems confronting the nation. The first was the social turmoil that had been so notable during the New Deal's first two years, especially during the 1934 labor upsurge. "Men versed in the tenets of freedom become restive when not allowed to be free," Senator Wagner had argued. Roosevelt shared Wagner's viewpoint, so in May 1935, when the U.S. Supreme Court struck down the National Industrial Recovery Act that mandated industry self-regulation, the president finally agreed to get behind Wagner's bill. The second problem Roosevelt hoped the proposed act would solve was wage stagnation and underconsumption, which most liberals blamed for the long Depression. American workers had to make more money, and a revived union movement was the only institution that was capable of forcing a big company such as U.S. Steel or General Motors to raise wages for their own employees and then spread the new pay standard to millions of other workers.

But the trade unions did more than raise wages. To the mass of American workers, a huge proportion of whom were immigrants or African Americans, unions represented a doorway into the mainstream of American life. Thus, by encouraging the growth of trade unions, the Wagner Act helped not only to raise incomes, but also to democratize the world of work by giving workers a collective voice with which to settle their grievances and organize themselves to bargain and take political action.

The Wagner Act guaranteed workers the right to freely organize their own unions and to strike, boycott, and picket their employers. It banned "unfair labor practices" by the boss, including the maintenance of

Ford Workers

UNIONISM NOT FORDISM

Now is the time to Organize!
The Wagner Bill is behind you!
Now get behind yourselves!

General Motors Workers, Chrysler Workers, Briggs Workers have won higher wages and better working conditions. 300,000 automobile workers are marching forward under the banner of the United Automobile Workers Union.

JOIN NOW IN THE MARCH AND WIN:
Higher Wages and Better Working Conditions
Stop Speed-up by Union Supervision
6 Hour Day, 8 Dollars Minimum Pay
Job Security thru Seniority Rights
End the Ford Service System
Union Recognition

Organize and be Recognized - JOIN NOW!

Union Headquarters for Ford Workers:	} Michigan Avenue at Addison } Verner Highway West, and Lawndale
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Sign up at Union Headquarters for Ford Workers or at any
office of the United Automobile Workers

1324 Clay at Russell 2141 Milwaukee at Chene 11725 Oakland at Tuxedo 4944 Leuschner at Dwyer 11640 East Jefferson 10904 Mack at Lemay 77 Victor at John R.	8944 Jns. Campau at Playfair 11410 Charlevoix at Gladwin 1343 East Ferry at Russell 3814—35th Street at Michigan 2730 Maybury Grand at Michigan 4715 Hastings Street Room 509 Hofmann Bldg.
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Distributed by
United Automobile Workers of America

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"The Wagner Bill Is Behind You!"

This leaflet distributed by the United Automobile Workers captured the impact of the Wagner Act on union organizing. Scott Molloy Archives.

sive power and institutional strength. In June 1935, when Franklin Roosevelt signed the new labor act into law, the obstacles to the creation of such a movement were considerable. Large corporate employers were so certain that the Supreme Court would declare the Wagner Act unconstitutional that they fought the unions and ignored the new statute. Many employers, including General Motors, Goodyear, and Republic Steel, hired labor spies, fired union activists, stocked up on guns and tear gas, and waged a public relations campaign against the act and the unions. Mass industrial unionism would not come easily in the United States, but new people, new ideas, and new organizing tactics mobilized millions of workers throughout the great mass production industries of that era. A fever of organization gripped working-class communities in a huge arc that spread from New

company-dominated unions, the blacklisting of union activists, the intimidation or firing of workers who sought to join an independent union, and the employment of industrial spies. To determine the will of the workers, the new law established a National Labor Relations Board, which would hear employee complaints, determine union jurisdictions, and conduct on-site elections. Whenever a majority of a company's workers chose a union, management had a legal obligation to negotiate with the union over wages, hours, and working conditions. Collective bargaining, wrote a leading economist, was a method of "introducing civil rights into industry, that is, of requiring that management be conducted by rule rather than by arbitrary decision." It was the essence of the industrial democracy that many New Dealers and labor activists sought to build.

The Challenge of Industrial Unionism

A law, however, is not a social movement. To give the Wagner Act real social and political meaning, the nation needed a working-class alliance of explo-

England through New York, Pennsylvania, the upper Midwest, and then on into the Southwestern states, in the process helping to give FDR and other New Deal Democrats a smashing reelection victory in 1936. Working-class empowerment had its impact not only at the work site and the ballot box, but also in the community. Union-sponsored baseball teams and bowling leagues, singing groups, tenant organizations, food cooperatives, and health clinics—all were part of a new participatory culture that gave life and spirit to the industrial unionism of the era. There were few feminists among the men who led the unions or staffed the top New Deal agencies. But the democratic awakening of the 1930s nevertheless had a profound impact on the lives of millions of women and of the men whose skin color had for so long made them something less than full citizens of the republic.

The Committee for Industrial Organization Most leaders of the American Federation of Labor (AFL) were unwilling to wage the necessary fight. They had no comprehensive strategy for organizing the semiskilled workers who made up the majority of employees in the great mass-production industries. These workers wanted an inclusive form of unionism that incorporated employees of many different skills and trades in a single industrial union. But the AFL adhered to a long-standing philosophy of exclusive jurisdiction, meaning that the various craft unions—carpenters, machinists, electricians, and so forth—would seek to organize only a narrow slice of the skilled workforce in each factory and mill. Equally important, the AFL leadership mistrusted workers who were not of Northern European or U.S. ancestry. William Collins, an AFL official assigned to the auto industry, once joked, “My wife can always tell from the smell of my clothes what breed of foreigners I have been hanging out with.”

Such attitudes infuriated unionists such as the United Mine Workers’ (UMW) John L. Lewis and the Amalgamated Clothing Workers’ Sidney Hillman, both advocates of industrial unionism. In their view, passage of the Wagner Act, the insurgent mood of the working class, and the increasingly antibusiness tenor of the White House meant that there would never be a better time to unionize industrial workers. If unions could seize this opportunity, organized labor would multiply its membership, economic power, and political clout.

By the fall of 1935, Lewis, Hillman, and a few like-minded colleagues had concluded that any mass organizing effort would have to take place outside the AFL framework, under the banner of a new Committee for Industrial Organization, later renamed the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO). John L. Lewis proved an inspiring chief of the new industrial union movement, but he was not a radical. The burly, sonorous-voiced UMW leader voted Republican in most elections and had a well-deserved reputation as a union autocrat. But he was determined to organize the labor move-

ment by industry, not by craft. "Great combinations of capital," he argued, "have assembled to themselves tremendous power and influence, and they are almost 100 percent effective in opposing . . . the American Federation of Labor. . . . If you go in there with your craft union they will mow you down."

The success of the CIO's organizing campaign in 1936 and 1937 rested on its ability to tap the energy of thousands of grassroots activists and to provide the national coordination and leadership that would enable the new unions to confront large corporations such as U.S. Steel and General Motors. Lewis hired scores of Communists and socialists because of their exceptional ability as mass organizers, and he backed their efforts with money from the UMW treasury. When reporters probed his decision to hire so many Communists, Lewis replied, "Who gets the bird, the hunter or the dog?" As it turned out, the "dog" got quite a few birds. The leftists with whom Lewis cooperated were energetic, young, and confident. Union radicals, many of whom were Communists or socialists—such as the autoworker Walter Reuther, the longshoremen's leader Harry Bridges, and the Transport Workers' Mike Quill—would soon emerge as the new generation of labor leaders. They were born in the twentieth century. Many were Catholic, some were African Americans and Jews, a few were Mexican Americans, but women were largely absent from the CIO leadership ranks.

The Roosevelt Landslide The CIO organizing drive was closely linked with Roosevelt's 1936 reelection campaign. Lewis wanted "a president who would hold the light for us while we went out and organized," so the nascent industrial union movement broke new ground by making an unprecedented half-million-dollar contribution to the national Democratic Party. As a result, the CIO enjoyed the friendly neutrality of the federal government during the most crucial phase of its organizing work.

To challenge Roosevelt for the presidency, the Republicans nominated Governor Alfred M. Landon of Kansas. Landon's campaign was backed by the conservative Liberty League, the National Association of Manufacturers, and many bitter opponents of the New Deal, but the Kansas governor was not a reactionary; in a tribute to the powerful New Deal coalition, and the ideas that sustained it, Landon endorsed much of Roosevelt's program while promising to administer it more efficiently.

Leaders of the Coughlin, Long, and Townsend movements formed the short-lived Union Party, an uneasy coalition that nominated Congressman William Lemke of North Dakota for the presidency. (Huey Long, who would have been the obvious choice of the new party, had been assassinated in September 1935.) On the left, both the Socialist and Communist parties ran halfhearted campaigns, implicitly backing Roosevelt. Earl Browder, the Communist presidential candidate in 1936, later recalled conducting an

"ambiguous campaign in favor of 'my rival,' Roosevelt." Earlier in the decade, the Communists had sharply attacked the New Deal. But now, to fight against big business and the Republicans at home and the rise of fascism abroad, they promoted a "Popular Front" of labor, liberals, New Dealers, and other radicals while proclaiming that "communism is twentieth-century Americanism."

Roosevelt ignored the small parties, directing his fire against the Republicans and the "economic royalists," who, he said, took "other people's money" to "impose a new industrial dictatorship." The forces of "organized money," he charged, "are unanimous in their hate for me—and I welcome their hatred." He concluded, "I should like to have it said of my first Administration that in it the forces of selfishness and of lust for power met their match." Such rhetoric paid off. As one millworker in the South noted, Roosevelt "is the first man in the White House to understand that my boss is a son of a bitch." When the Roosevelt motorcade passed through Michigan's industrial belt, virtually every assembly line ground to a halt as workers, union and nonunion alike, crowded to the windows.

Roosevelt also benefited from a shift in the loyalties of African American voters. Since the end of the Civil War, African Americans had been steadfast Republicans, but during the 1930s, they moved in massive numbers to the Democratic column. On the surface, this turnaround seemed puzzling. Roosevelt had never added black equality to his legislative agenda, and many of his programs discriminated against African Americans. Nevertheless, African American support for Roosevelt mushroomed during the 1930s (Figure 9.1). His administration responded to the needs of rural African Americans when the disastrous impact of the Agricultural Assistance Act on tenant farmers became apparent. New Deal agencies granted loans to struggling black farmers, helped some tenants to buy land, and created agricultural settlements where displaced farmers could begin anew. Meanwhile, New Deal relief measures and employment projects rescued many African Americans from complete destitution. In Cleveland, for example, the federal government became the largest employer of African Americans, whose job-

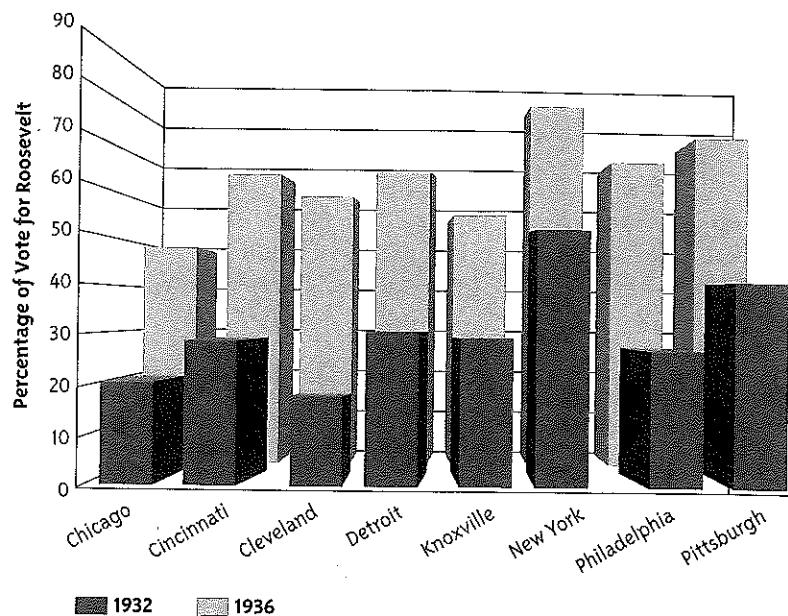


Like the Man Says . . .

