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Unemployed Citizens of Seattle, 1900-1933:

**Hulet Wells, Seattle Labor, and the
Struggle for Economic Security**

by

Terry R. Willis

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

University of Washington

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Approved by

William J. Roalson

Chairperson of Supervisory Committee

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Doctoral Dissertation

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Abstract

Unemployed Citizens of Seattle, 1900-1933:
Hulet Wells, Seattle Labor, and the
Struggle for Economic Security

by Terry R. Willis

Chairperson of the Supervisory Committee
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Department of History

Jobless workers in Seattle, Washington, in 1931 started a remarkable experiment in self-help and political action. Although the Unemployed Citizens' League appeared to emerge spontaneously, it actually evolved from three decades of practical experience.

The first chapter begins with a frontier economy and a laissez-faire ideology. Hulet Wells, one of the League founders, grew up on a pioneer farm and joined the Klondike gold rush of 1897.

The next three chapters cover economic change, ideological differences, and political action from 1900 to 1919. As Seattle grew from a frontier town to a metropolis, competing interests often clashed. Wells went to jail with Dr. Hermon Titus and other Socialists during the free speech fights. He was fired for organizing Postal Clerks Local 28. He ran for mayor in 1912, incurred the wrath of Col. Blethen and the *Seattle Times*, barely escaped a mob during the potlatch riot, and was elected president of the Seattle Central Labor Council. After World War I broke out, he was fired for

protesting the draft. He worked in the shipyards and helped organize the Seattle general strike of 1919.

Chapters V and VI explore the consumer-based economy of the 1920s, from boom to bust. With mass marketing, workers' incomes became essential to the economic system, but laissez-faire ideology hindered government from aiding workers. After 1929, Hooverville grew on the tide-flats. Carl Brannin, another League founder, joined the Seattle Labor College and started the monthly *Vanguard*.

The last three chapters focus on the Unemployed Citizens' League. Chapter VII covers the rise of the League. Lobbying for public works and unemployment insurance, League members sought "work or maintenance, NOT charity." Cast out from the money economy, they set up a system of mutual aid and self-help. When the business community urged consumers to "buy now," the *Vanguard* countered, "Buy--with what?" Chapter VIII traces the growing militancy and mass action of 1932, along with internal and external power struggles. Chapter IX covers the Olympia hunger march of 1933. The conclusion considers the interaction of ideology, economics, and politics.

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Preface

This dissertation has been, for me, a quest--a quest for an understanding of our economic system and the root causes of poverty. It stemmed from personal experience when I set out to try to support myself.

In 1984 I left my home in California and headed north to seek my fortune. The last of my three children had just graduated from high school. My ex-husband and I had sold our joint property, so I had a small monthly stipend coming in on a regular basis--not enough to live on, but enough to help out. I had a college education, plus good typing and word processing skills. With a modest lifestyle and no dependents, I planned to find a job and save a little money so I could buy a little cabin in the woods. Was I in for a surprise! By the end of the first year, not only was I not saving any money, but I was using up my savings for day-to-day living expenses. What had gone wrong with my plan?

I called up my local chapter of the National Organization for Women (NOW) and asked if they had a "decent pay" task force. "No," said the chapter president, "but come join us and we will start one." So I did. When our task force started looking at issues of jobs and pay, we discovered the problem was not limited to women. Many men also had good job qualifications but were either unemployed or working for less-than-livable wages. Middle-class families were experiencing the phenomenon of sudden downward mobility. What had gone wrong with the economy?

To help each other cope with our reduced circumstances, our NOW chapter started a "Nouveau Poor" task force. We held meetings and put out a newsletter for more than year. Like Alice in Wonderland, I became "curiouser and curiouser" about what was going on. To find more answers, I applied to the

history department of the University of Washington and was accepted in the Ph.D. program.

Wanting to study another group of people who had experienced sudden downward mobility on a large scale, I looked back at the Great Depression of the 1930s. When I learned that a group of Seattle workers had taken the lead in forming a self-help group, the Unemployed Citizens' League, I knew I had a topic for my dissertation. The surprise, for me, was to learn how long the League leaders had been organizing and agitating before the Depression finally gave an economic imperative to their idealistic exhortations. I had not expected to go back as far as the Gilded Age and the Progressive Era to trace the roots and growth of the League, but once I got into the subject, it seemed imperative to do so. Too many things could not be explained otherwise.

My personal interest was to look at gender issues, ideology, economics, and the question of "what is money, anyway?" The astute reader will notice immediately that my dissertation says practically nothing about women. The omission may seem odd, particularly in view of the fact that I have been a card-carrying feminist since 1972. In fact, my master's thesis focused specifically on women of a hundred years earlier: "Women of Sacramento in 1872." There are two reasons why women are missing from my study of the Unemployed Citizens' League. First is the nature of the source material. Most of the newspaper articles and autobiographies were written by men about men's concerns. Hulet Wells, for example, in his autobiography barely mentions his wife or child.

Second is the nature of my investigation. I am looking at a system which is, frankly, a little bit foreign to me. I grew up in a white middle-class milieu in the 1940s and '50s, when men went out to work and women stayed home. Women

worked, but not for pay. We were mothers and community volunteers; our husbands were the breadwinners. The volunteer sphere has many similarities, but it is also quite different from the monetary, paying-job sphere. Rewards and expectations can be very different. I know the volunteer sphere; I am trying to understand the paying-job sphere. I am looking at a male creation, the economic system, from a female perspective.

For those readers who wish a better understanding of women and women's issues, I would recommend three books in particular: Betty Lehan Harragan, *Games Mother Never Taught You: Corporate Gamesmanship for Women* (1977); Susan Ware, *Holding Their Own: American Women in the 1930s* (1982); and Dana Frank, *Purchasing Power: Consumer Organizing, Gender, and the Seattle Labor Movement, 1919-1929* (1994). Along the same lines, for those who wish a better understanding of racial and ethnic issues, I would highly recommend Quintard Taylor, *The Forging of a Black Community: Seattle's Central District from 1870 through the Civil Rights Era* (1994).

For me, one of the biggest issues was money--not how to get it or spend it, but money as an ideological issue. The work ethic and money. Money and its relationship to work; the social definition of work; the social allocation of various amounts of money for for various kinds of activities at various times and in various places. These questions are too abstract and too complex for me to address directly in this historical dissertation, but they are intimately related to the problems faced by Seattle's unemployed citizens, so I would like to place a few thoughts and suggestions here in the preface.

Money. What is it, anyway? I liked the medieval notion that each item had its own intrinsic value and there was such a thing as a "just price." I also liked the notion of "a

fair day's wage for a fair day's work." Growing up female, I learned that it was not polite to ask for, or about, money, so I had only the vaguest notion of how prices were set or how wages were established. I learned about spending money, spending money wisely, and saving for the future. But I did not know how monetary values fluctuated, or how economic competition worked, or how to figure out what a fair day's wage meant in dollars and cents in any given time or place.

I have learned that the monetary system is extremely useful, that it has grown extremely complex, that there are ways that some people can manipulate parts of it, that nobody controls the whole thing, and that, *in toto*, it is a huge but fragile social fabrication. It works largely because we believe it works and we--most of us--want it to work. The history of the monetary system since the days of Adam Smith has largely been a history of testing various hypotheses, some of which have worked in various periods of time. An analysis of money and how it works is beyond the scope of this dissertation, but it should be kept in mind, because the struggle for worker security is closely related to the social definition of money and the uses thereof.

For the reader who wants to know more about the historical development of money, I would recommend Elgin Groseclose, *Money and Man: A Survey of Monetary Experience*, (1934; revised and enlarged 1976). Groseclose focuses on money as a mechanism to facilitate trade and commerce, and on the historical experience in trying to stabilize the monetary system. "Yet money is," he says (page 7), "more than anything else, the creation of man, a device of his own making." An excellent book for understanding the origins and development of that enigmatic financial institution, the stock market, is John Steele Gordon, *The Scarlet Woman of Wall Street*, (1988). The "scarlet woman" was the Erie

Railway, whose enticing stocks brought about the downfall of many an investor. The book traces the major players and their financial manipulations within the context of the economic and industrial development of the times.

* * * * *

Having given the reader some idea of how I came to be interested in the general subject of unemployment, I'd like to say a few more words about the dissertation itself. To select the topic, I started out with a general question: A large group of middle-class people face sudden downward mobility (pay cuts; loss of jobs). What do they do? How do they cope? It seemed that a likely place to find such a group would be in the era of the Great Depression. When my first advisor, Dr. Robert Burke, loaned me his copy of Arthur Hillman's 1934 report on the Unemployed Citizens' League of Seattle, I knew I had found my group.

In his introduction, Hillman had commented: "the personal and social backgrounds, of the leaders of the movement especially, would be a fruitful study, only the beginnings of which are touched upon in this thesis." I became interested in the ancestry and origins of the League. What part did leadership play? What prompted its formation in this particular time and place? Were there any precedents? How had unemployed citizens tried to cope in earlier periods of Seattle history? What were the long-range, underlying causes of this particular development? What were the short-term, precipitating factors? What about previous efforts at creating grass-roots organizations? One of the leaders, Hulet Wells, had left a typescript copy of his autobiography with the University of Washington Library. After reading Wells' life story, I concluded that Hillman's comment was the understatement of the year.

As a historical approach, I had been favorably impressed by Barbara Tuchman's *A Distant Mirror*, in which she took the life story of a particular individual as a vehicle for her narrative of the 14th century . She chose a male member of the nobility and followed him from his birth through his adult career, as he experienced and impacted the chaotic events of that period. As it happened, the life of Hulet Wells provided just such a vehicle for the study of unemployment in the Pacific Northwest in the early 20th century. And the title he chose for his autobiography was uniquely relevant: "I Wanted to Work."

I did not start out with any particular conceptual framework in mind, other than my own eclectic approach. I just wanted to find out *what happened*. I wanted to get the facts as accurately as I could, and then see whether any pattern emerged. When I had nearly finished my dissertation, I picked up a copy of Udo Sautter, *Three Cheers for the Unemployed* (1991). Despite the curious title, it turned out to be a well-balanced study of the germination and growth of the idea that government might take some responsibility for its unemployed citizens. I liked his approach, and I have found that my own research generally supports his conclusions.

Sautter took a broad approach, focusing on the intellectual currents and political machinations that eventually resulted in such government programs as employment agencies, public works, and unemployment insurance. He deliberately passed over the unemployed themselves as agents of social change, because, he said, their organized efforts "were infrequent and generally not very significant." He pointed out that joblessness was in its nature an unstable condition which did not lend itself to easy organization, and those who suffered most from unemployment were generally the least articulate.

Unlike Sautter, I did focus on the unemployed themselves as agents of social change. My Seattle research tends to confirm his assessment of their limitations. Leaders of the Unemployed Citizens' League often bemoaned the difficulty of organizing the unemployed. Hulet Wells and his colleague Carl Brannin were indeed unusual among jobless workers in being articulate, having organizing skills, having access to a printing press, and having connections with networks of reform-oriented groups. Seattle was unusual, perhaps, in having a large number of experienced labor organizers taking an interest in the unemployed.

Through my study of the Unemployed Citizens' League, I have come to believe that perhaps the activities of the unemployed themselves were more extensive and more significant than Sautter indicates, but I am not prepared to argue that point. I have found that, in Seattle at least, the question of organizing the unemployed had a long and interesting history before the Great Depression occurred. Seattle citizens in many ways reflected the larger national culture and were impacted by national events. But they were by no means passive recipients of whatever the culture might offer them. My research suggests that, although it would be difficult to sort out just who did what, the Unemployed Citizens' League and hundreds of similar grass-roots organizations across the country put political and economic pressure on government to take up a new responsibility. Like Sautter, I would agree that the important point is that a substantial change did in fact take place: government was accorded both the ability and the obligation to aid the unemployed.

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As with any project of this scope, many people deserve credit for their input, assistance, and encouragement. I would like to mention a few who shared their time and expertise early in my graduate career, including Professors Earl Pomeroy, Robert Burke, Otis Pease, Jon Bridgman, and Robin Stacey in history; Ed Gross in sociology; and Paul Heyne in economics; Sharon Krachunis; and Pam, Nancy, Susan, Lorna, and Amy -- members of the Nouveau Poor task force.