A CIO recruiting poster quoted President Franklin Delano Roosevelt's statement supporting unions and collective bargaining. The George Meany Memorial Archives, AFL-CIO.

FIGURE 9.1 African Americans Vote Democratic

Although the Roosevelt administration never supported civil rights legislation, as it would be defined after World War II, African Americans began to abandon the Republican Party in the 1930s because the New Deal offered them jobs, relief, and a modicum of political power, especially in the urban North. This graph, which was developed by historian Nancy Weiss, shows the dramatic change in black voting patterns between 1932 and 1936. Weiss compiled data on voting in precincts that were predominantly black, which she defined as having a black population of 90 percent or greater in 1940.

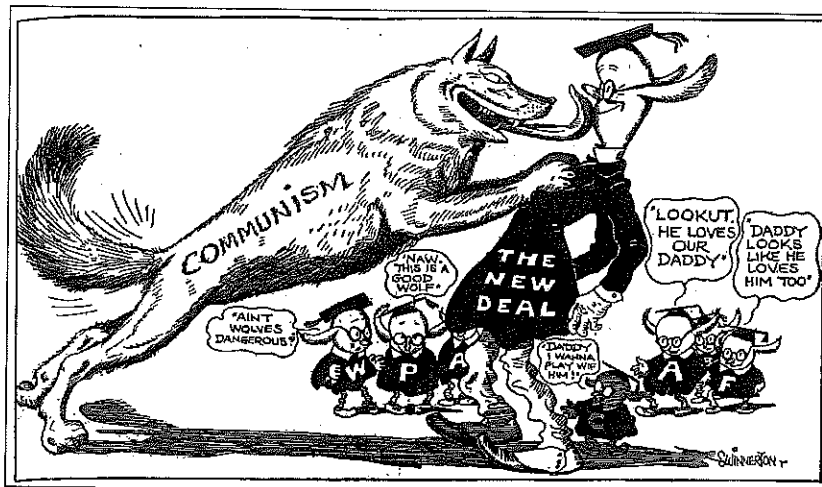


less rate fell from 50 to 30 percent. New Deal agencies also built more than three thousand housing units for the city's minority residents—fully half the public housing built in Cleveland.

On Chicago's South Side, one black resident recalled how "the WPA came along and Roosevelt came to be a god . . . You worked, you got a paycheck, and you had some dignity." Another New Deal agency, the Public Works Administration, spent four times more building African American schools and hospitals than all government agencies combined had done in the previous three decades. In Columbia, South Carolina, a registrar of

Love at First Sight

In an anti-FDR cartoon by James G. Swinnerton published in the *New York American* during the 1936 presidential campaign, a threatening Communist wolf licks the New Deal, represented by a "brain truster" wearing an academic cap and gown and donkey ears. The "Brain Trust" was a group of intellectual FDR advisors who helped construct the New Deal. James G. Swinnerton, *New York American*, 1936 — American Social History Project.



"President Roosevelt Is a Friend to the Laborin' Men"

African Americans wrote and sang many songs during the Depression to acknowledge the debt they felt to President Roosevelt or to tell the story of how joining unions changed their lives. Many of these songs used the rhythms and style of old spirituals or prison work songs. The lyrics of one such song, "Union Dues," were written in a more modern musical idiom, the blues, which became popular in southern African American communities in the 1920s. The folklorist George Korson recorded "Union Dues" during the 1940s.

President Roosevelt is a friend to the laborin' men,
Gives us the right to organize an' be real union men,
Union, union is all over the wide worl',
Back on the farm an' tobacco barns.
I'm glad I'm a union man; long may it live on,
The union will be livin' when I'm dead an' gone.

I got the union blues, don't care where I go,
I got the union blues, don't care where I be,
It's good for you an' good enough for me;
I'm goin' down the road feelin' mighty glad,
I'm goin' down the road feelin' mighty glad,
The union is the best friend that labor ever had.

I'm goin' to write a letter, goin' to mail it in the month o' May.
I'm goin' to write a letter, goin' to mail it this very day.
I'm goin' to thank the President for that seven-hour day.
I'm goin' to close my song, but won't close my mind,
I'm goin' to close my song, but won't close my mind —
That laborin' man was not left behind.

George Korson, *Coal Dust on the Fiddle* (1943).

voters reported that black Americans "say Roosevelt saved them from starvation, gave them aid when they were in distress, and now they were going to vote for him."

Roosevelt garnered 60 percent of the popular vote in 1936 and carried every state but Vermont and Maine. His victory was one of party as well as personality: the Republicans lost twelve more seats in the House of Representatives, giving the Democrats three-quarters of the total. In the Senate, seven new Democrats took office, giving the president's party nearly eight of every ten seats in that body. Democratic gubernatorial candidates won in Michigan, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and New York, four states where battles for union organization were sure to be fought. Urban working people made up the core of the new Democratic electorate. Overwhelming support came from the newly enfranchised children of turn-of-the-century Southern and Eastern European immigrants and from the native-born millions, black and white, who had left the farms for the cities during the 1920s. For them, a vote

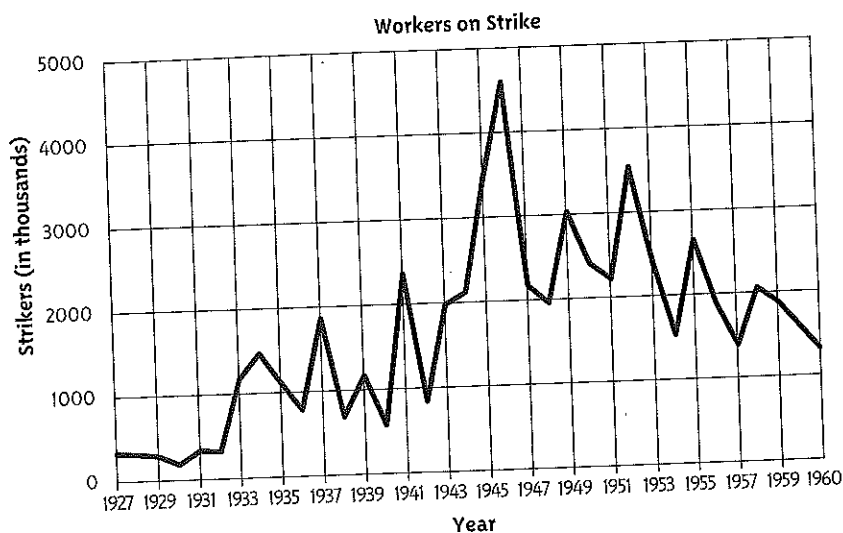
for Roosevelt and the New Deal was practically a requirement of participatory citizenship, a repudiation of the old industrial order.

Times had changed. In the 1920 election, the Republicans had captured the twelve largest cities, with a plurality of more than 1.5 million votes. In 1936, Roosevelt and the Democrats swamped their opponents in those cities by a margin of more than 3.5 million. In Knoxville, Tennessee, 56 percent of African Americans voted for Roosevelt; 75 percent in Pittsburgh; and 81 percent in New York City. In some midwestern industrial cities, over 90 percent of the Polish American and Italian American vote went to the Democrats. These urban ethnic and African American working-class voters would remain the backbone of the Democratic Party for the next third of a century.

The Flint Sit-Down Strike Buoyed by Roosevelt's landslide reelection, CIO efforts to organize basic industries—steel, rubber, meatpacking, autos, and electrical products—climaxed during the winter of 1937 in the General Motors sit-down strike at Flint, Michigan, the most consequential work stoppage of the entire twentieth century. During the 1930s and for decades thereafter, General Motors Corporation (GM) was the largest and most profitable corporation in the United States and one of the most sophisticated. *Fortune* magazine called GM “the world’s most influential industrial unit in forming the life patterns of the machine age.” Not surprisingly, GM managers were increasingly hostile to both the New Deal and the new industrial unions. The CIO’s political objectives, reported GM’s president Alfred Sloan to stockholders, were an “important step toward an economic and political dictatorship.” GM spent more money on labor spies than did any other company.

Autoworkers sought to counter GM’s enormous power with a companywide industrial trade union that could defend their dignity on the shop floor, their jobs after layoffs, and their standard of living in the community. The grievances of these relatively well-paid workers did not involve wages so much as arbitrary supervision, economic insecurity, and the dehumanizing speedup that was characteristic of assembly-line production. The foremen “treated us like a bunch of coolies [Chinese peasants],” a Chevrolet employee later remembered. “‘Get it out. If you cannot get it out, there are people outside who will get it out.’ That was their whole theme.” Because of the industry’s seasonal production cycle, employees worked long, hard hours during the winter and spring, only to be laid off for up to three months while the company retooled the factories during the off season. “The fear of being laid off,” one journalist noted, “hangs over the head of every worker. He does not know when the sword will fall.”

After FDR’s big victory in November, autoworker strikes began to multiply throughout the industrial Midwest (Figure 9.2). Some were planned

**FIGURE 9.2 On Strike!**

The number of American workers participating in strikes increased rapidly in the 1930s, reaching a Depression era peak during the sit-down strikes of 1937. But the era immediately after World War II found even more workers on strike. For decades thereafter, the existence of a powerful trade union movement ensured that strike levels remained high.

and authorized by leaders of the fledgling United Auto Workers (UAW), but many were organized by shop militants who understood all too well the impatience and grievances of their workmates. Soon, one General Motors plant after another was shut down, often by workers who remained inside to occupy the factory. These "sit-down" strikes, first attempted in 1935 in Akron's rubber factories, were an innovative tactic that prevented companies from replacing strikers with scabs. It also discouraged the use of violence, because the deployment of police, troops, or other armed groups to oust the men could result in damage to expensive company-owned buildings, machinery, and materials. Occupying corporate property was illegal, but strikers responded that management's failure to abide by the new Wagner Act was a violation of the law as well.

Shortly after Christmas 1936, leaders of the UAW and the CIO authorized a companywide strike at General Motors. Key GM plants had already been occupied in Flint, Michigan, which now became the battleground for the most pivotal labor struggle of the Depression decade. If Flint autoworkers could beat General Motors—the largest producer of automobiles, parts, and accessories in the world—their victory would galvanize workers throughout the basic industries of the United States. Located sixty miles northwest of Detroit, Flint was the corporation's major production center and a near-classic company town. General Motors employed four of every five workers in the city. For the UAW, the burden of conducting the actual confrontation with General Motors rested on a relatively narrow base: a few hundred sit-downers in each plant, an energetic group of radicals (many of whom were Socialist and Communist party members) who ran the strike from day to day, and a few older unionists of national reputation posted to Flint during the conflict. But the UAW also drew on the courage

"We Done It!"

Journalist Ruth McKenney covered the CIO victory in an Akron, Ohio, factory where rubber workers used a new tactic: the sit-down strike. Instead of walking out of the factory and picketing outside, the workers simply occupied the plant. In her novel Industrial Valley, McKenney drew on her experiences as a journalist to graphically describe the occupation of the Firestone tire plant in January 1936.

It was 1:57 a.m. January 29, 1936.

The tire builders worked in smooth frenzy, sweat around their necks, under their arms. The belt clattered, the insufferable racket and din and rhythm. The clock on the south wall, a big plain clock, hesitated, its minute hand jumped to two. A tire builder at the end of the line looked up, saw the hand jump. The foreman was sitting quietly staring at the lines of men working under the vast pools of light. . . .

The tire builder at the end of the line gulped. His hands stopped their quick weaving motions. Every man on the line stiffened. All over the vast room, hands hesitated. The foreman saw the falter, felt it instantly. He jumped up . . . his eyes darting quickly from one line to another.