I would like to thank all those who have been helpful in recent years, including Dennis Ingram; Gloria Abbenhouse; Sarah Ryan; my parents, William and Ruth Rentz; the staff of the University of Washington Libraries, members of the Pacific Northwest Historians Guild; and many friends and relations who have assisted, directly and indirectly, throughout my involvement in this project.

Lastly, I would like to express my sincere appreciation to my chief advisor, William Rorabaugh, to my Supervisory Committee members, John Findlay and Richard Kirkendall, and to the Graduate School Representative, Robert Dunnell.

Chapter I

The Settler's Frontier, 1878-1900

In the summer of 1931, a year and a half into the Great Depression, a group of jobless workers in Seattle, Washington organized the Unemployed Citizens' League. Within weeks, the idea had spread across the state and nation. People who had lost their places in the mainstream economic system pooled their resources to improvise an alternative system. Lacking money, they set up a system of self-help. Lacking jobs, they lobbied their government for public works and unemployment insurance.

Because the Unemployed Citizens' League appeared so suddenly and so spread quickly, it was hailed by many as a spontaneous, grass-roots phenomenon. Actually, its seeds had been sown on the frontier and its roots had been nurtured by the Seattle labor movement for three decades.

The labor movement, loosely defined, embraced a multitude of individuals, both organized and unorganized, who shared a common concern to improve the conditions of labor. The Seattle labor movement in the early twentieth century, with its rough-and-tumble factions and shifting alliances, could hardly be called unified. It included the Socialists, the Industrial Workers of the World, American Federation of Labor unions representing various trades, the Seattle Central Labor Council representing most of the unions in the city, the Seattle Labor College, various labor-oriented newspapers, and sympathetic organizations including a number of churches. It included workers' wives and families, along with individual sympathizers from many walks of life. Sometimes--more often perhaps than either side would care to admit--it even included members of the Seattle business community.

The cast of characters changed over the years, as people

moved in, moved out, or moved on. One man, however, provided a thread of continuity from the early 1900s to the formation of the Unemployed Citizens' League. One man participated in Seattle's free speech fights, union organizing, draft protesting, the Seattle general strike, and the Unemployed Citizens' League. That man was Hulet Wells, a mild-mannered postal clerk, who somehow kept getting *involved*.

Born in the frontier era, Wells came to adulthood at the turn of the century, in the beginning stages of urbanization and industrialization in the Pacific Northwest. The frontier experience influenced his later career as a wage-worker, labor organizer, and leader of the unemployed. His story and that of Seattle were intertwined, as he and his fellow citizens pursued the elusive goal of economic security in a changing economy.

The frontier experience left its mark on Hulet Wells and his contemporaries in the first few decades of the twentieth century. As myth or reality, the frontier was part of the collective experience of the nation. At the same time, the cultural values and expectations which the settlers carried from east to west helped shape the development of the frontier. The ideology of *laissez faire*, with its emphasis on the work ethic, self-reliance, individualism, and unfettered competition, was especially strong during the frontier period. As a spur to individual action and an obstacle to government action on social issues, this ideology had a long-lasting effect on political adaptations to changing economic circumstances.

The frontier economy of Wells' early years, where barter and goodwill often took the place of cash, would serve as a model many years later for the Unemployed Citizens' League.

Hulet Wells: A Pioneer Boyhood

The story of the struggle for economic security begins on a frontier farm in the Northwest wilderness.

Young Hulet Wells came into the world eleven years before the Territory of Washington became a state. His parents had emigrated from Canada as newlyweds in search of a farm of their own. At that time, the federal government was encouraging Western settlement through such measures as the Homestead Act of 1862, which entitled a settler to 160 acres in return for a \$10 fee and a promise to cultivate it for five years.¹ Hulet Wells' parents were among the thousands of settlers who took advantage of the offer. In 1877, shortly after they were married, Hiram and Alfreda Wells left their homeland in eastern Canada, took a train west to San Francisco, and then took a steamship north to Washington Territory. Finding a promising site near La Conner, a small trading post sixty miles north of Seattle in the fertile Skagit River delta,² they staked their claim. They chopped down trees to build a cabin, while clearing land to plant their crops.

¹ Robert Divine, *America Past and Present*, vol. II (1991), 508. Ross Robertson, *History of the American Economy* (1973), 112-113, 293. The Homestead Act was less generous than the Oregon Donation Land Act of 1850, which had enabled a married man to claim up to 320 acres (half a square mile) for himself, plus an additional 320 acres for his wife. See also Ruth Moynihan, *Rebel for Rights: Abigail Scott Duniway* (1983), 28, 230. A biography of Oregon's leading suffragist, this book shows frontier life from a woman's perspective.

² Charles Dwelley, "Skagit," *The Book of the Counties*, 1953 Yearbook of the Washington State Associations of County Commissioners and Engineers, (1953), 63-66. In the 1870s and 1880s, more settlers moved in. After they built dikes, dug drainage ditches, and logged and cleared the land, Dwelley reported, "Oats, barley, hay and other crops were growing like something out of a fairy tale." In other parts of Washington, settlers generally started out with dairy and berry farming. The land in Washington Territory was not as well suited for crops as, say, Iowa or California. Eastern Washington was too dry. Western Washington was heavily forested; when the trees were cut down, large stumps remained, giving rise to the expression "stump farms."

In the following year, on May 4, 1878, their son Hulet was born, the first of their ten children. Soon other relatives arrived from the East and settled on adjacent farmland, planting oats, barley, hay and other crops. As a boy, young Hulet marvelled at the oat crops, which were, he later recalled, "sometimes higher than my head."³

In this sparsely settled territory, a frontier economy prevailed. People obtained their daily bread through farming, hunting, fishing, and bartering with their neighbors. Wells later recalled that they used little cash:

As I grew up on the frontier, there was no competition for jobs. Occasionally my father worked for someone else, getting paid in money or some other form of exchange, but mostly the pioneers worked for themselves, and on our homestead there was always plenty of work to do.⁴

Although farming could put food on the table, homesteaders sometimes needed money for things they could not grow or make themselves. Wells' mother taught school in the little community schoolhouse two miles away. His father mortgaged the farm to buy supplies and enlarge the cabin. "I don't know how father got enough for us to eat and wear," Wells reported. "The pay from the first crops had to go back upon the land. Mother sat darning and patching little clothes far into the night." Despite the patches on his clothes, the young farm lad experienced no sense of deprivation. His own world, "bounded by a circle of treetops," as he said, was safe and secure.⁵

³ Hulet Wells, "I Wanted to Work," unpublished autobiography (1955), 18.

⁴ Wells, "I Wanted to Work," 2. When people moved to the city, money became more important for everyday survival. A job offered money; money bought a livelihood. When jobs and money disappeared in the early 1930s, the frontier experience provided a model for the self-help component of the Unemployed Citizens' League.

⁵ Wells, "I Wanted to Work," 15.

Yet the lad soon learned that poverty lurked in the world outside his circle of trees. One day he found one of his mother's books hidden in a drawer. It was a sentimental Victorian novel bearing the evocative title, *Without a Home*. Surreptitiously, he read it.⁶

The story concerned an aristocratic Southern family which had lost everything in the Civil War. In a period which glorified upward mobility, this family endured the trials and tribulations of downward mobility. The plot revolved around the family's attempt to secure a livelihood in New York City, hampered by the father's inability to get a job. When the heroine, Mildred, and her sister took jobs as shopgirls to support their parents, they experienced the hardships of the working class: long hours, low pay, and unhealthy conditions. The hero, Roger Atwood, a sturdy, intelligent farm boy who came to the city and won Mildred's heart, bore a strong resemblance to the Horatio Alger heroes of the same vintage who started from the bottom and worked their way up "with luck and pluck."⁷

One reason the book might have appealed to a young country lad such as Hulet Wells was its graphic comparison of city life and country life. Although country life offered a pleasant sense of security, it was dull and boring. City life, by contrast, was exciting, but also more dangerous. One had to find a job to pay for food and shelter, but how did one find a job?

The book also touched on the prevailing attitude toward

⁶ Wells, "I Wanted to Work," 1.

⁷ Rev. E.P. Roe, *Without a Home* (1881). In the 1880s female sales clerks were called shopgirls. Roe wrote prolifically for a popular audience in the 1870s and 1880s; he died in 1888. Horatio Alger wrote prolifically from 1866 until his death in 1899. See introduction by Rychard Fink in *Horatio Alger, Ragged Dick and Mark, the Match Boy* (1962), 11, 15.

charity. In the 1880s there were no government programs like unemployment insurance or social security for unemployed workers. The needy could appeal to private charity, but often at the cost of giving up their self-respect. Mildred feared the gossip and social disgrace that would follow upon her declining circumstances, but she feared one thing even more: "The thought of receiving charity brought an almost desperate look into her usually clear blue eyes."⁸

The book's author, the Reverend E. P. Roe, took a progressive viewpoint regarding the influence of the environment on human character, as opposed to a belief in an innate depravity or natural wickedness. He argued that human beings had the power to change the social and economic environment. Upholding the work ethic, he argued that not only did the individual have an obligation to society, but society had a reciprocal obligation toward its workers. Seeking to mobilize social concern for the working poor, he urged sympathy not only for overworked and underpaid shopgirls like Mildred, but for all of the "worthy people who are willing to work, but cannot get work."⁹

Wells credited this book with awakening his social conscience and foreshadowing his own future. "It made a deep impression on me," he said. "The impact on my childish mind of this first glimpse of economic misery may have had something to do with the preoccupation with social insecurity which became a major interest of my later life."¹⁰

Yet the young Hulet Wells, like many of his counterparts, felt the lure of the city. In his boyhood experience, the

⁸ Roe, *Without a Home*, 326.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 288. In linking poverty to low-wage jobs and unemployment, Roe was ahead of his times. In the early 1900s, theories of economic causation gained much more public acceptance. Robert Bremner, *From the Depths: The Discovery of Poverty in the United States* (1956), 135.

¹⁰ Wells, "I Wanted to Work," 2.

closest thing to a big city was Seattle, "a raw town that seemed a wonderful place to me."¹¹

On several occasions, the Wells family took a steamboat to Seattle, founded on Puget Sound as a sawmilling center in 1851. In 1880, when the young lad was but a toddler, the town contained some 3,500 people, with diverse shops, retail stores, and industries. In ten years the population multiplied more than ten-fold. Each time the Wells family landed at the dock on Elliott Bay, the city was bigger and busier than it had been at the time of their last visit. Before young Hulet reached adolescence, Washington became a state and Seattle became its largest city; the 1890 census counted more than 42,000 people.¹²

Despite his youthful attraction to city life, the lad Hulet would spend more time on the farm and in the far northern frontier before finding a job in the city. In the spring of 1892 the Wells family moved north to British Columbia, Canada. Hulet's father, Hiram, sold part of the La Conner farm to buy a 200-acre piece of brush prairie on the Fraser River near Fort Langley. The new acreage required heavy manual labor to make it suitable for farming. As Wells recalled, "I helped to slash a clearing on the new land, harvested the wild prairie grass for hay, and hunted ducks along the marshes."¹³

When Hulet went searching for his first real job, he found that he was competing with many other men, most of whom were older and more experienced than he. Eventually he was hired

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 16.

¹² Roger Sale, *Seattle, Past to Present*, (1976, 1982), 51. The census figures show Seattle a close second to Portland, Oregon in 1890 and 1900, with Seattle surpassing Portland in 1910, p. 78. Sale gives an excellent description of the physical characteristics of Seattle in the 1890s, pp.53-63.

¹³ Wells, "I Wanted to Work," 18.

to work in a neighboring hayfield for a dollar a day. He worked ten hours a day at heavy labor for several weeks, but when he asked for his wages, his employer refused to pay him. "It was exhausting work for a skinny boy," Wells recalled, "and it was a cruel blow when after repeated efforts to collect my pay for several weeks' work, the farmer told me that he had no money."¹⁴

His first job had given him a bitter lesson in employer-employee relationships. Disillusioned but not discouraged, the fifteen-year-old boy found another job, this time on a large stock and grain farm, where he shocked grain and took charge of a team of Percheron horses. He also worked on section crews for the Canadian Pacific Railroad. In these jobs and many others in the 1890s, a ten-hour day, six-day week was standard.¹⁵

Panic of 1893, Coxey's Army

Meanwhile, back in the States, President Grover Cleveland gave his inaugural address on March 4, 1893. Business was prospering. Cleveland, who had been elected on a pro-business platform, warned against government involvement in the private sector. "While the people should patriotically and cheerfully support their Government," he stated, "its functions do not include the support of the people."¹⁶

A month later, a selling frenzy on Wall Street drove stock

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 19. Wages were higher on the railroad than on the farm. Wells recalled the section crew wages: "The foreman got fifty dollars a month, the laborers a dollar and a quarter a day." *Ibid.*, 20.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 19-20. Harold Faulkner, *The Decline of Laissez Faire 1897-1917* (1961), 255-256.