This was it, then. But what was happening? Where was it starting? He stood perfectly still, his heart beating furiously, his throat feeling dry, watching the hesitating hands, watching the broken rhythm.

Then the tire builder at the end of the line walked three steps to the master safety switch and, drawing a deep breath, he pulled up the heavy wooden handle. With this signal in perfect synchronization, with the rhythm they had learned in a great mass-production industry, the tire builders stepped back from their machines.

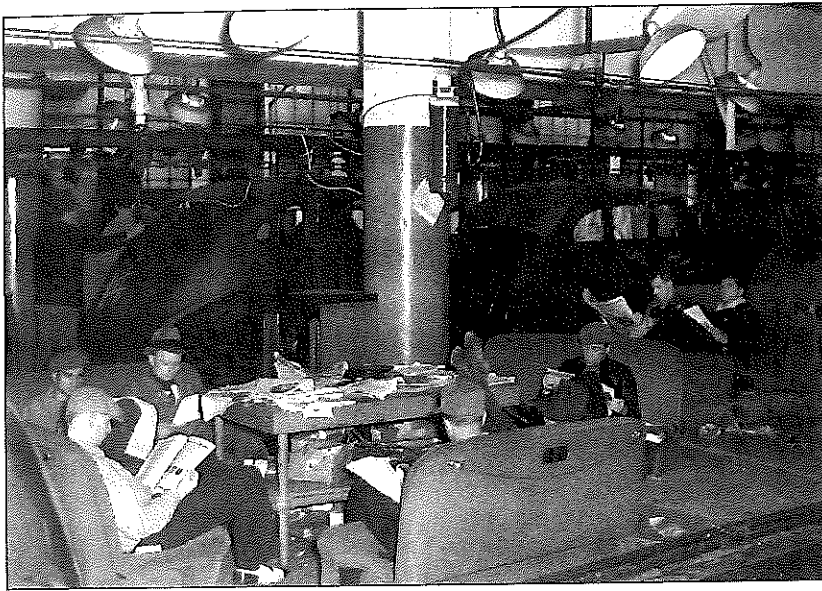
Instantly, noise stopped. The whole room lay in perfect silence. The tire builders stood in long lines, touching each other, perfectly motionless, deafened by the silence. . . .

Out of the terrifying quiet came the wondering voice of a big tire builder near the window: "Jesus Christ, it's like the end of the world."

He broke the spell, the magic moment of stillness. For now his awed words said the same thing to every man, "We done it! We stopped the belt! By God, we done it!" And men began to cheer hysterically, to shout and howl in the fresh silence. Men wrapped their long sinewy arms around their neighbors' shoulders, screaming, "We done it! We done it!"

Ruth McKenney, *Industrial Valley* (1939).

and determination of thousands of autoworkers and their families who sustained the sit-down strike for more than forty days. During the course of the occupation, sit-downers held frequent meetings, conducted classes on politics and history, put on plays, and scrupulously avoided damaging the factories or their products.



Catching Up on the News

During the sit-down strike, strikers who occupied General Motors' Fisher Body Plant No. 1 avidly followed newspaper coverage of their action. Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University.

The union's allies in the Democratic Party kept Michigan's powerful state militia at bay, even though the sit-down strike was of questionable legality and Flint police had sought to oust the strikers on more than one occasion. The transformation of the 1936 presidential election into a referendum on industrial unionism convinced key politicians, including Michigan's newly elected governor, Frank Murphy, and President Roosevelt himself, to refrain from using the National Guard or army to evict the strikers.

As in other Depression era industrial conflicts, the unionists organized themselves into paramilitary formations called "flying squadrons" to stop the police from bringing in strikebreakers or dislodging sit-downers. In Flint, a Women's Emergency Brigade, led by the twenty-three-year-old socialist firebrand Genora Johnson, was one of the most effective and celebrated. The red-bereted brigade served as the female shock troops of the solidarity movement; its members carried two-by-fours when they joined in violent confrontations, placing themselves between strikers and police and militia.

With car production at a near standstill, GM finally caved in on February 11, 1937. GM recognized the union as the sole voice of its employees and agreed to negotiate with UAW leaders on a multiplant basis. For the first time, union activists won the right to speak up, recruit other workers, and complain to management without fear of retribution. "Even if we got not one damn thing out of it other than that," declared a GM employee in St. Louis, "we at least had a right to open our mouths without fear." Indeed, an



Meanwhile, Outside . . .

The UAW's Women's Emergency Brigade, along with members of the union local's Women's Auxiliary, marched in front of an occupied Chrysler plant in March 1937. Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University.

enormous sense of self-confidence, democratic participation, even liberation swept through working-class ranks. Huge crowds thronged the streets of Flint in a celebration that Roy Reuther, an auto union militant, likened to "some description of a country experiencing independence."

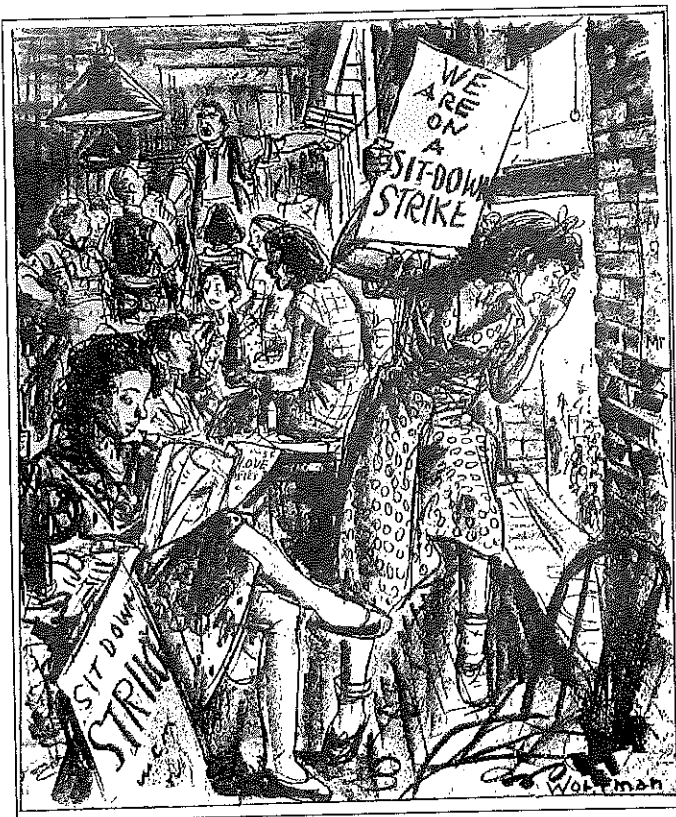
Industrial Unionism at High Tide Across industrial America, the GM settlement transformed the expectations of workers and managers alike. In Flint and elsewhere, few workers actively supported the first strikes, picket lines, and demonstrations. Although only a committed minority led the way, their coworkers neither supported the company nor remained neutral in the conflict; most stood back fearfully until the CIO stripped management of its capacity to penalize workers. In the wake of the GM victory, workers in almost every industrial district poured into the new unions, where, for a time, many organized into citywide units that cut across corporate, ethnic, and political boundaries.

In 1937, nearly five million workers took part in some kind of industrial action, and almost three million became union members. In Detroit alone, a rolling wave of sit-down strikes hit dozens of factories. "Somebody would call the office," recalled a UAW organizer, "and say, 'Look, we are sitting down. Send us over some food.'" Workers in Detroit occupied every

Chrysler Corporation facility, twenty-five auto parts plants, four downtown hotels, nine lumberyards, ten meatpacking plants, a dozen industrial laundries, three department stores, and scores of restaurants, shoe stores, and clothing outlets. When the police evicted female strikers from a cigar company and a few stores along lower Woodward Avenue, the labor movement shut down the entire city and put 150,000 protesters in front of City Hall.

Such raw power made the kind of headlines that influenced even the most conservative elite. There were no sit-down strikes at U.S. Steel, but its president, Myron Taylor, read GM's capitulation in Flint as a sign that "complete industrial organization was inevitable." To avoid a violent conflict with steelworkers, Taylor, who presided over the second-largest manufacturing company in the world—the corporation that had smashed the nationwide steel strike in 1919—agreed to raise wages and to recognize the CIO's Steelworkers Organizing Committee as the sole bargaining agent for employees. That was in early March 1937; scores of other major corporations followed suit. In April, the Supreme Court, whose conservative members also recognized the popular impetus behind the Roosevelt landslide and the labor upsurge, surprised almost everyone by declaring the Wagner Act constitutional.

Thus, CIO unionism had a profound impact on the daily lives of millions of ordinary workers. Although the new unions negotiated for higher wages and lobbied for much-needed social legislation, their greatest impact came inside the factory itself, where dramatic changes took place on the shop floor in the relationship between boss and workers. There, shop stewards elected by their workmates gave voice and power to the heretofore inarticulate. "Everybody wants to talk. Leaders are popping up everywhere," reported an organizer from Flint. Shop stewards used their newfound power to argue with the foreman, sometimes backed by employees in their departments, who dropped their tools and gathered around until the grievance was settled. "Before organization came into the plant, foremen were little tin gods in their own departments," declared a 1941 union handbook. "With the coming of the union, the foreman finds his whole world turned



Hello, Mama. We're Makin' History

Denys Wortman's cartoon in the March 25, 1937, *New York World-Telegram* captured the excitement and sense of power felt by many working men and working women when they participated in militant labor action. Denys Wortman, *New York World-Telegram*, March 25, 1937 — American Social History Project.

upside down. His small time dictatorship has been overthrown, and he must be adjusted to a democratic system of shop government.”

The AFL, which sharply rejected the call for industrial unionism two years earlier, reaped many benefits from this upsurge. Craft unions, which formerly had organized only skilled machinists, carpenters, and electricians, transformed themselves into industrial organizations so as to compete directly with the CIO. And many antiunion employers, frightened by the CIO success, suddenly appeared eager to negotiate with AFL unions so that they could avoid “Lewis’s Reds.” Total union membership, both CIO and AFL, rose from three million in 1934 to eight million at the end of the 1930s.

Industrial Democracy In many company-dominated towns throughout the East and Midwest, old-line Republican officials—white, Protestant, and of Northern European heritage—were either defeated or forced to share power with ethnic Democrats allied with the union movement. CIO industrial unions gave first- and second-generation immigrant workers a collective political voice. In western Pennsylvania steel towns and New England textile centers, the new citizenship and the new unionism were virtually synonymous, linking union membership, New Deal politics, and income stability. “Unionism is the spirit of Americanism,” asserted a typical union paper. This working-class Americanism transformed the meaning of citizenship and patriotism. In years past, conservative defenders of the industrial status quo had manipulated patriotic and nationalist sentiment in their own interest. They denounced radicals and unionists as “un-American”; after World War I, police and vigilantes had sometimes forced organizers to kneel and kiss the American flag as a sign of their loyalty to the nation and its institutions.

But during the 1930s, liberals, labor, and the left successfully captured the flag. A telling moment came in 1934 when Secretary of Labor Frances Perkins visited unorganized steelworkers in Homestead, Pennsylvania, to hear their grievances and explain New Deal labor policy. When union militants sought to make their voices heard, the mayor of the town, which was tightly controlled by U.S. Steel, abruptly cut short Perkins’s speech and ushered her out of the city hall. Out on the street, amid a crowd of angry steelworkers, she spotted an American flag flying over the local post office. In the lobby of that federal building, under the symbol of national unity, she resumed her speech, detailing, for the largely Catholic, immigrant audience, their rights under federal law.

Soon the Depression era labor movement would deploy huge American flags and other patriotic symbols in all its struggles. In California’s San Joaquin Valley, Anglo, Mexican, Filipino, and African American field hands demanded an “American standard of living” and rejected the paltry wage increases offered by the antiunion Associated Farmers. To rally those on

"Made in the U.S.A."