¹⁶ William DeGregorio, *The Complete Book of U.S. Presidents* (1984), 347. Grover Cleveland was both the 22nd and the 24th President. First elected in 1884, he was succeeded by Benjamin Harrison, 1889 to 1893. Cleveland took office for one more term, 1893 to 1897.

prices down, precipitating an economic downturn that became known as "the panic of '93." By September, four hundred banks and financial institutions had failed. By the end of the year 1893, more than fifteen thousand companies, including banks, railroads, mines, and factories, had closed their doors.¹⁷

When businesses failed, men were thrown out of work. They roamed about the countryside, blanket-rolls on their backs, seeking work wherever they might find it. They gravitated to the charity soup kitchens in urban areas like Seattle, Washington, or Vancouver, B.C. They were known by various names: blanket stiffs, bindle stiffs, tramps, hoboes, or "the industrial army." Their numbers had increased during an earlier depression in 1873, had diminished with the return of prosperity, and were once again increasing in 1893.¹⁸

Banks and businesses continued to fail throughout the winter and spring. In April and May, 1894, a motley army of unemployed men made its way from various parts of the country to Washington, D.C. to seek federal aid. Its chief organizer and promoter was Jacob S. Coxey, a well-to-do businessman of Ohio. Inspired by both patriotic and religious ideals, Coxey called his ragged band of followers "the Commonweal of Christ," but the press dubbed it "Coxey's Army." From Seattle, 900 jobless workers started out in April under the

¹⁷ H. Roger Grant, *Self-Help in the 1890s Depression* (1983), 6-8, 10. For the effects of the panic in Washington State, and especially in Seattle, Everett, and Tacoma, see J. Kingston Pierce, "The Panic of 1893," *Columbia*, vol.7, no.4, Winter 1993/94, 37-44. For a personal reminiscence, see George H. Bacon (1867-1937), *Booming and Panicking on Puget Sound*, a memoir written in 1933 and published in 1970. Bacon was one of the early businessmen of Whatcom and Skagit counties.

¹⁸ Helen Hawkins, *A New Deal for the Newcomer: The Federal Transient Service* (1991), 51. Hawkins stated: "When the depression of 1873 sent large numbers of unemployed men on the road, the ever-present vagrancy problem was transformed into the 'Tramp Menace'." John Garraty, *Unemployment in History: Economic Thought and Public Policy* (1978), 104-106. Garraty explains Karl Marx's term, "reserve industrial army."

leadership of Henry Shepard. They got as far as Tacoma, where they elected a new leader, Edward Jeffries, and joined forces with a large Tacoma contingent led by Frank "Jumbo" Cantwell. By walking and riding the rails, courting danger, stealing trains, and getting arrested, ragged troops from the Pacific Northwest reached Washington, D.C., some three to four months after starting out. As specific remedies for unemployment, Coxey's Army petitioned for public works and government assistance to enable workers to set up cooperative industries for mutual self-help. The Army did not ask for unemployment insurance; the concept was just beginning to be developed in Europe and had not yet attracted attention in America.¹⁹

Newspapers in both the United States and Canada chronicled the progress of the army as the various contingents made their way through the states to the national capital. The *Daily News-Advertiser*, published in Vancouver, B.C., ran frequent reports on "The Industrial Army" throughout April and May, since armies were forming in the western states with the intention of marching to Washington, D.C., even after the main contingent of Coxeyites had been dispersed.²⁰

On the family farm near Vancouver, sixteen-year-old Hulet

¹⁹ Carlos Schwantes, *Coxey's Army: An American Odyssey* (1985), 231-242. Cantwell arrived in D.C. in July; Jeffries in August. Donald McMurry, *Coxey's Army: A Study of the Industrial Army Movement of 1894* (1929). Franklin Folsom, *Impatient Armies of the Poor* (1991), 180-186, 450. Daniel Nelson, *Unemployment Insurance: The American Experience 1915-1935* (1969), 6-10.

²⁰ See, for example, articles in the *Vancouver Daily News-Advertiser*, May 2, 3, 5, 10, 16, 19, 23, 27, 30, 1894, usually a paragraph or two on page 1 under the simple heading, "The Industrial Army." Datelines include such widely dispersed locations as Indianapolis; Cheyenne, Wyo.; Vacaville, Cal.; Leavenworth, Kan.; Fresno, Cal.; and St. Louis, Mo. Canada also experienced unemployment, as indicated by the headline, "One Thousand Unemployed Men New in Winnipeg," May 5, 1894, 1. The brief report added, "that number is being constantly swelled by recruits from outlying towns and train arrivals."

Wells read the newspaper reports with interest. He wondered, "What would Coxeys ask of the government, and what would the answer be?"²¹

The *Daily News-Advertiser* reported on the May Day demonstration on the steps of the United States capitol, calling it a fiasco. Only about six hundred men showed up, although thousands had been predicted. The newspaper also printed the text of the speech Coxeys had intended to give before he was arrested for walking on the grass:

The protest which Coxeys vainly endeavored to read from the Capitol steps was as follows: "The Constitution of the United States guarantees to all citizens the right to peacefully assemble...and furthermore, declares that the right of free speech shall not be abridged...."

We are here to petition for legislation which will furnish employment for every man able and willing to work....²²

The Canadian newspaper expressed its ambivalence toward the mass demonstration in its editorial:

The novel and startling spectacle of hosts of men from all parts of the country converging on the Capital, is but one form in which the impatience, the suffering of the people finds expression. We may ridicule such movements; we may disparage those who take part in them. But we cannot escape from the conviction that there must be something radically wrong somewhere when such abnormal incidents are found.²³

Wells later recalled his disappointment in the response of the United States government: "When the government resorted to trickery and had Coxeys arrested for walking on the grass, it seemed to me a mean and contemptible thing."²⁴

²¹ Wells, "I Wanted to Work," 19.

²² "Coxey Came...The Industrial Army," *Vancouver Daily News-Advertiser*, May 2, 1894, 1.

²³ "The Evil of Delay," *Vancouver Daily News-Advertiser*, May 2, 1894, 4.

²⁴ Wells, "I Wanted to Work," 19.

Both Coxey's Army and the depression that spawned it made a profound impression on Wells, prompting him to puzzle over the recurring "curse of mass unemployment." Noting the phenomenon of poverty in the midst of plenty, he pondered:

What was the cause of this amazing calamity? I could understand how it might happen to a poor country.... But here we had everything; rich soil, virgin forests, minerals, oil, coal and waterpower, and plenty of capital, foreign and domestic. Also we had the newest kinds of machinery, unsurpassed technological and mechanical skills, and administrative ability of a high order. And yet, in spite of all that, a pitiful army of jobless men and women could not be allowed to work, because the things they produced could not be sold.

It was a great riddle, and of course I was not equipped to solve it, but it had a profound and lasting effect upon my mind and eventually determined the course of my mature life.²⁵

It was a riddle. Why did the government, the representative of all the people, do nothing to help the unemployed? Economics and ideology both played a part. President Cleveland had simply expressed a long-standing popular belief, as well as a political and economic reality of the day, when he had said in his inaugural address that the functions of government "do not include the support of the people."²⁶

Economically, the nation was undergoing great changes due to industrialization and urbanization. With the coming of the railroads and the telegraph, transportation and communication speeded up. In 1850 a cross-country trip had

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 4-5. Coxey's Army had a lasting effect on the national consciousness. Eighteen years later a future mayor of Seattle nearly got into a fist-fight over it. In 1912, when a political opponent accused him of having led Coxey's Army, Ole Hanson shouted, "That's a lie!" and advanced toward his opponent. Several men moved in to stop the impending fight, and the crowd dispersed without incident. *Seattle Times*, Feb. 13, 1912, p. 11.

²⁶ William DeGregorio, *The Complete Book of U.S. Presidents* (1984), 347.

taken six months in a covered wagon. In 1893, after the transcontinental railroad reached Seattle, the cross-country travel time shrank to about six days.²⁷ With the completion of telegraph lines, news could be sent from coast to coast within hours. While Eastern states were undergoing the process of industrialization, the Pacific Northwest was still a frontier, but it was rapidly catching up.

The late nineteenth century was called, variously, the Gilded Age, the age of Enterprise, or the age of the Robber Barons. It was an age of business growth and the rise of great corporations, conglomerates, trusts, and cartels. It was also an age of union-busting, strikes, and labor unrest. Great fortunes were made. The *nouveau riche* spent ostentatiously, while laboring people struggled to survive.

Ideological positions which had evolved out of past experience were applied to the new and rapidly changing economic realities. Complex intellectual theories became over-simplified as they made their way into popular beliefs, or the "conventional wisdom," but both intellectual theory and popular beliefs affected political action. In the late nineteenth century, both intellectuals and the general public accepted a number of basic tenets in support of *laissez faire*, the principle that the government should keep "hands off" the business sphere.²⁸

²⁷ Murray Morgan, *Skid Road* (1951, 1978), 67, 100.

²⁸ For the concept of the "conventional wisdom," see John Kenneth Galbraith, *The Affluent Society*, (1958), 18. See also Robert and Helen Lynd, *Middletown in Transition*, (1937) ch.XII, 402 ff., "The Middletown Spirit," for a study of conventional beliefs and values in middle America in the mid-1930s. For a comprehensive view of the changing nature of business and government, see Faulkner, *Decline of Laissez Faire 1897-1917*, 21. Faulkner notes that on the eve of the new century, social critics had reason for discouragement: "The battle for economic and political reform waged in 1896 seemed lost and the nation committed to *laissez faire* and a continuation of older ideals and methods."

Ideology, Laissez Faire

In the worldview of nineteenth-century economic thinkers, the dominant paradigm was based on "land, labor, capital." Theoreticians ranging from Adam Smith to Karl Marx and Henry George based their theories on the economic relationship between these three elements. With the analysis revolving around productivity, the consumer was almost invisible. The function of consumer was not perceived as beneficial in itself. The producer added to social resources; the consumer depleted them. As William Graham Sumner, professor of political economy at Yale University, asserted, "A man who is present as a consumer, yet who does not contribute either by land, labor, or capital to the work of society, is a burden."²⁹

As a practical matter, the industrial system needed the worker as a tool in the production process, but it did not need the worker as a consumer. Andrew Carnegie's workers did not buy his steel rails. Businesses produced goods and materials for other businesses or for export, not for local markets or mass consumption. A rise in unemployment did not imperil the basic operation of the capitalist system. On the contrary, under certain conditions unemployment benefited business and industry by lowering the cost of labor. Unemployed workers, being neither producers nor consumers, simply did not count as part of the economic system.

Consequently, neither the federal government nor the states had created any infrastructure to regulate employment opportunities nor had they designated any funds to aid unemployed workers or their families. Moreover, the prevailing *laissez-faire* ideology prevented government from creating any such infrastructure or funding mechanism.

²⁹ Wm. Graham Sumner, *What Social Classes Owe to Each Other* (1883). 19.

Ideologically, the tenets of *laissez faire* included the following propositions: Natural Law rules the economic sphere; the market is self-regulating through supply and demand. Evolution dictates the survival of the fittest through competition, but charity thwarts that process by sustaining the unfit. Producers add to social wealth; consumers deplete it. Self-interest serves the social interest. The work ethic is vital to progress, but charity weakens that ethic by sustaining non-workers. Anyone who really wants to work can find a job; government need not be concerned with the individual worker. An unemployed worker plays no part in the economic system as a whole.³⁰

The ideology of *laissez faire* had historical roots in the eighteenth century. In 1776 the Scottish philosopher Adam Smith in *Wealth of Nations* postulated an "invisible hand" guiding the economy, operating through self-interest and supply-and-demand. By adding to the wealth of his own household, an individual added to the total wealth of his community. "By pursuing his own interest," Smith explained, "he frequently promotes that of the society more effectually than when he really intends to promote it."³¹

Smith described how the process of supply and demand regulated the production of goods and services. When the supply of goods exceeded the demand, prices would go down

³⁰ For a slightly different approach to the tenets of *laissez faire*, see Garraty, *Unemployment in History*, 93. Garraty cites a critique in 1819 by Simonde de Sismondi, a Swiss theorist: "Sismondi excelled at pointing out the evil consequences of laissez-faire capitalism that the classical economists were ignoring, minimizing, or accepting as inevitable."

³¹ Adam Smith, *An Inquiry Into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, Liberty Classics (1776, 1981). Smith used the "invisible hand" as a metaphor simply in passing on page 456, but it captured the imagination of succeeding generations. For a refutation of the thesis that self-interest automatically promotes social benefit, see Kenneth Lux, *Adam Smith's Mistake: How a Moral Philosopher Invented Economics and Ended Morality* (1990).

until equilibrium was reached. When demand exceeded supply, prices would go back up. As a commodity, labor, too, was subject to the law of supply and demand, with the term "wages" denoting the price of labor. In the long run, Smith believed, the market tended toward equilibrium: "The quantity of every commodity brought to market naturally suits itself to the effectual demand."³²

In discussing supply and demand, Adam Smith made an important distinction. He used the phrase "effectual demand" to emphasize the use of "demand" in a specific, limited sense. It referred not to "need" or "want" as the general public might assume, but to money available in the market for particular goods or services. In other words, people without money were not included in the analysis of market processes; "demand" in the economic sense was restricted to "those who are willing to pay."³³

In the mid-nineteenth century, the British biologist Charles Darwin developed his theory of evolution. His countryman, the sociologist Herbert Spencer, applied the theory of evolution to social development. Spencer's approach became known as social Darwinism. As social Darwinism gained popular appeal, the doctrine of the "survival of the fittest" was grafted onto the "law of supply and demand" as a basis for social policy.³⁴

³² Smith, *Wealth of Nations*, 74.

³³ *Ibid.*, 73. Smith gave an example: "A very poor man might be said in some sense to have a demand for a coach and six; he might like to have it; but his demand is not an effectual demand, as the commodity can never be brought to market in order to satisfy it." The confusion between "need or want" and "demand" became especially evident in the 1930s, when food was rotting in the farmers' fields while at the same time people were going hungry. People "needed and wanted" food, but they had no money, so they provided no "demand" for the farmers' produce.

³⁴ For theories of evolution, see Charles Darwin, *Origin of Species* (1859), and Herbert Spencer, *Social Statics* (1851), and *Progress: Its Law and Cause* (1857). For a biographical sketch as well as excerpts from

In America, professor William Graham Sumner became a leading proponent of social Darwinism and *laissez faire*. Amplifying Adam Smith's analysis, Sumner explained:

The modern industrial system is a great social co-operation. It is automatic and instinctive in its operation.... The parties are held together by impersonal force--supply and demand.³⁵

Sumner argued that legislators should not tinker with the laws of nature. Since scientists did not yet understand the mechanism of the economic system, government should keep "hands off" and let the economy manage itself.³⁶ He urged statesmen and reformers to remember "the forgotten man," the anonymous, hard-working taxpayer who would bear the burden of social experimentation.³⁷

Although the "hands off" philosophy gave free rein to the greedy and unscrupulous, it also found adherents among thoughtful Americans who were genuinely concerned for the best interests of society. Two articulate private citizens who applied the philosophy to practical action were Andrew Carnegie, a successful capitalist, and Josephine Shaw Lowell, a professional social worker.

Andrew Carnegie, the steel magnate who had risen from rags to riches in the best Horatio Alger tradition, preached the

Spencer's copious writings, see J.D.Y. Peel, ed., *Herbert Spencer On Social Evolution* (1972). For discussion and readings on social Darwinism, see E. David Cronin, *Government and the Economy: Some Nineteenth-Century Views* (1964).

³⁵ William Graham Sumner, *What Social Classes Owe to Each Other* (1883), 75, 58.

³⁶ Sumner, "Laissez-Faire," in Albert Keller, ed., *Essays of William Graham Sumner*, Vol.II (1934), 468-477. Sumner discusses the uses and abuses of the doctrine of *laissez-faire*. He states, p.475: "Laissez-faire is a maxim of policy. It is not a rule of science."

³⁷ Sumner, *The Forgotten Man--Rediscovered After Fifty Years*, (1883...1933). See also Sumner's *What Social Classes Owe to Each Other*, which includes two chapters on the forgotten man.

responsible use of riches for social betterment, the gospel of wealth. He argued that men who had demonstrated their capacity to create wealth were far better qualified than the government to be "trustees for the poor."³⁸

Josephine Shaw Lowell, a Civil War widow who organized the New York Charity Organization Society in 1882, advocated a scientific approach to social work, entailing careful investigation of individual cases. Private charity, she said, was far better qualified than the government to take care of the poor in a constructive manner. Government should give relief as a last resort, and then only in a controlled environment such as a poorhouse or an asylum. The dilemma for society, said Lowell, was "how to help those who are poor, without adding to their numbers and constantly increasing the evils they seek to cure."³⁹

Although the professor, the capitalist, and the social worker represented three different fields of endeavor, their writings revealed a genuine concern for social betterment and a strong, underlying basis of agreement on such topics as the primacy of Natural Law, the desirability of individualism, the benefits of competition, the dangers of charity, and the

³⁸ Andrew Carnegie, "Wealth," *North American Review*, 148 (June 1889), 653-64, reprinted in Gail Kennedy, ed., *Democracy and the Gospel of Wealth* (1949), 3. Carnegie, *The Gospel of Wealth and Other Timely Essays* (1900). Sumner and Carnegie are both profiled in Robert McCloskey, *American Conservatism in the Age of Enterprise* (1951). McCloskey argues, p.174, that Gilded Age conservatism elevated materialism at the expense of humanity. John Chamberlain, *The Enterprising Americans* (1961), 156-161. Carnegie began his spectacular rise in business and industry during the Civil War (1861-1865) and built up his steel empire in the 1870s.

³⁹ Josephine Shaw Lowell, *Public Relief and Private Charity* (1884), 93-94. William Stewart, *The Philanthropic Work of Josephine Shaw Lowell*, (1911), 122 ff. See also Robert Bremner, *From the Depths* (1956), 46-57, on charity organization societies, and Bremner, *American Philanthropy* (1960), 98-104, on Lowell and charity organization. The New York Charity Organization Society was modeled after the London Charity Organization Society, which had been organized in 1869 to coordinate existing charities for increased effectiveness.

role of government regarding social issues. All three gave unstinting approval to the concept of self-help. As Lowell put it, "the best way to help people is to help them to help themselves."⁴⁰

When the panic of 1893 occurred, economists, businessmen, politicians, and the general public applied the theory of the business cycle as it had been developed up to that time. According to classical economic theory, the business cycle was self-regulating, containing its own checks and balances. The law of supply and demand not only regulated the production and prices of goods and labor, but it also played an important role in the business cycle. Periodic downturns were a natural and inevitable phenomenon which served a corrective function, allowing a readjustment of supply and demand. A panic, crisis, or recession indicated a glut on the market caused by overproduction. The solution was to wait for the market to restore its own equilibrium.

The tenets of *laissez faire* thus constituted a strong ideological imperative to keep government out of the economic sphere (except when it suited the purposes of those in power), while the workers' chronic lack of consumer-power constituted a weak economic incentive for government to address the condition of unemployment. And so it was not surprising that the United States government in 1894 did nothing for the tattered troops of Coxey's Army, but responded to their appeal for jobs by arresting their leader for walking on the grass.⁴¹

⁴⁰ Lowell, *Public Relief and Private Charity*, 111. Sumner, *What Social Classes Owe to Each Other*, 143, said: "If we help a man to help himself, by opening the chances around him, we put him in a position to add to the wealth of the community." Carnegie, "Wealth," in Kennedy, *Democracy and the Gospel of Wealth*, 20, said: "In bestowing charity, the main consideration should be to help those who will help themselves."

⁴¹ The ideology of *laissez faire* was one thing; the actuality was another. Whether by action or inaction, government impacted the economy

For the Wells family, the economic depression was compounded when the Fraser River overflowed its banks. Due to the combination of the flood and the depression, Wells' father lost the Canadian farm and moved his family back to their remaining land at La Conner. To help his parents, Wells obtained a job as a schoolteacher in Agassiz, a small village on the Fraser River, where he struggled through the next two years. "I was a conscientious teacher," he said, "but I fear I was not a very good one, being driven into the job by necessity, and not because I was fitted for it by training or temperament."⁴²

In the summer of 1897, word of a gold strike in the Klondike reached Vancouver and traveled quickly from village to village up the Fraser River. The nineteen-year-old schoolteacher in Agassiz jumped at the chance to embark on a new adventure.

Klondike Gold

Economic recovery from the panic of '93 proceeded at an uneven pace in both Canada and the United States. In the summer of 1897, the city of Seattle, like much of the rest of the country, wallowed in the doldrums. On July 17 the steamer *Portland* landed at the dock with a deck full of passengers and a cargo of a ton and a half of Klondike gold. The Chamber of Commerce initiated a nationwide promotional campaign, sending out maps showing that the trail to the

and vice-versa. The nineteenth century recognized the close relationship between the two spheres when it designated the academic discipline of economics by the term "political economy." The point here is not the actuality, but the ideological arguments that were used to promote or retard government action.

⁴² Wells, "I Wanted to Work," 25. Agassiz is located near Chilliwack, about eighty miles east of Vancouver, B.C.

Klondike led right through Seattle. The ensuing gold rush created a local boom, as thousands of prospectors crowded into the city to outfit themselves for the trek north.

The eleven-year-old town of Vancouver, B.C. also experienced a boom. Wells quit his teaching job and went with his father to Vancouver, from whence they planned to go in search of Klondike gold. Wells described the hectic activity:

Men from all over the world were there, many of them already togged out in arctic clothing. Streets were lined with outfitting stores displaying furs, parkas, mackinaws, sleds, snowshoes, camp-stoves, tents, tools, sleeping bags, and a thousand other things useful to fantastic. The water front was jammed with traffic, and outgoing ships packed from rail to rail.⁴³

Although many prospectors were already heading north with dogsleds, Wells and his father decided to wait for the spring thaw so they could take a team of horses. Wells then attempted to get a job in the city. Despite the frantic commercial activity, he had little success. "Getting a job in the city seemed to me then and during all my later life a formidable thing," he recalled.⁴⁴

It was here in Vancouver, in the winter of 1897-1898, that he formulated a question and a political approach that would recur, in themes and variations, throughout the next thirty-some years of his life. The question concerned jobs and money, and the mutual responsibilities of society and the individual. In his boyhood on the farm, money had seldom been an issue. With land and labor, one could secure food, shelter, and clothing. In the city, on the other hand, it took money to secure food, shelter, and clothing. It took a

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 26.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 26.

job to get money, but how did one get a job? "The situation confounded me," Wells recalled, adding:

We had an ordered society in which a government provided police to prevent crime, a health department to prevent the spread of disease, a judiciary to settle disputes, departments to stop fires, build sewers, and train children to take their place in the business of making a living. But there was no provision whatever for the elementary need of putting a worker in contact with a job.

It seemed to me that a primary function of government ought to be to assure its citizens THE RIGHT TO WORK.⁴⁵

Unbeknownst to the farm-boy-turned-gold-seeker, a number of other individuals were also pondering the larger question of social responsibility. Among those thinkers who rejected the doctrine of *laissez faire* was Edward Bellamy, a utopian writer who had just published *Equality*, a vision of a social organization which had banished poverty and unemployment. Like Wells, Bellamy believed that government had a legitimate function in assuring its citizens a means of livelihood. Showing the connection between economic rights and political rights, he argued:

What is life without its material basis, and what is an equal right to life but a right to an equal material basis for it? . . . How else can any government guarantee liberty to men save by providing them a means of labor and of life coupled with independence; and how could that be done unless the government conducted the economic system upon which employment and maintenance depend?⁴⁶

Bellamy died of tuberculosis in 1898, but his ideas had a lasting influence. Together with his earlier book, *Looking Backward* (1888), *Equality* inspired people by giving them a vision of a better world. Shortly before his death, a group

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 27.