Thomas Bell (born Adalbert Thomas Belejcek) based his 1941 novel *Out of This Furnace* on his family's experience as Slovak immigrants who toiled in Pittsburgh's steel mills. The story spans the years from the grandfather's arrival in 1881 to the grandson's participation in the CIO organizing drives of the late 1930s. In the closing pages of the novel, Dobie, the grandson, reflects on the sense of empowerment he and his fellow steelworkers now enjoy, concluding that, despite his ancestry, his participation in the formation of the Steelworkers' Union had made him feel as American as if his family had arrived with the Puritans.

And he realized now what it was that had once puzzled him about the CIO men. Whatever their ancestry, they had felt the same way about certain things; and because Dobie had been born and raised in a steel town, where the word meant people who were white, Protestant, middle-class Anglo-Saxons, it hadn't occurred to him that the CIO men were thinking and talking like Americans.

"Maybe not the kind of American that came over on the Mayflower," he reflected, "or the kind that's always shooting off their mouths about Americanism and patriotism, including some of the God damndest heels you'd ever want to see, but the kind that's got 'Made in U.S.A.' stamped all over them, from the kind of grub they like to the things they wouldn't do for all the money in the world."

He stared down at the sleeping town without really seeing it.

"Made in the U.S.A.," he thought, "made in the First Ward. Mikie was right; it's too bad a person can't pick their own place to be born in, considering what it does to you. I'm almost as much a product of that mill down there as any rail or ingot they ever turned out. And maybe that's been part of the trouble. If I'm anything at all I'm an American, only I'm not the kind you read about in history books or that they make speeches about on the Fourth of July; anyway, not yet. And a lot of people don't know what to make of it and don't like it. Which is tough on me but is liable to be still tougher on them, because I at least don't have to be told that Braddock [Pennsylvania] ain't Plymouth Rock and this ain't the year 1620."

... Made in the U.S.A., he thought, made in the First Ward. But it wasn't where you were born or how you spelled your name or where your father come from. It was the way you thought and felt about certain things. About freedom of speech and the equality of men and the importance of having one law—the same law—for rich and poor, for the people you liked and the people you didn't like. . . . About the uses to which wealth and power could honorably be put. . . . About human dignity, which helped a man live proudly and distinguished his death from an animal's; and, finally, about the value to be put on a human life, one's enemy's no less than one's own.

Thomas Bell, *Out of This Furnace* (1941).



Celebration

A May 1937 union demonstration of Aliquippa, Pennsylvania, steelworkers and their supporters was featured on the cover of *Photo-History* (a short-lived, pro-CIO magazine). *Photo-History* (July 1937) — Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress.

the picket lines, strikers sang, "Fight for Union recognition, Fight for better pay, Fight to better our condition, In the democratic way, Eighty cents won't feed us, A dollar and a quarter would be fine, Show the farmers that they need us, JOIN THE PICKET LINE."

New Faces in the Union Halls In these union struggles, women workers won their own kind of industrial citizenship, albeit one that was limited by the sexist assumptions of the period. The unions recruited almost a million women in the 1930s, especially in the garment trades, electrical products, clerical and sales work, canning, and tobacco processing. Women sit-down strikers occupied hotels, drugstores, restaurants, and auto parts factories. Women often played an essential role in linking a union's shop activism to the larger community. Most unions organized women's auxiliaries, whose very existence testified to a sense of family solidarity. During the 1934 Firestone strike in Akron, for example, the local newspaper reported, "Shoulder to shoulder with their men, the wives, daughters, and sisters of strikers

ers marched through the business district to strike headquarters in a great victory parade." But such dramatic linkages were far less important than the more subtle ways in which women made the unions present in their neighborhoods and communities. Labor-based tenant organizations, soup kitchens, food cooperatives, recreation halls, singing societies, and education programs drew both women workers and the wives and daughters of male unionists into a dense, supportive social network that strengthened the ties of solidarity inside the factory and out.

The New Deal and the new unions advocated "equal pay for equal work," but the sign carried by one male picketer proved more eloquent and revealing: "Restore Our Manhood," it implored. "We Receive Girls' Wages." Even in industries dominated by women workers, male union activists did not welcome female leadership. Thus, those women who played leading

roles in the labor movement were remarkably atypical: divorcees, widows, political radicals, or members of intensely union-conscious households.

Florence Luscomb, for example, earned an architecture degree from MIT in 1909 but soon abandoned architecture (at that time, a very unusual occupation for a woman), first to campaign for woman's suffrage and later to work for prison reform. When the CIO started the United Office and Professional Workers' Union, Luscomb became president of the Boston local. Although she helped to win higher pay, she had trouble building a large union. One problem was that female clerical workers often felt socially superior to factory workers and above trade unionism; another was that stenographers and typists worked in isolated settings and small groups. And as Luscomb later recalled, "the CIO didn't give much assistance in having secretaries organized; they'd be too busy trying to organize the textile workers, and the railroad workers, and large 'important' bodies of the working class."

During the Depression years, the trade union movement became an increasingly important vehicle for the advancement of workers of color, but they overcame the legacy of white working-class racism and official union exclusion only with great effort. Officials of AFL craft unions, who sought to monopolize the labor market for their members, simply excluded African Americans from their trades. In Richmond, Virginia, for example, the AFL Labor Temple prohibited entry to any black worker, union member or not. And when diesel locomotives reduced the number of firemen needed by the railroads, the white railroad brotherhoods waged a virtual war against black workers who remained in the occupation. Therefore, many black organizations, including the Urban League and the NAACP, remained skeptical of the union movement, and many African Americans remained loyal to paternalistic employers.

Attitudes shifted rapidly in the late 1930s, however. First, an inspiring, progressive trade union of African Americans gave a voice to all black workers. Under the leadership of A. Philip Randolph, the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters took advantage of the nation's prolabor mood to win higher wages, shorter hours, and job security for the 35,000 black and Filipino porters and maids who worked for the Pullman Company. Even more important, the protection offered by a signed contract gave these newly empowered people the freedom to press for civil rights in the railroad towns where they lived. Randolph, who was a socialist and a powerful orator, became an important new spokesman for black Americans, relying on his union as a high-profile stage from which to denounce racism where ever he found it, in or outside of unions.

In the tobacco, cannery, longshoremen's, and foundry industries, African Americans often built all-black local unions. But the future of black labor lay with the interracial unions in the industries organized by the CIO.

"It Was a New Idea for Office Workers to Organize . . . A Very Unusual Idea"

In this selection from an oral interview, Florence Luscomb recalls the CIO drive to organize women office workers, an increasingly important occupational category, into industrial unions. Luscomb had a long and distinguished career as a progressive reformer, suffragist, trade unionist, and peace activist. Educated as an architect at MIT, Luscomb was an officer in the NAACP, an organizer for the International Ladies Garment Workers' Union, and, as she recalls, president of the Boston local of the CIO's United Professional and Office Workers of America.

I joined the American Federation of Labor, what they called, the Stenographers, Typewriters, Bookkeepers, and Accountants Union. Not typists, but typewriters. I joined it in the early thirties, because I believed in labor unions, and so I wanted to be a member. And it was really just a fake union. There was just this one public stenographers' office in Boston, and that was a union office. . . . When I became president in 1936, I wanted to put on a big campaign to unionize more office workers. And they [the AFL union] wouldn't do it. . . . When the Congress of Industrial Organizations came along and started to establish a United Office and Professional Workers Union . . . we set up local No. 3 of the UOPWA in the CIO. I was the president for several years, and we did a lot of very active work without getting a very large union.

For example, there was one big firm which had quite a large office staff, and they paid very low wages. We used to go around and find one girl in the office who would think that they ought to be organized, and she'd give us the names and addresses of all the office workers. We'd go and visit them in their homes, and talk union with them. And we got a large group of girls in this office who were very much interested in having the union there. The firm got wind of it, that they were probably going to have a strike on their hands. So they raised their girls' pay, whereupon the girls lost all interest in joining the union! And that happened various times. We got more stenographers with pay raises than we got members of the union, but we did gradually build up the union. It was a new idea for office workers to organize—it was a very unusual idea. They felt themselves socially superior to the person working in a factory, although they might get much less pay than the girls who were working in the factory.

Ellen Cantarow with Susan Gushee O'Malley and Sharon Hartman Strom, *Moving the Mountain: Women Working for Social Change* (1980).

African Americans made up about 25 percent of all packinghouse workers in Chicago, 15 percent of employees in the steel industry, 4 percent of autoworkers (10 percent at Ford), and a large portion of the workers in the lumber and mining camps of the South. Communists and other radicals were particularly active in pushing forward African American rights within the new unions, but all industrial union leaders had to pay at least lip service to the idea of racial equality. As CIO leader Philip Murray, who

presided over the organizing drive in steel, forthrightly promised, "there shall be no discrimination under any circumstances, regardless of creed, color, or nationalities."

Such sentiments would be hard to put into practice, but these ideals represented a recognition that the allegiance of African American workers was essential to the success of the new movement. Black workers, for example, often held jobs that were vital to the production process, from the hot and dirty foundries where engine blocks were poured to the stinking and bloody killing floor, where African Americans controlled the flow of carcasses to every department within the great Chicago meatpacking houses.

The CIO's campaign to unionize the steel industry put its egalitarian claims to the test. Black-white conflict had helped to undermine the great steel strike of 1919. Now, the recruitment of black organizers to the Steel Workers Organizing Committee helped to reassure skeptical African American steelworkers that the union would take their interests seriously. The union's success brought an end to some of the most glaringly discriminatory practices in the steel industry. As the lowest-paid laborers won large raises, the enormous wage inequities between high- and low-skilled workers began to shrink. Meanwhile, the CIO's culture of solidarity earned black workers some real social dividends. "Well, you know, I'll tell you what the CIO has done," reported a black worker in Chicago. "Before, everyone used to make remarks about, 'that dirty Jew,' 'that stinkin' black bastard,' 'that low-life Bohunk,' but you know I never hear that kind of stuff anymore. I don't like to brag, but I'm one of the best-liked men in my department. If there is ever any trouble, the men usually come to me."

Others were not so sanguine. Interracial unionism did little to end the social and residential segregation that pervaded working-class America. Although union meetings were integrated—often they were the first integrated event workers of either race had ever attended—activities that even hinted at social equality, such as dances and picnics, remained a flashpoint. Conflict between black and white workers emerged on the shop floor, too, where trade unions tended to reinforce the segregated, hierarchical job structures that had been established in the preunion era. At issue was the seniority system. Unions demanded rigid rules governing promotions and recalls from layoffs. Managers and white workers usually insisted that seniority should be enforced on a departmental, not a plantwide basis, which protected the rights of the well-paid whites who held the best jobs against the claims of black workers who might well have greater overall seniority within the entire factory.

But African American workers did not flinch from a growing loyalty to the new unions. Despite the overt racism of many white workers, the new unionism, with its signed contracts, grievance procedures, and elected shop

stewards, generated a kind of industrial citizenship that liberated African Americans from the paternalism, deferential subordination, and overt racism of the old social order. And it provided new organizational weapons with which to fight. The Packinghouse Union would have failed “if it hadn’t been for the Negro joining with you,” a Kansas City black worker reminded his white brothers and sisters. “We are not asking for favors. We will take what is coming to us.”