⁴⁶ Edward Bellamy, *Equality*, (1897), 17.

of his followers founded an Equality Colony in Skagit County, Washington. Although Hulet Wells, heading for the Klondike, was unaware of Bellamy or the new colony at the time, it was not far from the Wells' family homestead at La Conner.⁴⁷

While the founders of Equality Colony embarked on their experiment in cooperation, Wells was beginning an adventure in rugged individualism. In Vancouver in the winter of 1897-1898, he searched in vain for a wage-paying job. "The city fascinated and yet terrified me," he recalled, as he faced a precarious living on the "wage-workers' frontier." In the many books he had read, the boy-hero always got a job in the city, but it was always by chance. "But suppose the lucky chance did not come?" At length he persuaded a cafe owner to hire him as a waiter, but the mean-spirited man fired him summarily on his first day, snorting, "Don't need you." Despondently, Wells concluded, "The city didn't need me."⁴⁸

Unable to find another job in Vancouver, Wells returned to the family homestead near La Conner. In the spring, he went with his father to Ashcroft, a small town on the Thompson River, where they bought and tamed eight wild horses to make up a pack train. In May, 1898, they headed north on the Ashcroft Trail. When Wells and his father started out on the Klondike gold rush, they packed basic provisions like flour and sugar, which they bought in Vancouver and at some of the settlements along the way. They carried bacon, which might have been bought with money or obtained from the farm. They supplemented their diet by hunting birds, marmots and other small game along the way, while the horses foraged for

⁴⁷ Charles LeWarne, *Utopias on Puget Sound 1885-1915* (1975). See Ch.3, "Equality Colony: The Plan to Socialize a State." LeWarne states, p.63, that Equality Colony marked its founding date as November 1, 1897.

⁴⁸ Wells, "I Wanted to Work," 27-30. See Carlos Schwantes, *Hard Traveling: A Portrait of Work Life in the New Northwest* (1994), 1-2, for the term, "wage-worker's frontier."

themselves. They usually slept outdoors in shelters they made themselves. In that manner they survived many months with little money.⁴⁹

In September they reached their northernmost destination, Telegraph Creek, a small mining settlement on the Stikine River. Wells' father, anxious to get back home to his farm and family, booked passage on a boat heading back to the States. Wells chose to stay with the gold seekers. He remained in the Klondike for two more years. He found a little gold, but gambled it away. He took on a variety of jobs to maintain himself, but he also gambled away most of his wages.

Gambling was a popular pastime in the gold rush encampments. Perhaps it was a metaphor for a way of life, where the luck of the draw might mean riches or ruin. For Wells, the outcome was usually ruin. Yet he found himself unable to resist the lights, the action, the camaraderie and the lure of fate, not even when he knew the cards were stacked against him. He recalled:

I was a good poker player and in an honest game could hold my own, but at the public tables there were no honest games. So I played blackjack, which was the universal favorite. You could walk up to any table anywhere on the street and lay down a bet from twenty-five cents to a thousand dollars, and it is the easiest game in the world for a crooked dealer. Work was scarce, but after every payoff I bought just enough food to keep me alive and lost

⁴⁹ Wells, "I Wanted to Work" (1955), 26, 30-31, 34, 40 Ashcroft is located on the Thomson River a short distance above its junction with the Fraser. At times, Wells recalled, the packtrain "probably did not average more than twelve miles a day when in motion," p.36. For more information on pioneer diets, see Jacqueline Williams, *Wagon Wheel Kitchens: Food on the Oregon Trail* (1993). Williams researched the preservation and preparation of food during the westward overland migration. Flour was a mainstay, along with sugar, beans, bacon, salted meats, and dried fruits. See, for example, "a typical food list," p.3.

all the rest to the gamblers.⁵⁰

Working conditions were hazardous due to natural forces such as the weather, which contributed to accidents and illness. Death was always a possibility. Two of Wells' trail companions became seriously ill with scurvy. Wells did not fall ill, but he did suffer an episode of snow-blindness. On several occasions, he narrowly avoided death by freezing or drowning. On the Inklin River he started to cross the ice, but fell through and got wet to the waist. Despite the intense cold, he was able to drag himself out and get back to his camp, where a small fire still smoldered. On one occasion he was nearly crushed by a falling rock. In working a mining claim, he tried to move a huge boulder by excavating the ground beside it so that it would fall into the hole. When he swung his pickaxe underneath the boulder, it started to topple over. Somehow he leaped out of the way just in time. "A fraction of a second," he said, "would have squashed me flat and buried me twelve feet deep."⁵¹

In addition to the hazards of nature, there were the temperamental vicissitudes of one's fellow man. Once Wells narrowly escaped being stabbed in a restaurant. He had ordered a moose steak. It was too rare, so he asked the waiter to have it cooked a little more. The drunken cook took offense, picked up a carving knife, and started after Wells. The waiter tackled the cook and saved Wells' life.⁵²

Getting work was difficult enough; getting paid for it was another matter. On one occasion, after spending many long days as a cook and handyman on a pack train, transporting kegs of whiskey 175 miles on the difficult trail from Glenora to Teslin, the choleric trail boss refused to pay him. He

⁵⁰ Wells, "I Wanted to Work," 66.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 56, 60-62, 74.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 75-76.

hiked twelve miles each way to a Canadian court to get his pay.⁵³

On another occasion, Wells was working on a ditch when the promoters of the project stopped the work and refused to pay the men. That night a crowd gathered outside their office, threatening a hanging party. After the police arrived on the scene, the workers got their pay.⁵⁴

The hardships of the frozen North seemed to bring out both the worst and the best in mankind. Wells recounted numerous instances of kindness on the part of strangers. Although he travelled alone for the most part, he often found friendly companions on the trail. One of his new companions introduced him to new ideas on politics and economics. On three different occasions, Wells met a man named Woods, whom he described as "a talkative, congenial man of about forty, a free silverite and an admirer of Henry George." Wells was intrigued. He listened to Woods talk about Henry George, who, as an unknown printer in California in 1879, had presented an original and highly influential economic theory in his best-selling book, *Progress and Poverty*. Since the publication of his work, George had campaigned fervently for a single tax on land, attracting many devoted followers. Very much a public figure, he had only recently died, in 1897.⁵⁵ Two decades later, Wells would encounter another admirer of Henry George, a man named Carl Brannin who would play a key role, along with Wells, in the Unemployed Citizens' League of Seattle.

In his later life, Wells looked back upon the frontier

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 46-54.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 67.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 60. Wells also mentions Woods on pp.45, 58-59. No first name is given. Rhoda Hellman, *Henry George Reconsidered*, (1987), 77-78. Henry George, *Progress and Poverty* (1879). See introduction to the Centennial Edition published by Robert Schalkenbach Foundation, 1992.

period with nostalgia. "Willing workers might be sure of a living," he said at one point, "for there was always the soil, and the soil was rich."⁵⁶ In actuality, the soil was not always rich and willing workers were not always sure of a living. Wells' own story of his tribulations on the trail to the Klondike belied his assertion that willing workers might be sure of a living.

There were in fact many unemployed workers on the frontier, but they were often designated by some other term, such as prospector, blanket stiff, tramp, hobo, or seasonal worker. Henry George in *Progress and Poverty* had noted the large numbers of unemployed men who congregated annually in San Francisco when harvest-time was over. In the Far West in the 1870s, long before the alleged closing of the frontier, he observed the "strange and unnatural spectacle of large numbers of willing men who cannot find employment."⁵⁷

By the 1890s, social observers were calling attention to patterns of seasonal unemployment, cyclical unemployment, and technological unemployment. These problems existed on the frontier as well as in the urban industrial centers. Up in the Klondike a man took his chances. But in the city, a willing worker should be able to find some kind of economic security, or so it seemed to young Hulet Wells.

* * * * *

Thus, Wells' experiences on the frontier formed a basis for his social activism on behalf of wage-workers like himself. While he was growing up, Wells had developed a work ethic and a social conscience. The family farm offered useful work along with a sense of security. Books and newspaper reports

⁵⁶ Wells, "I Wanted to Work" (1955), 4.

⁵⁷ George, *Progress and Poverty*, 270, 273.

awakened his social conscience. In contrast, the Klondike adventure entailed work, but no security. Personal experience heightened his social conscience.

During the winter in Vancouver when he had met with rejection on every hand, he had not doubted his own capability. Instead, he suspected that something was wrong with the system. He analyzed the function of a democratic government in securing social well-being and found it wanting. Why, he asked, did not a government ensure that its citizens would have a *right* to work? This question would engross his attention for the next thirty-odd years. Meanwhile, the ideology of *laissez faire*, buttressed by economic theories, reinforced the *status quo*.

In his two years as an unsuccessful gold prospector, Wells had experienced the excitement and dangers of survival in a highly individualistic setting. As he felt the first chill of another winter coming on, he decided he had had enough of the Klondike, with its physical hardships and economic uncertainties. He was anxious to return to a more civilized environment.

Chapter II

The Wage-workers Frontier, 1900-1910

Late in the year 1899, as another cold northern winter approached, Hulet Wells decided to return home. He took a train to Skagway and then booked passage on a steamship to Seattle. Shortly after boarding, he developed a severe case of typhoid fever. By the time he reached Seattle, he was feverish and semi-conscious. Since he had no money, he was taken to the charity hospital, a retired sternwheel steamer staked to a rickety pier on the tideflats. Wells recognized it as a boat that had plied the waters between Seattle and LaConner when he was a child. A kindly doctor had rescued the aging boat by turning it into a hospital, while rescuing "fallen women" by giving them jobs as nurses. Someone contacted Wells' parents. A little later, his father arrived and took him back to the family farm. Wells recalled, "It appeared that my family was glad to have me back. I went home for convalescence and the welcome of a prodigal son."¹

Turn-of-the-century Seattle was growing rapidly. In the previous decade the population of Seattle had doubled; the census of 1900 counted eighty thousand residents. In the next decade the number would triple to nearly two hundred forty thousand.² Industry, trade, and commerce were expanding. Seattle, said an enthusiastic booster, "is today the handsomest, most enterprising and most progressive city of the whole Northwest."³

Yet progress did not come without friction, controversy,

¹ Hulet Wells, "I Wanted to Work," autobiography (1955), 80-82.

² *U.S. Census of 1890, 1900, 1910*, as cited in Roger Sale, *Seattle: Past to Present, Washington* (1976), 51.

³ "Seattle Ten Years Ago and Seattle Today," *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, December 31, 1899, 27.

and social ferment. Many of the new immigrants to the Pacific Northwest were young men looking for work, lured by promises of high-paying jobs on the wage-workers' frontier.⁴ At the same time, a wage-worker's job was fraught with peril, with no protection from government. The wage-worker in the Pacific Northwest was a pioneer in the industrial world, breaking trail for others to follow.⁵ The hazards of nature were compounded by the hazards of dealing with their fellow man. Employers, with their superior economic power, often subjected their workers to long hours, low pay, and hazardous conditions. When workers sought better wages and conditions, employers fired them. When workers tried to form unions, employers used force to prevent them. When workers tried to mobilize public opinion on their behalf, authorities often arrested them. Workers in the forests, farms, and mines often gravitated to Seattle between jobs, where they made periodic attempts to organize and agitate for better conditions. Seattle was the scene of numerous "free speech" fights, both on the street and in the courtroom.

In this energetic milieu of economic change and social ferment, Hulet Wells would receive a practical education in public speaking, writing, and human relations. As a pioneer on the wage-workers' frontier, he would learn many lessons about economics and politics. He would trade the insecure life of a casual laborer for the security of a steady job, only to be disillusioned by long hours and low pay. As a

⁴ Carlos Schwantes, "The Concept of the Wagerworkers' Frontier: A Framework for Future Research," *Western Historical Quarterly*, 18:1 (1987), 39-55. Schwantes, p.41, describes the waggerworkers' frontier as representing "a zone of extremely rapid transition from wilderness to industrial, post-frontier society." It was characterized by large numbers of migratory male workers in extractive industries such as logging, farming, fishing, and mining.

⁵ Carlos Schwantes, *Hard Traveling: A Portrait of Work Life in the New Northwest* (1994), 19-20. Schwantes, *The Pacific Northwest: An Interpretive History* (1989), 250-265.

socialist, he would learn about politics. As a worker, he would learn about unions. Combining theory and action, he and his comrades-in-arms would break new ground on the economic front. "We were the pioneers," he later recalled, "in the fight for a social change that is little short of revolutionary."⁶

Job Search, Seattle Post Office

After Wells recovered his health, he faced once again the daunting prospect of finding a job. Economic opportunities had changed since his parents had started their married life a quarter of a century earlier. Although homestead land was still available, the best locations had been taken. Yet, as the settlers' frontier receded, the wage-workers' frontier expanded. The Pacific Northwest economy was dominated by extractive industries: logging, fishing, and mining, as well as farming. A great many men found employment in seasonal work and manual labor, working for wages instead of tilling their own ground. In fields and forests, mines and fisheries, conditions were often hazardous, hours were long, and pay was low. Work was intermittent and uncertain. Itinerant workers known as "blanket stiffs" tramped the highways and byways of western Washington.⁷

In the economic system these workers were known as "producers." Seldom indeed were they counted as consumers in any positive sense. A man who carried all of his worldly possessions in a blanket roll could not consume much.

In the census year 1900 the total population of Washington

⁶ Wells, "I Wanted to Work," 91.

⁷ W.P.C. Adams, *Second Biennial Report of the Labor Commissioner of the State of Washington 1899-1900* (1901), 13-16 and *passim*. Carlos Schwantes, *Radical Heritage: Labor, Socialism, and Reform in Washington and British Columbia 1885-1917* (1979), 14-21.

State was a little over half a million, or less than one per cent of the seventy-six million people in the United States. Sixty per cent of the population lived in rural areas; only forty per cent lived in cities. Seattle, with eighty thousand people, claimed only 15 per cent of the state's population.⁸ The influence of the Klondike gold rush was evident not only in the growing numbers of people in the city, but also in the sex ratio. The proportion of males to females in the city in the year 1900 was 177 to 100; men outnumbered women almost two to one.⁹

When Hulet Wells tried to find work, he was but one among hundreds of young, single males competing for jobs. At the age of twenty-one, he wanted to earn his own living in the city, but for the next four years he tramped the countryside as a blanket stiff. Although slight of build, he had strong muscles and a hardy constitution. The challenge of physical labor gave him psychological satisfaction as "a man among men." He recalled:

I took a pride in my scrawny strength. I cleared land, worked in hayfields and grainfields, bucked 100-pound sacks of grain, and juggled 250-pound bales of hay as a wireman on a baling crew.¹⁰

Like other itinerant workers, Wells often returned to the city between jobs. In the winter of 1902 he got a job driving a team of horses pulling a scraper, grading a city street. He recalled the long hours and miserable conditions: "Morning and night in the darkness I took care of the team, and all day slopped through the mud, soaked with sleet and rain."¹¹

⁸ *U.S. Census of 1890, U.S. Census of 1900*, as cited in Calvin Schmid, *Growth of Cities and Towns*, Washington (1969), 74-84, 134-155.

⁹ Schmid, *Growth of Cities and Towns*, 81.

¹⁰ Wells, "I Wanted to Work," 82.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 83.

When that job ended, Wells and two companions took to the road. He recalled, "We fled the city, tramping the railroad in the short winter days, shivering by a fire at night, looking for a job in the timber camps." For the next year, Wells worked in logging camps and shingle mills, where he cut down trees, hauled logs, and sawed huge blocks of cedar into shingles. Although outdoor work was invigorating, it made for a precarious livelihood. Wells wanted to settle down. He recalled, "But still I longed for a job in the city, if only I knew how to get it."¹²

How did one get a job in the city? Private employment agencies, known colloquially as "job sharks," charged the worker a fee, which Wells did not have in his pocket. The only public employment agency in the state was the Municipal Free Employment Office of Seattle, established in the wake of the Panic of '93. This office in 1899 made some fifteen thousand placements, mostly for unskilled and semi-skilled work, charging no fees to either the employer or the employee. However, most employers did their own hiring directly, and most workers found work either through connections or through tips from other workers.¹³

One day when Wells was in Seattle, an old friend from his Klondike days urged him to try out for a civil service job. In 1904 he passed the federal examination with high marks and soon was hired as a clerk in the Seattle post office. "I was much elated," he said, "until I learned the truth about the postal service under Frank Hitchcock. The post office of that day was a sweatshop due to permanent under-staffing."¹⁴

Wells and his fellow clerks worked in a poorly lighted

¹² *Ibid.*, 82-83.

¹³ Adams, *Report of the Labor Commissioner*, 20-24.

¹⁴ Wells, "I Wanted to Work," 83. Hitchcock was Postmaster General of the United States.

basement. They worked from nine to fourteen hours a day with no overtime pay, no compensatory time off, and no night differential. They worked the standard six-day work-week, plus Sundays whenever their supervisor required it. Wages were low, with no additional benefits.¹⁵

Faced with the grim alternative of unemployment, Wells chose to stay with the post office. One day in 1905, as Wells was sorting newspapers, he noticed "an odd little paper called the *Appeal to Reason*," which had reached the Seattle post office from Girard, Kansas. Intrigued, he read it.¹⁶

The *Appeal* appealed to his reason. He experienced, as he later recalled, "an intellectual awakening." He described his conversion to socialism:

But surely, I thought, security from cold and hunger is a prerequisite to any effort of creative intelligence. So is freedom from coercion of either mind or body. So is order, which requires an ending of class strife and the horrors of war. Suddenly I saw all these things wrapped up in the socialist philosophy, and I embraced it with a fervor that became the dominant force of my life.¹⁷

Embarking on his self-guided search for answers, Wells read economic theories "from Adam Smith to Thorstein Veblen." He wished that he had a quick, incisive mind. "Unfortunately mine is the slow plodding and forgetful mind," he said. "So I made slow progress finding out the things I wanted to know, but my curiosity remained unabated." He recalled his intellectual journey:

I followed my own random road. Alas, there were so many books, so many blind trails. . . . I

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 83.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 88. For a biography of the editor of the *Appeal to Reason*, see Elliott Shore, *Talkin' Socialism: J.A. Wayland and the Role of the Press in American Radicalism, 1890-1912*, (1988). See also Joseph Conlin, *The American Radical Press 1880-1960*, vol.I (1974), 50-59.

¹⁷ Wells, "I Wanted to Work," 87.

satisfied myself that unhampered capitalism exploited its workers, and that its fatal point of weakness was the unemployment crisis which was growing progressively worse.¹⁸

At the time Wells embarked on his quest for answers, many other people were searching for ways to improve society. Across the country, workers in many industries endured long hours, low pay, and poor working conditions. By the turn of the century, increasing numbers of writers were calling attention to the plight of the working poor. In 1900, novelist Theodore Dreiser in *Sister Carrie* showed how a woman's wages failed to meet her modest living expenses. He also showed how the fruitless search for employment demoralized a man bit by bit until eventually he lost the will to live.¹⁹ In 1904, social investigator Robert Hunter found that ten million Americans (out of a population of some 76 million) were living in poverty, "underfed, underclothed, or badly housed." While acknowledging that poverty could be due to wastefulness or some other personal deficiency, he asserted that low wages were also at fault:

There are also many, many thousand families who receive wages so inadequate that no care in spending, however wise it may be, will make them suffice for the family needs.... Such wages are neither "fair" nor "living" wages: they are poverty wages.²⁰

Reformers did not question the work ethic. Instead, they sought to broaden the opportunities and rewards for working. They sought to mobilize workers to secure better conditions for themselves. In Washington in 1900, the state platform of

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 94, 96.

¹⁹ Theodore Dreiser, *Sister Carrie* (1900), 49-62, 370, 407, 497-499.

²⁰ Robert Hunter, *Poverty* (1904), re-print, edited by Peter d'A Jones as *Poverty: Social Conscience in the Progressive Era*, (1965), 26, 47, 60, 64. See also Robert Bremner, *From the Depths* (1956), 151. Thirty-three years later Franklin D. Roosevelt said, "I see one-third of a nation ill-housed, ill-clad, ill-nourished." (second inaugural address, 1937.)

the Social Democratic Party recognized unemployment as a primary concern of workers. It included a specific call for public works to provide jobs, demanding "use of the taxing power to establish a system of public improvements, upon which the unemployed shall be employed."²¹

Dr. Titus and the Seattle Socialists

In the social ferment of the early 1900s, Hulet Wells soon found an ideological home. Seeking a local socialist group, he found Dr. Hermon F. Titus, "father of Seattle socialism," speaking in an old church hall. In addition to leading meetings, Dr. Titus had been publishing a weekly newspaper, *The Socialist*, for the past five years. He was, said Wells, "a dogmatic, dictatorial person, but a man of incisive mind and considerable platform ability."²²

Born in Massachusetts in 1852, Hermon Titus graduated from theological seminary in 1876. He served as a Baptist minister for eleven years, but resigned from the ministry because, he said, "churches did not represent Jesus." After graduating from Harvard Medical School in 1890, he became a physician. He and his wife, Hattie, arrived in Seattle in 1892, where they became active in civic issues.²³

After Equality Colony was founded in Skagit County in 1898, Dr. Titus often visited it. This colony was an experiment in cooperative living inspired by Edward Bellamy's two novels, *Looking Backward* (1888) and *Equality* (1897). In presenting the ideal of a cooperative commonwealth, Bellamy had gone beyond the vague utopian visions of many would-be reformers

²¹ *The Socialist*, Aug.12, 1900, 4.

²² Wells, "I Wanted to Work," 92.

²³ "For Congressman: Hermon F. Titus, Physician," *Socialist*, Aug.12, 1900, 3.

to imagine the practical details of an egalitarian system. As a literary device, he created a time traveler, a young man who fell into a hypnotic sleep in 1887 and awakened in the year 2000. The young man marveled at the social and economic changes. His new hosts explained their cooperative system to him, while he in turn told them about the appalling industrial conditions of the late nineteenth century. Bellamy himself had deliberately avoided using the word "socialism," since socialism at that time had a foreign (*i.e.*, "anti-American") ring to it. He called his ideal system "state capitalism," "economic democracy," or "the new nationalism," giving the concept of government ownership a distinctively American flavor.²⁴

The founders of Equality Colony were typical of many nineteenth-century socialists in their utopian aspirations. Dr. Titus, however, had different ideas. In defiance of convention, he promoted the term "socialism" with pride. He believed in the revolutionary teachings of Karl Marx. Instead of going off into the wilderness, socialists should organize the proletariat, the working-class people who congregated in the cities. "A Socialist party is a workingman's party, pure and simple," Dr. Titus said.²⁵

Dr. Titus explained his philosophy in a series of essays entitled, "Revolutionary Socialism and Reform Socialism." He advocated "scientific revolutionary socialism," claiming,

²⁴ Edward Bellamy, *Looking Backward* (1888) and *idem*, *Equality* (1897). Bellamy's ultimate vision, the one he called "the most radical innovation," was, as he said in *Equality*, 372: "the admission of the entire population, both of workers and of those unable to work or past the working age, to an equal share in the national product." See also Charles LeWarne, *Utopias on Puget Sound 1885-1915* (1975), 55-113.

²⁵ *Socialist*, Aug. 12, 1900, 1. The phrase "pure and simple" was a take-off on Samuel Gompers' famous statement that "trade unions pure and simple are the natural organizations of the wage workers." See Samuel Gompers, *Seventy Years of Life and Labor* (1984), 115.

"Reform Socialism is not Socialism at all."²⁶ Revolutionary socialism would triumph, Dr. Titus argued, because its theories were supported by the facts of history. He stated: "Revolutionary, Scientific Socialism is sometimes described as Marxian Socialism, or simply, Marxism." As Charles Darwin had contributed to the biological sciences, so Karl Marx had contributed to the social sciences, said Dr. Titus, "and thus Marx stands with Darwin as one of the twin scientific discoverers of the last century."²⁷

Among "the facts," Dr. Titus listed the following:

Machinery now does the work of the world and produces the world's wealth. . . .

Machinery is always accompanied by the unemployed. . . .

Wages are kept at the subsistence level.

All the rest of the vast Wealth produced in the Machine Age goes to the employer, the owner of the Machine.