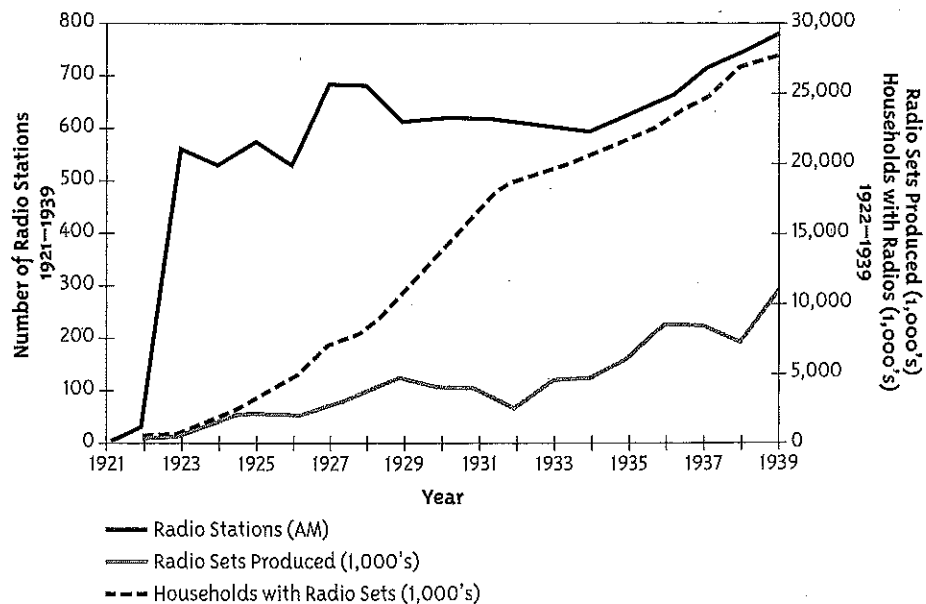
The Culture of New Deal America

Just as mass production typified American industry in the 1930s, mass culture characterized entertainment, journalism, and the arts during that era. Fifty million Americans went to the movies each week. Radio entered almost every home, and news magazines such as *Time* and *Newsweek* brought East Coast reportage to remote rural areas (Figure 9.3). And for the first time, the federal government employed writers, photographers, actors, and artists on a massive scale.

What was the relationship of this new mass culture to the politics of the era? Almost all newspapers were hostile to labor and the New Deal, and most of the new Hollywood moguls were staunch Republicans.

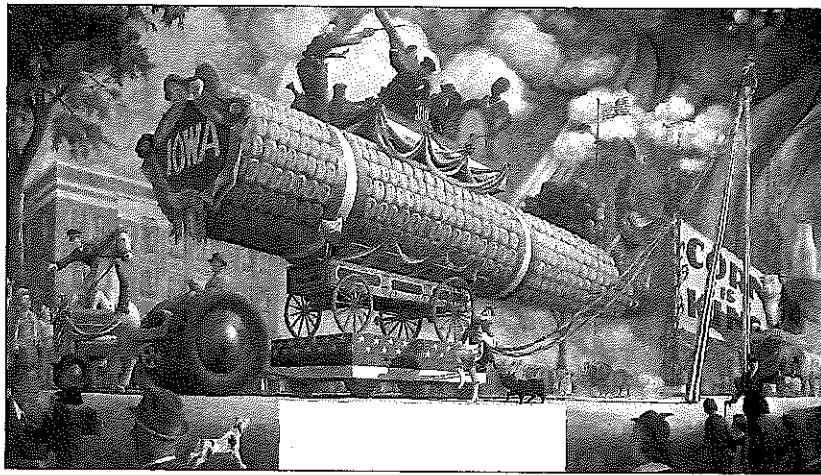
FIGURE 9.3 The Rise of Radio

By the end of the 1930s, almost every electrified home contained a radio. In 1922, thirty stations broadcast to just 60,000 radio sets. But seventeen years later, over seven hundred stations beamed music, news, drama, and comedy to more than twenty-seven million households.



Nevertheless, creative artists who were sympathetic to labor and the left had an unprecedented impact on mass culture in the 1930s. In these Popular Front years, radicals in or close to the Communist Party played a major role in organizations devoted to everything from modern dance to student politics, public housing, and minority rights. The cultural movement had a broad reach, combining a modernist, experimental sensibility in arts and letters with an appreciation of the critical role of workers and farmers in American society. Simultaneously nationalistic and regionally rooted, it celebrated as inherently democratic and creative the folk cultures of the Southwest, the Appalachian South, and small-town New England.

Federal Arts Projects The Roosevelt administration fostered support for New Deal programs by helping artists to create and disseminate works of democratic mass culture. In the early 1930s, the drama, color, and political subjects of the great left-wing Mexican muralists Diego Rivera, José Clemente Orozco, and David Alfaro Siqueiros inspired those who sought to develop socially relevant public art in the United States. Such was the appeal of their work that even the Rockefeller family commissioned them to produce murals for Dartmouth College and Rockefeller Center in New York, while Henry Ford's son Edsel sponsored a Rivera mural with the subject of industrial labor at the Detroit Institute of the Arts. (However, Nelson Rockefeller ordered the removal of the Rockefeller Center mural because Rivera included a portrait of Soviet leader V. I. Lenin.) Late in 1933, New Deal relief and public works agencies began to fund similar works, employing thousands of artists to produce more than fifteen thousand murals, oils, watercolors, and prints. As part of the Works Progress Administration, employees of the Federal Art Project created murals for the walls of federal

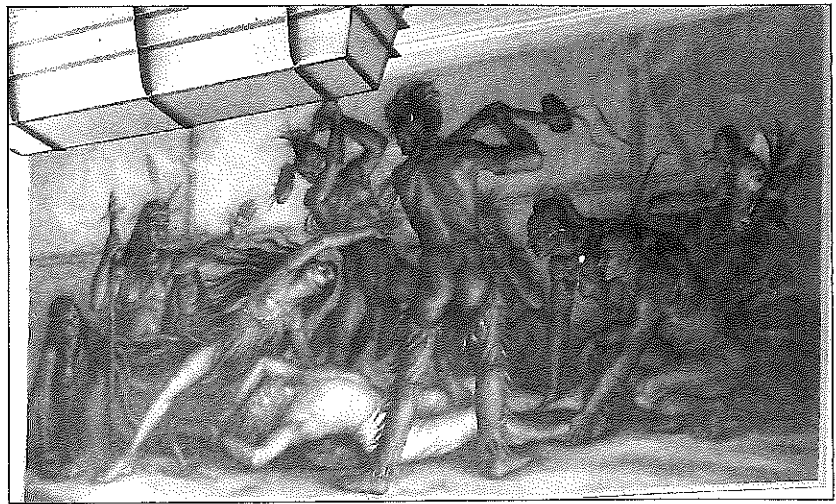


The Corn Parade

Few of the post office murals that were commissioned by the Treasury Department Section of Fine Art displayed the humor of Orr C. Fisher's paean to corn. But the Iowa-born Fisher's work suggests the kind of regional boosterism and pride of place that characterized many murals painted by local artists. Orr C. Fisher, *The Corn Parade*, 1941, oil on canvas — National Archives.

Pocahontas Rescuing Captain John Smith

At times, local tastes clashed with individual artists' expressions. In the case of Paul Cadmus's mural for Richmond's Parcel Post Building, it was male nudity that roused concern. Although Pocahontas's breast and the foreground Indian brave's buttocks remained bare, Cadmus had to retouch a suggestive fox head he had mischievously placed over another brave's groin. This was not the first time Cadmus had faced censorship; a Navy admiral demanded the removal of his 1934 painting *The Fleet's In!* from a government-sponsored exhibition, horrified by its depiction of an intoxicated group of sailors flirting with prostitutes and a gay man. Paul Cadmus, *Pocahontas Rescuing Captain John Smith*, 1939, mural — National Archives.



and state buildings and established public art centers in remote communities. The project employed as many as 6,000 painters, sculptors, and muralists, 90 percent of whom were on relief.

New Deal public art embodied the hope of John Dewey, the nation's foremost philosopher, that "our public buildings may become the outward and visible sign of the inward grace which is the democratic spirit." Reflecting the leftist politics of many of the artists, the representational subject matter was often that of ordinary Americans, at work or in struggle, rendered in a heroic, larger-than-life style. Like other elements of New Deal culture, the murals and paintings were overtly masculinist. Women were portrayed as sturdy partners in the American pageant but were not presented as heroines in their own right.

WPA projects for writers and musicians gave important and creative work to thousands of unemployed white-collar workers—not just writers and composers, but also insurance salesmen, librarians, and middle managers. Federal Writers' Project employees published guidebooks, collected folk songs, and recorded interviews with ex-slaves, cowboys, and immigrants. The United States had only eleven symphony orchestras in the early 1930s; the WPA music project created thirty-four more, not just in the biggest cities of the East and West Coasts, but in Oklahoma and Utah as well. Government-paid music teachers gave lessons to 70,000 people in Mississippi and sparked a boom in the sale of secondhand pianos. In New Mexico, amateur musicians collected folk tunes with roots going back to Spain, Cuba, and Mexico; in Oklahoma, they recorded the songs and dances of five Native American tribes. Such cultural work fostered a more democratic

vision of the American past, celebrating the "forgotten American" and the "common hero."

The most outstanding contribution to the nation's cultural awareness came from the New Deal photojournalists. To build broad public support for its programs, the Roosevelt administration encouraged the directors of New Deal agencies to document the human suffering caused by the Depression. For this purpose, the WPA, the Department of Agriculture, and the Farm Security Administration (formerly the Resettlement Administration) hired amateur and professional photographers to travel the Depression-ravaged country. Some of the hundreds of thousands of "social-realist" photos they shot—particularly Dorothea Lange's haunting portraits of poor farm women, Arthur Rothstein's shots of dust storms, and Walker Evans's despairing images of sharecroppers—became icons of the Depression. These photos circulated widely in the popular press, including *Time*, *Look*, and *Life* magazines, and they appeared in major museum exhibits and best-selling books.

Music, Theater, and Hollywood Folksinger Woody Guthrie and novelist John Steinbeck combined the social realism of the Depression era photojournalists with the populist cultural sensibilities of the left-wing Popular Front. Guthrie, who had taught himself to sing country music and folk ballads in Texas and Oklahoma, wrote songs that celebrated hobos, cowboys, fruit pickers, and New Deal monuments such as the Bonneville Dam on the Columbia River. His best lyrics captured the spirit of America in a style so poetic and direct that one of his songs, "This Land Is Your Land," became a kind of national anthem. John Steinbeck's 1939 novel *The Grapes of Wrath*, a mythic tale of suffering, migration, and redemption, immortalized the Okies who fled the Southwestern Dust Bowl for California. Guthrie's and Steinbeck's work proved powerful and lasting in part because the protagonists were white, rural, and Protestant; their strength and dignity made them icons of the mainstream national culture.

Theater enjoyed a renaissance during the New Deal years as well. In New York, Lee Strasberg and Harold Clurman organized the radical, labor-oriented Group Theatre, which discovered playwrights Clifford Odets, William Saroyan, and Irwin Shaw. Odets's play *Waiting for Lefty*, the story of



The Fields Family, Haile County, Alabama, Summer 1936

From 1935 to 1943, photographers working for several government agencies, principally the Farm Security Administration (FSA), produced the most enduring images of the Great Depression. Walker Evans's pictures of the rural poor were part of that massive documentation effort. Wishing to convey both suffering and dignity, FSA photographers searingly presented conditions to the American public, selecting effective compositions and poses that were influenced by advertising and mass-market magazine formats. Walker Evans, 1936 — Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress.

"The Yeast Which Makes the Bread Rise": Hallie Flanagan on Drama as Politics

"The theater must grow up," declared Hallie Flanagan, director of the New Deal era Federal Theatre Project (FTP), which provided employment for actors, directors, and technicians during the Depression. By the 1930s, theater was rapidly losing its audiences to movies, and Flanagan sought to win audiences back by revitalizing drama with the excitement and conflict of contemporary life and politics. In this talk on theater as social action, she borrowed the rhetoric of the militant labor movement as she summarized the work of a 1937 summer project that gathered FTP workers from around the country.

Our Federal Theatre, born of an economic need, built by and for people who have faced terrific privation, cannot content itself with easy, pretty or insignificant plays. We are not being given millions of dollars to repeat, however expertly, the type of plays which landed 10,000 theatre people on relief rolls. By a stroke of fortune unprecedented in dramatic history, we have been given a chance to help change America at a time when twenty million unemployed Americans proved it needed changing. And the theatre, when it is any good, can change things.