Modern Society is therefore divided by the property line into two classes, the Wage Class who get a bare living and the Capitalist Class who get all the rest.²⁸

The concept of the class struggle offered an explanation for observable economic conditions. Dr. Titus asserted that capitalists would naturally reject the Marxian revolutionary analysis, because its conclusions were "too dangerous to existing institutions." The Working Class, on the other hand, needed only to be shown the way: "When once the Working Class in general learns the conclusions of Modern Science with respect to its development and destiny, nothing can

²⁶ Hermon Titus, "Revolutionary Socialism and Reform Socialism, ch.I," *Socialist*, Sept.7, 1907, 4. The same series of essays was published the previous year, September-October, 1906.

²⁷ Titus, "Revolutionary Socialism, ch.II," *Socialist*, Sept.14, 1907, 4.

²⁸ Titus, "Revolutionary Socialism, ch.IV," *Socialist*, Sept.28, 1907, 4.

prevent its united action and victory."²⁹

Free Speech Fight #1: The Haywood Trial

In order to mobilize workers, it would be helpful to have a specific cause. Such a cause presented itself in February, 1906, when three members of the Western Federation of Miners were charged with murder. A former governor of Idaho, Frank Steunenberg, had been killed by a bomb at his home in December, apparently in revenge for his harsh treatment of the Coeur d'Alene miners during the strike of 1899. With no evidence, no warrant, and no extradition papers, police in Colorado seized the well-known labor leader, William "Big Bill" Haywood, secretary-treasurer of the Western Federation, along with two other prominent union members, and spirited them away to Caldwell, Idaho. The three were charged with the murder of Steunenberg and taken to the penitentiary. Haywood would spend the next eighteen months in prison; he wasn't tried until the following year. His two companions were held even longer.³⁰

Dr. Titus knew the Coeur d'Alene labor situation. The mining district in the mountains of Idaho had been the scene of industrial warfare throughout the 1890s. Miners sought living wages, safety measures, and the right to organize, while corporation owners sought to minimize expenses, maximize profits, and destroy the union.³¹ In 1899, an explosion destroyed a mill in one of the camps where miners

²⁹ Titus, "Revolutionary Socialism, ch.II," *Socialist*, Sept.14, 1907, 4.

³⁰ William Haywood, *Bill Haywood's Book* (1929), 80-81, 88-89, 191-197. The other two defendants were Charles Moyers, president, and George Pettibone, a member of the WFM. Giving the names in order of rank, the trial was generally known in the contemporary press as the Moyer-Haywood-Pettibone trial. In the annals of history, however, it was Haywood who became the legendary figure.

³¹ For extensive, well-documented background, see Robert Wayne Smith, *The Coeur d'Alene Mining War of 1892* (1961).

were protesting pay cuts. Governor Steunenberg called in federal troops and declared martial law on the entire district. Federal troops herded eight hundred miners "like sheep" into a bull pen, where they were kept for weeks with little food and no sanitation. Some men died and many fell ill of "typhoid, pneumonia, malaria, dysentery and other diseases." When Dr. Titus started *The Socialist* in 1900, he featured several stories on the miners' conditions. He saw the Coeur d'Alenes as a microcosm of the capitalist system, in which profit-hungry owners exploited poverty-stricken wage-slaves. "The class struggle in Idaho no one can deny," he said. "It is the world-wide class struggle boiled down and easy to comprehend."³²

Shortly after Bill Haywood's arrest in 1906, Dr. Titus moved his newspaper, *The Socialist*, to Caldwell, Idaho.³³ While waiting for the trial to begin, Dr. Titus returned to Seattle several times to generate support for the accused labor leaders, as well as for his publishing venture. Street speaking, or soapbox oratory, was a vital propaganda tool as well as a form of entertainment. Anyone could set up a portable platform. On any given evening, one might wander about the central part of the city and listen to a political candidate, a woman suffragist, an evangelist, a temperance advocate, or a traveling salesman, all within the space of a few blocks. Besides the Salvation Army with its nightly meetings at four or more locations, other groups habitually using the streets were the Penial Mission, the Volunteers of

³² *Socialist*, Aug. 19, 1900, 1, 4, including excerpts from Job Harriman's pamphlet, *The Class War in Idaho*. See also Haywood, *Bill Haywood's Book*, 185-186. For information about the Knights of Labor, see Foster Rhea Dulles, *Labor in America*, (1949, 1960), 126-149. For five case studies, see Leon Fink, *Workingmen's Democracy: The Knights of Labor and American Politics* (1983).

³³ Paul Bushue, "Dr. Hermon F. Titus and Socialism in Washington State, 1900-1909," master's thesis, University of Washington (1967), 90-91.

America, and the Theosophists. City streets were not only public thoroughfares; they were also public gathering places.³⁴

Except for socialists.

It was not that socialists had been completely denied the right to speak on city streets. The mayor, William "Labor Mayor" Moore, allowed the socialists to speak "below the dead line"--that is, in the skid road area, but not in the more desirable downtown locations.³⁵ Local socialists had agreed to these restriction in 1905. However, in the summer of 1906, Dr. Titus wanted to raise money and support for his Idaho venture. He sought access to the business district. With "Big Bill" Haywood in jail, socialists and unionists all across the country raised their voices in protest. As national news, it offered a great opportunity to educate and mobilize the masses. But in order to educate the masses, would-be organizers needed first to secure their constitutional right to freedom of speech.³⁶

In Seattle the chief of police, Charles Wappenstein, dispersed Socialist gatherings, citing a city ordinance which prohibited obstructing the street. With the backing of his Seattle Socialists, Dr. Titus determined to put the ordinance to a test. On Sunday, August 19, 1906, he took his cart and mule to Second and Union streets, where he spoke to a crowd

³⁴ Street speakers often used a wooden crate or soapbox as a platform; hence the term "soapbox speaker." "Letter to the City Council," *Socialist*, Sept.23, 1907, 4. Titus, "Editorial Correspondence," *Socialist*, Aug.25, 1906, 4. In recruiting for "Local Seattle," said Titus, "Street meetings, the sale of literature, and subscriptions to Socialist papers will be relied upon for propaganda purposes."

³⁵ "The Situation in Seattle," *Socialist*, Aug.25, 1906, 4. Bushue, "Dr. Hermon F. Titus and Socialism," 92-93.

³⁶ "Denver Socialists Win," *Socialist*, Sept.22, 1906, 4. "For Free Speech," *Socialist*, Sept.29, 1906, 1. The reporter says, "Socialists are being arrested all over the United States for "Obstructing the Streets."

of several hundred people. He was not arrested, so he announced publicly that he would speak the next night at the corner of Second and Pike, the busiest corner in the city. This time he was arrested, along with his attorney, Edwin J. Brown. The two men spent several hours in jail.³⁷

The notoriety was gratifying. Dr. Titus courted arrest again and again. By the end of September, he had been arrested six times, made bail of \$100 each time, was fined three times, and was facing two more court hearings which might result in fines or possible imprisonment. Capitalizing on Titus's martyrdom, *The Socialist* exulted:

Already in Seattle, the persecution has done more for Socialism than anything which has happened in years. The Socialist Headquarters has practically been transferred to the Police Station. ...Not a single daily paper, although they are in sympathy with the suppression of Socialism, dares to defend the high-handed action of the police.³⁸

The Free Speech movement generated money and membership. *The Socialist* reported: "Public sentiment is strongly for the Socialists, and the police campaign of suppression is the best propaganda ever had in the city." Calling Police Chief Wappenstein "the chief organizer for the Socialist Party in Seattle," it boasted: "He is making Socialists at the rate of a hundred a day and Socialist sympathizers by the thousand."³⁹

While martyrdom in Seattle was making converts locally, the continuing imprisonment of three martyrs in Idaho was

³⁷ *Socialist*, August 25, 1906, 4. Bushue, "Dr. Hermon F. Titus and Socialism," 92-93.

³⁸ "For Free Speech On The Streets," *Socialist*, Sept.29, 1906, 1. An editorial cartoon satirizes police persecution of Socialists. Cartoon shows a large crowd of men in the street watching prize fight bulletins, a large crowd in the street at a religious meeting, and a small group on the sidewalk attending a socialist lecture. Two policemen with billy clubs rush to arrest the socialists. (The same cartoon appears again on the front page a year later, Sept.21, 1907.)

³⁹ "For Free Speech On The Streets," *Socialist*, Sept.29, 1906, 1.

attracting national publicity. Dr. Titus, whose Seattle arrests had not stopped him from publishing his weekly newspaper out of Idaho, had contributed to public awareness. In December 1906, when he moved his newspaper publishing plant back to Seattle, he reported that the case had provided an opportunity to educate the public on socialist teachings. Looking back with satisfaction on the venture, he said:

In leaving Idaho, we are safe in claiming that the people of the state understand the principles and tactics of Socialism far better than when we entered it.⁴⁰

While Dr. Titus was moving and reorganizing his newspaper, the Seattle Free Speech movement abated. In May 1907, Dr. Titus went back to Idaho to cover Bill Haywood's trial for the *Socialist*. The trial was a nationwide story, not only because of the sensational aspects of the case, but also because Haywood was defended by attorney Clarence Darrow, who was legendary for his eloquence on behalf of the underdog. Nearly three months later, early in the morning on Sunday, July 28, the jury brought in a verdict of "Not Guilty." Dr. Titus was one of the first reporters to congratulate Bill Haywood on his acquittal.⁴¹

After the verdict was delivered, Dr. Titus turned his attention back to the Seattle Socialist Party, which needed a boost in both membership and finances. The Free Speech movement had generated much publicity the year before. Could it be repeated?

⁴⁰ "'The Socialist' To Be Reorganized," *Socialist*, Dec.8, 1906, 1.

⁴¹ "Haywood Not Guilty," *Socialist*, Aug.3, 1907, 1. Haywood in his autobiography, *Bill Haywood's Book*, 216, gives the date of the verdict as June 28, but he was writing some twenty years after the fact. It could have been either a slip of memory or an error in transcribing his manuscript. (June and July look similar in hand-writing.) Moyer was let out on bail; eventually his case was dropped. Pettibone, in ill health, was held another three months for his trial. He was acquitted, but died soon afterwards. *Ibid.*, 219, 224.

Free Speech Fight #2: The Black Hole of Seattle

In September the Free Speech movement started up again. This time it turned into a clean-up-the-jail crusade. In this campaign the *Socialist* acquired an unlikely ally, the *Seattle Times*. The publisher, Colonel Alden Blethen, had no use for socialism, but he also had little use for Mayor Moore. The *Times*' motive, according to the *Socialist*, was to divide the labor vote and thereby contribute to Moore's defeat at the next election. The *Socialist* explained, "Blethen hates Moore and sees that an increased Socialist vote means a diminished Labor vote for Moore."⁴²

A visiting socialist, J. B. Osborne, "the blind orator" of California, was arrested on Wednesday evening, September 4, 1907. The Socialist Party paid him three dollars a day for speaking. "If he has to spend the time in jail, he certainly will earn his wages," commented *The Socialist*, explaining the terrible conditions:

For a blacker hole was never seen in Calcutta than this Seattle City Jail. No beds, no straw, no planks, nothing to sleep on but the cold stone floor, concrete stone, not even a place to sit.⁴³

That Saturday, *The Socialist* started a Free Speech Defense Fund, stating, "The Socialists are making this fight on behalf of the general public." On Thursday, September 19, J. B. Osborne was again arrested, along with Dr. Titus. Osborne was placed in solitary confinement "in a dirty, foul-

⁴² "From the Black Hole of Seattle" and "Politics in Seattle," *Socialist*, Sept. 2, 1907, 1-2. Titus credits the *Seattle Times* for the photograph of nine "Socialists Who Braved The Black Hole," including Hulet Wells. Sharon Boswell and Lorraine McConaghy, *Raise Hell and Sell Newspapers: Alden J. Blethen & The Seattle Times* (1996), 150-158.