The theatre can quicken, start things, make things happen. Don't be afraid when people tell you this is a play of protest. Of course it's protest, protest against dirt, disease, human misery. If, in giving great plays of the past as greatly as we can give them, and if, in making people laugh, which we certainly want to do, we can't also protest—as Harry Hopkins is protesting and as President Roosevelt is protesting—against some of the evils of this country of ours, then we do not deserve the chance put into our hands. . . . Here is one necessity for our theatre—that it help reshape our American life. Nor do we work, hereafter, alone. We work not in isolated centers, but in a nationwide Federal Theatre. From that union we should gain tremendous strength. . . .

From it we shall all learn. Through it we shall mutually create a theatre which need not be just the frosting on the cake. It may be the yeast which makes the bread rise.

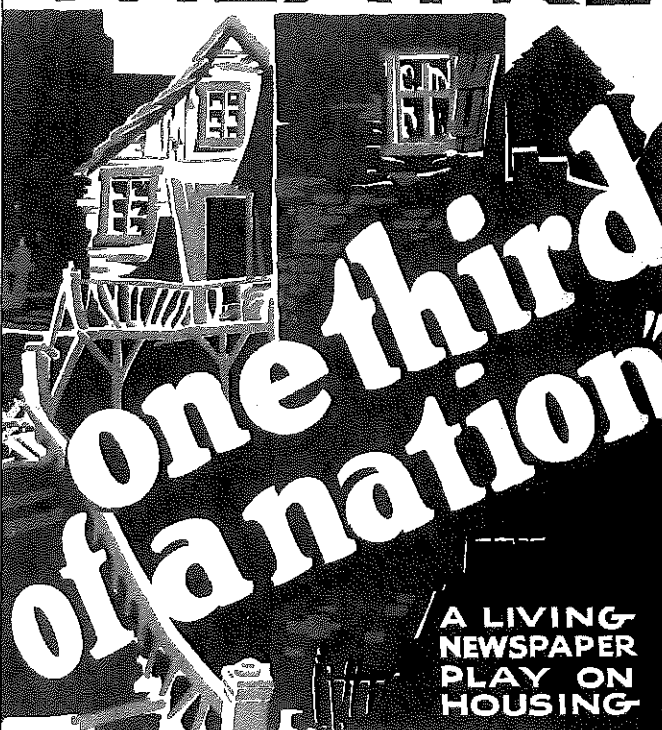
Hallie Flanagan, "Theater as Social Action," in Piere de Roban, ed., "First Federal Summer Theater: A Report," *Federal Theatre*, June–July 1937: 36 (a project newsletter available in the Federal Theatre Project collection, Library of Congress).

a taxi strike, was the most widely performed—and most widely banned—American play of 1935. In the labor movement, skits, plays, and radio dramas became an integral part of union propaganda. In 1935, the International Ladies' Garment Workers Union established the Labor Stage. One of its productions, *Pins and Needles*, became a Broadway hit. Employing actors who were drawn from the garment shops, the show satirized contemporary politics and the lives of ordinary workers.

The government supported dramatic arts through the WPA's Federal Theatre Project, which hired actors, writers, and directors from the relief

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One Third of a Nation

Taking its title from FDR's Second Inaugural Address, the 1938 Federal Theatre Project production played to packed houses in New York and ten other cities. Arthur Arent's "Living Newspaper" play combined documentation and drama — and an imposing four-story tenement set — to convey the causes of and solutions to America's housing crisis. Library of Congress, Federal Theatre Project Collection.

rolls. It produced classics by Shakespeare, Molière, and Marlowe, as well as socially avant-garde works such as the "Living Newspaper" plays and Sinclair Lewis's *It Can't Happen Here*, a drama about fascism coming to America. Many plays were produced in multiple versions, with African American, Spanish, and Yiddish casts. Led by Hallie Flanagan, the exuberant, politically engaged director of Vassar College's Experimental Theatre, the Federal Theatre Project became a lightning rod for conservative criticism of the New Deal, both because it employed so many radicals and bohemians and because many Americans thought that theatrical work was hardly work at all.

I Am a Fugitive from a Chain Gang

Mervyn LeRoy's 1932 film, starring Paul Muni as a wrongly imprisoned World War I veteran, exposed the abuses of the penal system in the South. Museum of Modern Art/Film Stills Archive.



Following the addition of sound to motion pictures in 1927 and the establishment of the major movie studios, Hollywood and its stars had moved to center stage in American mass culture. Though most Depression era films had little social or political content—Busby Berkeley's extravagant production numbers, such as *Gold Diggers of 1933*, were escapist fantasies—there were some exceptions. The dark crime films of the early Depression,

The Ideal Picket

In 1941, trade union activism reached the workplace where some of the nation's favorite fantasies were produced. After Walt Disney fired union organizers on his art staff, his studio cartoonists went on strike. This cartoon from a newspaper report indicated how Disney strikers brought new skills to labor organizing. "There are mighty few labor disputes," the caption stated, "in which just about every striker can make his own picket signs. Consequently, the signs are bright and lively . . . attracting the passerby and winning friends for the Screen Cartoon Guild." *PM*, June 6, 1941 — American Social History Project.



including *Little Caesar* (1930) and *Public Enemy* (1931), explored the gangster underworld, while *I Am a Fugitive from a Chain Gang* (1932) exposed the South's brutal penal institutions. Frank Capra's films, especially those starring Jimmy Stewart, contrasted a populist version of small-town America with the corrupt and self-interested world of powerful politicians and businessmen. And comedians such as the Marx Brothers, Charlie Chaplin, W. C. Fields, and Mae West lampooned the social pretensions of the wealthy.

Many of the film stars of the 1930s, including Eddie Cantor, Joan Crawford, and James Cagney, were partisans of the New Deal. They helped to build the feisty Screen Actors Guild, which not only advanced the economic interests of its membership, but also demonstrated that trade unionism was not just for factory workers. Unionism in Hollywood entered Walt Disney's studios in 1941, when cartoonists successfully struck for higher pay and greater artistic freedom. Such activities generated much controversy if only because they seemed to subvert the hierarchical, celebrity culture promoted by the major studios and the Hollywood media.

Backlash Against Labor and the New Deal

Although the labor movement and the New Deal seemed to sweep all before them in 1936 and 1937, their very success generated resistance and counter-mobilization from people who had long opposed their progressive goals. By 1937, the U.S. economy was producing as many goods and services as it had in 1929. Businessmen who had been desperate for federal help five years earlier suddenly resented new government initiatives. "The life preserver which is so necessary when the ship is sinking," observed an official of the Chamber of Commerce, "becomes a heavy burden when a man is back on dry land." Thus, conservative businessmen and politicians united to oppose unionizing efforts, FDR's judicial proposal, and the expansion of New Deal programs. In the process, a powerful alliance formed between Southern Democrats and conservative Republicans, and fissures emerged within the working class. As if all these problems were not enough, the economy took a nosedive late in 1937. In a single year, industrial production declined by one-third, manufacturing employment fell by one-quarter, and in the big cities, WPA rolls rose fivefold.

The Conservative Counterattack In California, a right-wing mobilization began in 1934. The agricultural strikes in the Central Valley, Upton Sinclair's radical campaign for the governorship, and the general strike in San Francisco frightened conservatives. Vigilante groups soon terrorized the state's agricultural districts, kidnapping and beating labor organizers and their supporters. But the Associated Farmers, a statewide interlocking network of packers, shippers, utilities, and employers of migrant labor,

emerged as the most powerful new opponent of labor and the New Deal. With strong ties to local sheriffs and police departments, it kept well-organized files on thousands of radicals and union organizers at its San Francisco headquarters. In 1936, urged on by the Associated Farmers, the California Highway Patrol sealed off the state to Okie migrants and crushed a strike by lettuce harvesters in Salinas. The next year, California business interests broke a sit-down strike at Douglas Aircraft, thus helping to keep most of Los Angeles "open-shop" until World War II. Although California voters elected a liberal, Culbert Olson, to the governorship in 1938, the state's economic and political elite would not make peace with the New Deal or with organized labor.

President Roosevelt's ambitious plan to "pack" the Supreme Court with judges who were favorable to the New Deal also generated a furious conservative response. Roosevelt saw his reelection in 1936 as a sweeping mandate, but he feared that the courts, which had invalidated much of the work of the New Deal's first hundred days, would soon strike down the fruits of the second hundred days, including the Wagner Act and the Social Security Act. To preclude this possibility, the president wanted the authority to name up to fifty additional federal judges, including six Supreme Court justices, whenever an incumbent with ten years seniority reached the age of seventy. His plan, made public early in 1937, would have increased the executive power over the judiciary and given him a solid majority of opinion on the Supreme Court.

To many Americans, not just the Republican old guard, the CIO sit-down strikes and the Roosevelt court-packing plan seemed part of the same assault on social order and established property rights. Their fears and resentments exploded on the Senate floor on April 1, 1937, when both Democrats and Republicans denounced the CIO, its sit-down tactic, and what they considered to be Roosevelt's hunger for dictatorial power. On this issue, public opinion turned against the president, and the court-packing plan went down to an embarrassing defeat. But FDR did not come away empty-handed. The Supreme Court itself, perhaps mindful of the public support enjoyed by New Deal initiatives, shifted course and validated most of the legislative initiatives of the Second New Deal, including Social Security and the Wagner Act. Then a series of unexpected retirements gave the president the chance to name several distinguished liberals to the High Court, including Hugo Black, Felix Frankfurter, and William O. Douglas.

The labor movement was not so fortunate. When the Steel Workers Organizing Committee struck the nation's "Little Steel" companies (large corporations such as Bethlehem and Republic that were small only in comparison to U.S. Steel) in May 1937, steel executives were determined to resist, in part because they believed that the upsurge of anti-New Deal sentiment touched off by FDR's court-packing fiasco had also turned the public

against the CIO. The strike came to a bloody climax on Memorial Day, May 30, 1937. That afternoon, a crowd of more than 1,000 steelworkers, family members, and supporters marched to the main gate of Republic Steel, on Chicago's South Side. Carrying large American flags, the demonstrators represented a cross-section of the ethnically diverse workforce in Chicago's steel industry, from Southern Europeans, who probably constituted a majority, to smaller groups of African Americans and Mexican Americans. The mood of the crowd was peaceful, but two blocks north of the plant gate, the demonstrators encountered a force of 200 Chicago police, wielding clubs, ax handles, and guns.

When the police refused to give strikers permission to set up a picket line, a few people in the crowd began throwing rocks. The police immediately opened fire. As men, women, and children ran for their lives, police shot at their backs, killing 10 demonstrators and wounding 30 others, including 3 children. Nine people were permanently disabled, and another 28 were hospitalized with injuries inflicted by police clubs and ax handles. The next day, headlines in one of Chicago's newspapers proclaimed, "Reds Riot at Steel Mill," and a coroner's jury pronounced the killings "justifiable homicide."

A matter of months after the CIO's resounding victory in Flint, the 1937 Memorial Day Massacre mobilized antistrike, antilabor forces across the Midwest. Eight more strikers were killed in June, another 160 were seriously wounded, and many more were subjected to police tear gas and arrest. Democratic governors, such as Martin Davey of Ohio ordered the state national guard to jail union organizers, break up picket lines, and escort strikebreakers into Ohio steel plants. Staggered by such unexpected opposition from Democratic officeholders, the CIO's Philip Murray called on President Roosevelt to offer at least a verbal endorsement of union steelworkers who had supported him so loyally during his 1936 election campaign. But Roosevelt, weakened by his Supreme Court defeat, considered the Little Steel strike "a real headache" and spurned Murray's plea for help. "The majority of the people are saying just one thing," FDR declared during a June press conference: "A plague on both your houses." CIO President John L. Lewis offered a rejoinder on Labor Day 1937: "It ill behooves one who has supped at labor's table and who has been sheltered in labor's house



"The Memorial Day Massacre"

This photograph was one of many taken of the May 30, 1937, incident outside the gates of the Republic Steel Company's South Chicago factory. During the subsequent investigation by the U.S. Senate's La Follette Committee, these images — including motion-picture newsreel footage — proved that the brutal attack was unprovoked by the unarmed strikers. Only two words were audible on the newsreel sound track: "God Almighty!" The newsreel was later screened nationally but was never exhibited in Chicago. Negative no. ICH137116 — Chicago Historical Society.

to curse with equal fervor and fine impartiality both labor and its adversaries when they become locked in deadly embrace." The alliance between labor and the New Deal would not be an easy one.

New Deal Setbacks in the South Although Roosevelt left the CIO in the lurch during the spring of 1937, he actually stepped up his efforts to make the Democratic Party a more consistently liberal organization. Many New Dealers wanted to industrialize the South, equalize wages there with those in the North, and democratize the political system. In a speech in Georgia in 1938, Roosevelt brought the campaign for an expanded New Deal to the heart of Dixie. He attacked those southerners who were content to maintain a "feudal economic system." "There is little difference between the feudal system and the fascist system," he declared, referring to the rise of reactionary governments in Italy and Germany. "If you believe in one, you lean to the other." Voicing the views of a small but energetic group of southerners who were allied with the New Deal, Roosevelt declared the South "the nation's number one economic problem."

But southern political leaders rejected Roosevelt's gambit. During the court-packing fight and in the debates over relief and the minimum wage, Democratic congressmen and officeholders from the South proved increasingly hostile to New Deal reformism. The white southern oligarchy was more secure in 1938 than it had been in the depths of the Depression. Massive New Deal financial subsidies revived cotton and tobacco cultivation and began a program of farm mechanization that tilted the balance of power still further toward the landed gentry. Especially as the CIO turned its attention to the mills, factories, and refineries of the industrial South, the benefits of federal relief began to pale beside the threat of federal intervention in labor and race relations. As one southern white crudely summed up his fears, "You ask any nigger in the street who's the greatest man in the world. Nine out of ten will tell you Franklin Roosevelt. That's why I think he's so dangerous."

This conservative turn did not reflect the views of the majority of southerners, black and white, who overwhelmingly favored federal regulation of industry and economic aid. But the states of the old Confederacy were not then governed by institutions that would today be considered democratic. Most southern states systematically denied suffrage to African Americans, even as the poll tax made it difficult for poor whites to vote. In Virginia and Mississippi, less than 10 percent of the adult population cast a ballot, in presidential elections. In the long run, New Deal agricultural policies would force millions of rural black Americans off the land and set the stage for the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s. But in the 1930s, such displacement merely depopulated the countryside and intensified racial competition at the bottom of the labor market. As a result, a CIO

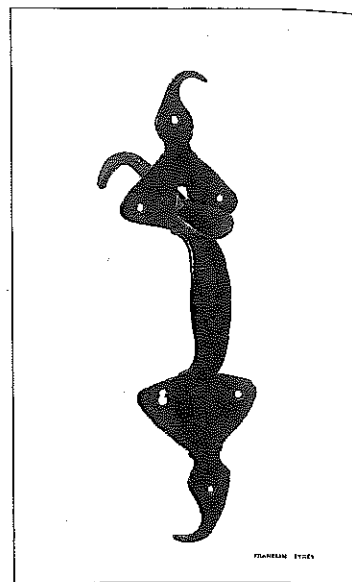
effort to organize southern textiles—still the nation's largest industry—collapsed late in 1937.

Roosevelt's effort in 1938 to realign the Democratic Party and purge opponents of the New Deal also failed. In a series of Democratic primaries, the president supported Democrats who backed the Second New Deal against conservatives who opposed his program. He attempted to purge outspoken conservatives such as Senator Walter George of Georgia, who saw the president's program as "a second march [by Union General Sherman] through Georgia," and Senator Ellison ("Cotton Ed") Smith of South Carolina, who had sharply attacked the Fair Labor Standards Act. But the conservative southern Democrats held onto their seats in the 1938 elections, and the Republicans won eighty-one new seats in the House and eight in the Senate.

Roosevelt also failed to bring about a liberal realignment in the West. His defeat there was ironic, for no region had benefited more from federal generosity in the 1930s. In Montana, for example, federal agencies spent five times more per capita than they laid out in North Carolina, largely to help western cattlemen hurt by overgrazing and falling prices. But these twentieth-century pioneers resented the help. "For this salvation," one historian observed, "many cattlemen never forgave the government."

Roosevelt's failure to realign the Democratic Party in 1938 laid the basis for a generation-long alliance between conservative "Dixiecrats" and Republican opponents of the New Deal, one that effectively frustrated liberal efforts to expand the welfare state, advance African American civil rights, and encourage the growth of the labor movement. As a reform movement, the New Deal was over. For the next quarter century and beyond, the nation would be governed by a Democratic Party with a split personality. At the presidential level, the Democrats would make an effective play for the votes of the northern, urban, working-class majority; once in power, however, Democratic presidents would be unable fully to deliver real reforms. With the institutional power their long years of congressional seniority assured them, southern Democratic legislators and their Republican allies would block most initiatives that threatened the industrial or racial status quo.

Labor Divided and Besieged If working-class Americans had been more politically and socially united, the New Deal and the new unions might well have parried the conservative assault with greater success. But the enormous changes that were at work in industry and politics opened up deep cultural divisions within America's working population. On one side stood the lower middle class and the old labor aristocracy, largely of Northern European descent. These men and women had a substantial stake in the existing social order, be it the comfortable politics of a small midwestern town or the



The Art of the Common Man

Some New Deal projects harbored a conservative perspective. The Index of American Design, one of the Federal Arts Projects (FAP), celebrated what was "American" in the decorative arts by looking back nostalgically to a preindustrial past. Between 1935 and 1942, artists produced 18,000 watercolors of indigenous artifacts, such as this door latch by an anonymous Pennsylvania German blacksmith, a simple utilitarian farmhouse object with decorative details, including the curved points on the cusp. These pictures made up a pictorial archive that aimed to connect Americans with their folk and popular arts—the "arts of the common man," in the words of FAP director Holger Cahill. Franklyn Syres, *Door Latch*, watercolor, 1943.8.16758—National Gallery of Art.



Un-American!

A cartoon published in the *Washington Post* ridiculed the hearings held by Texas congressman Martin Dies's House Committee on Un-American Activities during August 1938. Hollywood darling Shirley Temple is shown holding a hammer and a sickle, the symbol of Communism. Elderman, *Washington Post*, August 24, 1938 — Copyright 1938, *Washington Post*. Reprinted with permission.

chance to climb a few steps higher on the factory job ladder. Bolstered by organizations such as the Masons, the Knights of Columbus, and the well-established churches, as well as through kinship and friendship, many Protestant workers and some Irish Catholics became hostile to the New Deal and disdainful of the CIO, in which radical Jews, anticlerical Catholics, and cosmopolitan intellectuals held prominent posts. These religious cultural fissures within the working class turned into a political chasm by the late 1930s, generating a revival of the Ku Klux Klan in Indiana, Missouri, and Texas and the appearance of the anti-Semitic, anti-Communist Black Legion in Ohio and Michigan factory towns. Such divisions penetrated the labor movement as well, fueling an intense rivalry between the AFL and the CIO and generating bitter factional conflicts within unions that attempted to consolidate their power in the electrical, farm equipment, newspaper, automobile, and mass transit industries.

In Washington, these conflicts within the labor movement aligned the AFL with some of the bitterest opponents of the New Deal. In 1938, Congress authorized the formation of a House Committee on Un-American Activities (HUAC). Under the leadership of the right-wing congressman Martin Dies of Texas, the committee attacked Popular Front political organizations and exposed left-wing influence in the Federal Theatre Project, ultimately closing it down. The AFL used HUAC's hearings to denounce sit-down strikes and to publicize the role that Communists and other radicals played in the formation of the CIO.

A year later, the National Labor Relations Board came under sharp attack by the House Rules Committee, led by the conservative Virginian Howard Smith. Working closely with Smith and other antiunion southerners, the AFL charged that the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) favored the CIO. Reeling from his recent defeats, President Roosevelt quickly appointed a new set of NLRB members, who accommodated the AFL's point of view. The new board stressed the importance of stability and the validity of craft union claims. Hence, the NLRB soon proved far less amenable to the industrywide union structures that were favored by the

"The Charge Has Been Made That This Article of Yours Is Entirely Communistic"

The election of a large number of new conservative congressional representatives and senators in 1938 and the subsequent attack on and rollback of federal programs had ominous implications for the New Deal coalition. In 1938, congressional conservatives established the House Committee on Un-American Activities to investigate communist influence both in and out of government. Among those who were called to testify in December was Hallie Flanagan, director of the Federal Theatre Project, who was questioned by Democratic representative Joseph Starnes of Alabama about an article on workers' theater she had written seven years earlier. Despite its ridiculous qualities, the exchange between Starnes and Flanagan reveals the lengths to which conservative Democratic and Republican politicians would go to discredit progressive institutions and individuals and smear them with the taint of Communism.

Mr. Starnes: I want to quote finally from your article "A Theater is Born" . . . "The power of these theaters springing up everywhere throughout the country lies in the fact that they know what they want. Their purpose—restricted, some will call it, though it is open to question whether any theater which attempts to create a class culture can be called restricted—is clear. This is important because there are only two theaters in the country today that are clear as to aim: one is the commercial theater which wants to make money; the other is the workers' theater which wants to make a new social order. The workers' theaters are neither infirm nor divided in purpose. Unlike any art form existing in America today, the workers' theaters intend to shape the life of this country, socially, politically, and industrially. They intend to remake a social structure without the help of money—and this ambition alone invests their undertaking with a certain Marlowesque madness." You are quoting from this Marlowe. Is he a Communist?

Mrs. Flanagan: I am very sorry. I was quoting from Christopher Marlowe.

Mr. Starnes: Tell us who Marlowe is, so we can get the proper reference, because that is all that we want to do.

Mrs. Flanagan: Put in the record that he was the greatest dramatist in the period immediately preceding Shakespeare.

Mr. Starnes: Put that in the record because the charge has been made that this article of yours is entirely Communistic, and we want to help you. . . . Of course, we had what some people call Communists back in the days of the [ancient] Greek theater.

Mrs. Flanagan: Quite true.

Mr. Starnes: And I believe Mr. Euripides was guilty of teaching class consciousness also, wasn't he?

Mrs. Flanagan: I believe that was alleged against all of the Greek dramatists.

Mr. Starnes: So we cannot say when it began.

Eric Bentley, *Thirty Years of Treason: Excerpts from Hearings Before the House Committee on Un-American Activities, 1938-1968* (1971).

CIO and by those who saw the labor movement as a regulator of working-class income and purchasing power.

The Roosevelt Recession In late 1937, the nation seemed close to returning to the conditions of 1933: employed factory workers were cut back to a one- or two-day workweek, and some of the unemployed went hungry once again. The so-called “Roosevelt Recession” was a product both of the president’s political blunders and of far-reaching economic problems. By 1937, a remarkable economic recovery convinced administration policymakers that the Depression was nearly over; indeed, rising prices now seemed the real threat. So despite continued high unemployment, FDR cut WPA expenditures, laying off 1.5 million relief workers. This premature effort to balance the federal budget sucked purchasing power out of the economy, as did the \$2 billion tax increase required by the new Social Security program (the pension checks would not begin flowing until 1941). But the sharp recession of 1937 and 1938 also had more ominous causes. American capitalism was still an unstable system; none of the New Deal reforms transformed its fundamental character. Instead, Roosevelt’s overwhelming victory in 1936, the rise of labor, and the growth of federal regulation might well have inhibited investment by businessmen worried about the effects of these trends on their enterprises.

The administration’s response to the recession helped to define the contours of liberal thought and politics for the next generation. After much internal debate, Roosevelt announced two partially complementary initiatives in April 1938. The first was a massive spending bill inspired by the

The Depression Continues

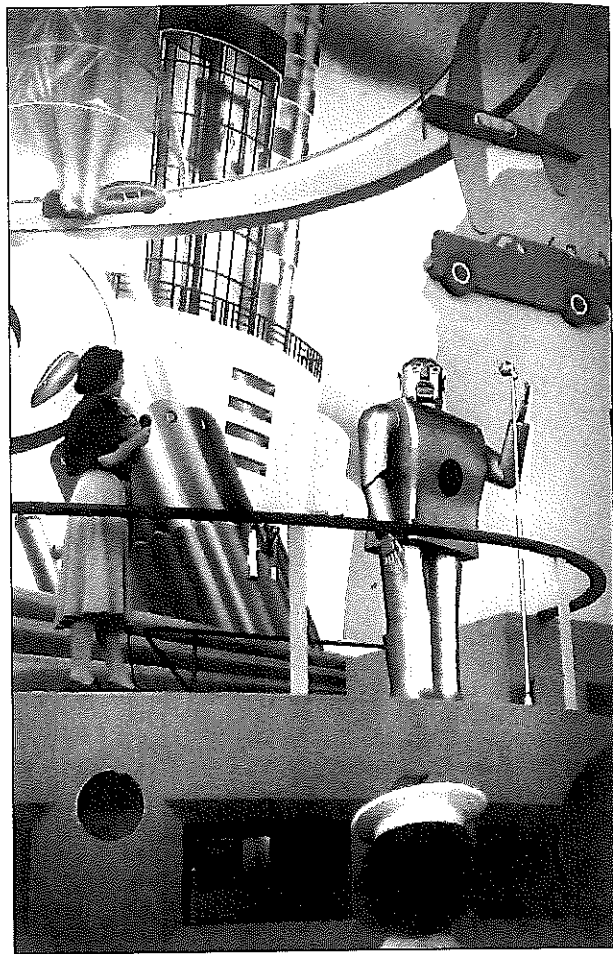
These migrants camped along U.S. Route 99 in Kern County, California, in November 1938. Unemployment rose sharply again during the “Roosevelt Recession,” Dorothea Lange, 1938 — Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress.



theories of British economist John Maynard Keynes, who argued that in time of economic stagnation, government should “prime the pump” by raising public expenditures. Admitting that he could not avoid a large budget deficit, Roosevelt asked Congress to appropriate \$5 billion for public works and relief programs. The government added two million new workers to the payroll, and this soon sparked another tentative recovery.

But Roosevelt and his more radical advisers did not see this strategy as an adequate response to what many considered a stagnant economy. These left-leaning New Dealers believed that the concentration of economic power kept prices high and wages low. To generate significant spending, the nation needed more than budget deficits and public relief; it needed a shift in power from the corporations to workers and consumers. To explore this thesis, Roosevelt appointed Thurmond Arnold as head of the Justice Department’s Antitrust Division, and he launched a vigorous attack on business monopolies. Working with Congress, Roosevelt also set up a Temporary National Economic Committee to study corporate power and obstacles to competition. These New Dealers fought business monopolies because they thought that the concentration of power undermined democracy and thwarted the expansion of consumer purchasing power. But this broad vision did not carry the day, even within New Deal circles. It soon lost out to a strategy that focused on manipulation of consumer demand through either tax cuts or spending programs. New Deal liberalism, as a result, became defined by efforts to regulate and stabilize the economy through tax measures and spending policies rather than by an effort to directly redistribute wealth or limit the power of giant corporations.

Part of the reason for the gradual narrowing of New Deal liberalism was a sharp and increasingly effective corporate assault on programs that attacked their power and prerogatives. Businessmen routinely condemned Washington bureaucrats, left-wing New Dealers, and the new “labor bosses.” Such rhetoric had its appeal, especially among the affluent, but the major corporations proved more successful when they projected a



“The World of Tomorrow”

The 1939 New York World’s Fair opened in the shadow of approaching war, yet its theme and exhibits optimistically predicted a prosperous, pollution-free future based on the technological expertise provided by American corporations. Among its many attractions was Elektro, a seven-foot “moto-man” in the Westinghouse Corporation’s “Singing Tower of Light.” Elektro — who “talks, sees, smells, sings, and counts with his fingers” — represented the benefits of electrical power. Queens Museum of Art.

Public Housing

Legislators and real estate lobbyists tried to keep expenditures for public housing low, contributing to the drab uniformity of many government-sponsored projects. But some public housing offered inexpensive homes with the style and amenities of a locality's private residences. With their tall windows and cast-iron balconies, these St. Thomas Houses, for example, fit comfortably into New Orleans's traditional architectural design. *Public Housing: The Work of the Federal Public Housing Authority (1946)* — American Social History Project.



bright future in which they would bring the bounty of new technology and consumer goods to the whole population. Like the New Dealers, executives at companies such as DuPont, General Motors, and Standard Oil of New Jersey looked beyond the Depression to a new era of high-wage consumption. But they celebrated the remarkable technical and organizational innovations that industry had made during the Depression. For example, managers at DuPont transformed a company that was known for the profitability of its munitions business and the paternalism of its labor relations into a modern enterprise that boasted "Better Things for Better Living . . . Through Chemistry." The corporate counteroffensive reached full flower at the 1939 New York World's Fair, where scores of corporations advertised their vision of an abundant future under the guidance of giant conglomerates. GM's Futurama exhibit, which featured an elaborately crafted world of express highways, green suburbs, and well-planned cities, proved the highlight of the fair and offered a corporate alternative to the social democratic vision of New Deal partisans and labor activists.

Conclusion: What the New Deal Accomplished

If the New Deal was stymied at the end of the 1930s, it nevertheless left an enormous legacy that reshaped the nation for more than two generations to come. Economic recovery was actually the least of the New Deal's achievements. It was in many respects an economic failure. None of Roosevelt's recovery programs ended mass unemployment or restored long-term economic growth. At the end of the 1930s, the effort to construct a new mass market for American industry was still incomplete. The labor movement

"I Am Hanging on to the Principles of the New Deal"

In his classic 1941 study of rubberworkers in Akron, Ohio, sociologist Alfred Winslow Jones painted a complex picture of workers' political consciousness at the close of the New Deal era. Jones's study revealed that despite their labor activism a large majority of Akron's unionized rubberworkers continued to accept the basic right of capitalists to use their property as they saw fit. This belief was tempered, however, by a strong sense of social justice. The following interview with James Hunt, a tire-builder, typified the attitudes of many Akron workers and unionists.

All my spare time I devote to the union—to meetings and activities. That's my social enjoyment. I want to see the union eventually a sound and steady organization. I am not at all satisfied with it the way it works at present. . . . Don't get me wrong. I'm a hundred per cent for unions and I think we are twice as well off since the union was organized. . . . Since the union was organized we have had more freedom, security, dependability, and stability in wages. The union has sprung up as a sort of social change in the face of the present fast speed-up system. In the beginning the union grew so fast that . . . anybody and everybody just jumped in and went along. Socialism has crept in and I'm no socialist so I greatly disapprove of that. I want to see majority rule in a union as well as in our government, but that is not true in either at present. . . . We must build a constructive organization instead of a destructive one.

. . . The big trouble with the New Deal is that a few people run the country instead of the majority like they should. Although I have been non-partisan all my life, I am hanging on to the principles of the New Deal, but I really know that it won't solve our problems.

. . . Every worker should make more than just living expenses, but the average one certainly does not. There ought to be a limit on how much the rich can earn and on the profits of any factory or corporation. There ought also to be a minimum for everybody. There is no sense in one man making a dollar an hour and another working twice as hard and making fifty cents. But I don't contend that everyone should make equal wages for that would be wrong too.

Alfred Winslow Jones, *Life, Liberty, and Property* (1941).

was but half-built, commercial investment remained tepid, and trading blocs and war tremors shaking Europe and the Far East threatened the prospect of any revival of overseas trade. Working-class standards of living were no better than those of 1929, and working people still lived in a world of economic insecurity. World War II and half a decade of ultra-Keynesian government spending would be required to eradicate mass unemployment and restore economic growth to the United States.

But if the New Deal failed to make capitalism work, its supporters nevertheless transformed the nation's politics. The Roosevelt electoral coalition would dominate presidential politics until the 1970s. White supremacists from the South belonged to it, but so did progressive farmers from the

upper Midwest, urban politicians whose machines had been reinvigorated by the federal relief funds they administered, middle-class liberals anxious for social reform, African Americans who saw the federal government as a new ally, and industrial unions that gave weight and influence to the Democratic Party's left wing. Roosevelt often functioned as a power broker juggling those disparate interests. It was not always a pretty sight, but compared with the far more monolithic power that the pre-Depression Protestant elite had wielded, the Roosevelt coalition had far more legitimacy.

The New Deal and the new unions constituted a cultural triumph because they transformed Americans' vision of themselves and of their nation. With widespread public support, the federal government constructed a welfare state that became an active—even a protective—presence in citizens' lives. The welfare state and the labor laws enacted during the Second New Deal had many flaws, but they held the promise of a new social and political enfranchisement. For at least half of the industrial working class—not only African Americans but also immigrants from Southern and Eastern Europe—citizenship had been merely a formality, underused or unrealized. Despite the power of the coalition of Dixiecrats and Republicans, the new unionism and the New Deal played a decisive role in mobilizing these new Americans into an organized body of citizens whose political power and distinctive outlook gave birth to a new kind of patriotism. In the 1930s, voter participation reached its twentieth century apogee. In the approaching world conflict, the nation would be more unified than ever because its patriotism arose from a pluralism that was far more genuine than that of earlier—or later—times. In the 1930s, America's working people transformed themselves from deferential subjects into self-confident citizens.

The Years in Review

1935

- The Second New Deal, which includes the Works Progress Administration, Social Security Act, and Wagner Act, greatly expands the role of the federal government.
- American Federation of Labor (AFL) dissidents establish the Committee for Industrial Organization (later the Congress of Industrial Organizations, or CIO) under John L. Lewis to back aggressive organizing of industrial unions.
- Populist senator Huey Long of Louisiana is assassinated.
- The Communist Party of the United States proclaims support for a "Popular Front" of labor, liberals, and New Dealers to fight business and the rise of fascism.

1936

- The Supreme Court invalidates the Agricultural Adjustment Act.
- The National Negro Congress is founded to support union organizing drives, agitate for more public housing, and picket discriminatory employers.
- The California's Associated Farmers crush the lettuce harvesters' strike in Salinas.
- Roosevelt is reelected in a huge landslide over Republican Alfred Landon and third-party candidates William Lemke, Norman Thomas, and Earl Browder.
- General Motors employees initiate a massive sit-down strike in Flint, Michigan, which will lead to GM's recognition of the United Autoworkers Union in early 1937.

1937

- Strikes sweep the nation; nearly five million workers take part in some kind of industrial action, and almost three million become union members.
- Roosevelt announces his "court-packing" plan to add six new justices to the U.S. Supreme Court.
- U.S. Steel recognizes the Steel Workers' Organizing Committee, but smaller steel companies resist; workers at Republic Steel in South Chicago stage a strike that turns into a massacre by police.
- A sharp decline in the economy, the "Roosevelt Recession," saps the president's popularity.
- The Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters wins union recognition, higher wages, and shorter hours.

1938

- The House Committee on Un-American Activities holds hearings suggesting that many of America's problems are caused by Communist agitators.
- The Fair Labor Standards Act prohibits child labor, sets a minimum wage, and writes the forty-hour workweek into federal law.
- The Democrats lose eighty-one seats in the House and eight seats in the Senate, as Roosevelt's effort to "realign" the Democratic Party fails.

1939

- The New York World's Fair in Flushing Meadows, New York, presents a vision of an abundant future under the guidance of giant corporations.

- African American contralto Marian Anderson gives a concert on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial after the Daughters of the American Revolution bar her from performing in Constitution Hall.

Additional Readings

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