⁴³ "For Freedom of the Streets," *Socialist*, Sept. 7, 1907, 1. In military history, a "black hole" was the barracks prison. The "Black Hole of Calcutta" was especially notorious for its inhumane conditions.

smelling cell, six by seven feet." *The Socialist* reported, "The only article of furniture and fixture was a bucket that leaked. The floor of the cell was so filthy that Osborne was compelled to stand up all night."⁴⁴

Dr. Titus spent two nights in the city jail, experiencing conditions in several different cells. On the first night, he slept on the cold concrete floor in a dimly lit, unfurnished cell with several "drunks." The next morning he was taken to a cell where six members of the chain gang were being held. Since Dr. Titus was fifty-five years old and in poor health, he refused to go out with the gang to do pick-and-shovel work on city streets. His wife, Hattie, tried to bring him food suitable for his gastric ulcer, but the police chief would not let her give it to him. That evening, he was confined with six other men in a hot, unventilated cellar, where he suffered from heat and thirst. His wife attempted to get him transferred to the county jail, which was cleaner and more humane, but to no avail. A friend, fearing for the doctor's health, posted bail and he was released.⁴⁵

The Socialist noted ironically, "There is a Humane Society in Seattle and a Humane officer to see that animals are not cruelly treated." It asserted that the city jail was so bad it was not even a fit place to keep livestock.⁴⁶

During the week ending September 28, three more socialist speakers and a newsboy were arrested. Hulet Wells, Thomas Sladden, and Emil Herman were jailed together in a "cold iron cage below stairs." They were later joined by Robert Anderson, known as "one of the oldest newsboys in town."

⁴⁴ "For Freedom of Streets," *Socialist*, Sept.7, 1907. "Simple Persecution," *ibid.*, Sept.28, 1907, 1.

⁴⁵ "City Jail Shown Up Number 3," *Socialist*, Sept.21, 1907, 1. "No. 1-- The Jail and Its Inmates" and "A Woman's Attempt to Get Her Husband Properly Jailed," *Socialist*, Sept. 28, 1-2.

⁴⁶ "A True Story: Infamous Humanity," *Socialist*, Sept.28, 1907, 1.

Anderson, a member of the News Boys' Union, was arrested on a charge of "disorderly conduct." While hawking *The Socialist*, he had embarrassed the city's respectable element by calling out, "All about the Black Hole of Seattle! All about the Seattle city jail!"⁴⁷

Wells, Sladden and Herman were held in jail for twenty-four hours, refusing the offer of their attorney, Edwin J. Brown, to have them released on a writ of habeas corpus. The *Socialist* commented, "They propose to take their medicine and force the capitalists, Republicans as well as Mayor Moore's City Labor Party, to do their worst and no dodging."⁴⁸

In October the city board of health ordered the jail closed down as "unfit for human habitation." The *Socialist* exulted over the "Fall of the City Bastille." An editorial, with tongue in cheek, bemoaned the passing of "the vile hole . . . sometimes called the Hotel de Wappenstein:"

The jail is known to every experienced crook and hobo in North America, and to say that it will be missed is putting it lightly....

We shall also miss the jail when we come to show our friends from the East about the city. This jail was the one thing upon which we could depend for a thrill. Boston has her Old South church, New York has the Flatiron Building, Chicago has the Stock Yards, but we had the worst jail that ever happened.⁴⁹

Mayor Moore retaliated for the condemnation of the jail by removing the city board of health.⁵⁰ The socialists countered by escalating their Free Speech campaign. They held a mass

⁴⁷ "Freedom of the Press Attacked by Wappenstein," *Socialist*, Sept.28, 1907, 1. Tom Sladden, state secretary for the Socialist party in Oregon, had come to Seattle to participate in the Free Speech fight. Emil Herman was an organizer in Washington.

⁴⁸ "Freedom of the Press Attacked," *Socialist*, Sept.28, 1907, 1.

⁴⁹ "Fall of the City Bastille," *Socialist*, Sept.12, 1907, 1.

⁵⁰ "Capital Gone Mad!" and "The Mayor Without Excuse," *Socialist*, Sept.19, 1907, 1.

meeting at the Pike Place market on Monday night, October 28. Despite the pouring rain, a crowd of some fifteen hundred people turned out. One by one, the socialists got up to speak. One by one, they were arrested. Nine socialists, including Hulet Wells, spent the night in the city jail. On Wednesday night, Wells, Sladden and Herman spoke again and were arrested again. The next night another speaker, James Lund, was arrested. The four men were kept in jail until Saturday.⁵¹

After the socialist demonstrators had all been released, one of their number, Elmer Allison, put his literary talent to use in describing the atmospheric conditions in the jail. He noted that "stinks are of many and various kinds," adding:

But there is a stink which abides in and pervades every crack and crevice of the Seattle City jail from sweat-box to dungeon, that is not a stink merely, but an aggregate of stinks. A stink before which all other stinks known on earth or surmised in hell fall flat and curl up at the edge.⁵²

Late in November, the Superior Court of King County ruled in favor of the socialists. Affirming the constitutional right to free speech and the right to peaceable assembly, Judge George Morris charged the jury to rule, not on the opinions expressed by the speaker, but only on the question of whether the streets had been obstructed. "All the law requires is that the streets be kept clear, reasonably kept clear for the ordinary purposes of the street."⁵³

⁵¹ "From the Black Hole of Seattle." *Socialist*, Sept.2, 1907, 1. "Cruel Treatment Alleged--Four Socialists Arrested for Street Speaking Assert That They Suffered While in the Municipal Bastille--Steel Cage in Which They Were Confined is in Horrible Shape," *Seattle Times*, Sept.3, 1907, 21. The story is accompanied by a photograph of H.M. Wells, Emil Herman, James Lund, and Thomas Sladden.

⁵² Elmer Allison, "Stinks," *Socialist*, Sept.2, 1907, 1. Allison was a socialist from Bangor, Washington.

⁵³ "On Free Streets," *Socialist*, Sept.23, 1907, 4.

Despite the superior court ruling, Mayor Moore continued to have socialist speakers arrested. On January 6, 1908, eight speakers were arrested, along with two men holding banners proclaiming, "You are out of a job because you have produced too much." Although the ten men spent the night in jail, they did at least enjoy the benefit of better ventilation and cleaner quarters. The Socialist Free Speech fight had accomplished its goal of cleaning up the jail. It had gained publicity for the socialist cause. It had tested a strategy of non-violent protest which would be used by other groups of wage-workers and unemployed citizens in succeeding years.⁵⁴

In the city elections in February and March, "Labor Mayor" Moore was defeated and Wappenstein resigned as police chief. With the advent of John F. Miller as the new mayor, Seattle Socialists claimed victory in the Free Speech fight.⁵⁵

Even before the free speech fight ended, however, public attention in the city of Seattle had been diverted by a new economic crisis. This recession, commonly called "the panic of 1907," followed a pattern which economists had identified as a normal part of the business cycle.

Panic of 1907, The Blanket Stiff

In October 1907 a financial crisis occurred in New York when a number of banks failed. Financier J. Pierpont Morgan assembled the top bankers, closed some banks, bailed out others, and halted the financial panic.⁵⁶ Seattle did not

⁵⁴ "Local Seattle: Monday Night Arrests," *Socialist*, Jan.11, 1908, 3.

⁵⁵ Bushue, "Dr. Hermon F. Titus and Socialism," 113.

⁵⁶ For the effect on the financial community in the Pacific Northwest, see Jack Bertholf, *Men and Mutuality* (1951), 103; and Shelby Scates, *Firstbank: the Story of Seattle-First National Bank* (1970), 31-32. For relief efforts in the industrialized, northeastern states, see Leah Feder, *Unemployment Relief in Periods of Depression* (1936), 189-217.

feel the impact right away. The financial instability at the top, however, produced a ripple effect which affected Seattle banks and businesses two weeks later, just as the Socialist Free Speech fighters were enjoying the notoriety attending their release from jail.

On Monday, November 4, a currency crisis reached the city. Seattle banks started to issue clearing house certificates instead of cash. The *Times* explained that this move was necessary because otherwise Portland, Tacoma, and other cities would drain Seattle banks of cash. The *Times* assured its readers that there was "no cause for alarm." The certificates would mainly be used for large commercial transactions. Cash would still be available in smaller amounts for daily use and for payrolls. Local merchants publicly pledged to accept the certificates in lieu of cash. The certificates would be redeemed for currency as soon as the financial crisis was over. The *Times* asserted:

If no one worries, and ignorant depositors are not given cause for alarm, it will be just as convenient to transact business as it has ever been.⁵⁷

While Seattle bank officials reassured their customers that their own financial condition was sound, a banker from San Francisco, the largest financial center on the West Coast, also reassured the public. He reported,

There is nothing to fear whatever in San Francisco as a result of this flurry in Wall Street. The danger that threatened here is now passed and there is no reason to believe that financial conditions will not return to a nearly normal point by the end of the week.⁵⁸

⁵⁷ "Without a Ripple of Excitement a Temporary Currency is Adopted," *Seattle Times*, Sept.4, 1907, 1.

⁵⁸ "Crocker Blames Roosevelt for Depression," *Seattle Times*, Sept.6, 1907, 3. A Blethen editorial also used the term "flurry" to describe the financial crisis: "When this flurry shall have blown over, as it will have done within two weeks--every man and woman having money in the

Seattle banks and financial institutions soon recovered from the "flurry in Wall Street," and most of the city's businesses also recovered. By the following May nearly all of the clearing house certificates had been redeemed, and the city's currency was back to normal.⁵⁹

For many of Seattle's laboring men, however, the brief down-turn in business meant a longer period of unemployment. Once again the numbers of blanket stiffs began to rise. Dr. Titus commented on their growing visibility:

We wonder why there are so many men tramping around the country. The old people tell us it was not so when they were young. In the good old days there were no tramps and hoboes.⁶⁰

The Socialist in 1907 ran an artist's drawing, showing the "Blanket Stiff" with his bedroll on his back. In the background, a long line of railroad track disappeared into the distance. The caption:

He built the ROAD--
With others of his CLASS, he built the road.
Now o'er it, many a weary mile, he packs his load,
Chasing a JOB, spurred on by HUNGER'S goad.
He walks and walks, and wonders why
In H--L, he built the road.⁶¹

banks will be grateful to the Clearing House Committee," in "Why Clearing House Certificates were Adopted," *Times*, Sept.5, 1907, 6. Five years later, a *Post-Intelligencer* story testified that the "panic of 1907" had become a distant memory: "Like a shadow of the past, a \$2 clearing house certificate, a relic of the panic of 1907, drifted into the Seattle National bank yesterday and was promptly redeemed at its face value," in "Clearing House Paper Redeemed," *Post-Intelligencer*, Sept.13, 1912, 2.

⁵⁹ Shelby Scates, *FIRSTBANK: The Story of Seattle-First National Bank*, (1970), 31-32.

⁶⁰ Titus, "Revolutionary Socialism, ch.IV," *Socialist*, Sept.28, 1907, 4. The statement that there were no tramps or hoboes earlier is clearly false, but the important thing here is the perception that the numbers were increasing.

⁶¹ "For the Unemployed," *Socialist*, Sept.23, 1907, 1; the same drawing was reprinted Aug.20, 1910, 3. The term "Blanket Stiff" or "Bindle

Just a few years earlier, Hulet Wells had been a member of this class, chasing a job in the farms and logging camps of western Washington. Although he now had a steady job in the post office, he chose to spend his off-hours with a group of people who were concerned about working conditions, class conflict, and economic insecurity. The Socialist Party in Seattle offered both a theoretical framework and practical experience.

In January 1908, *The Socialist* estimated there were ten thousand "unemployed proletarians" in Seattle. "Your Capitalist employers have shut down the Machinery of Production," a reporter wrote, using capital letters for emphasis, "and turned Ten Thousand men out of jobs in this city alone and millions of men in this country."⁶²

Among the unemployed workers in the city were one thousand members of the Carpenters Union, representing half of the total membership. Although some of the unemployment was seasonal and some was due to the carpenters' strike (which *The Socialist* did not mention), socialists ascribed all of it to the capitalist system.⁶³

Describing the impact of these thousands of "unemployed proletarians," *The Socialist* declared,

This whole Puget Sound swarms with them. They are putting up rude shacks and tents everywhere, seeking to "grub" an existence in the woods and along the shores. They throng the Police Station at nights as "Sleepers," overwhelm the Police Court

Stiff" derives from the blanket-roll (sometimes called a bindle) that such men typically carried on their backs.

⁶² "Straws" and "What the Socialist Party Will Do for the Unemployed," *Socialist*, Jan.11, 1908, 1. "Local Seattle," *Socialist*, Jan.18, 1908, 3.

⁶³ *Socialist*, Jan.25, 1908, 1. *The Socialist* made no mention whatever of the strike. *The Seattle Times*, March 1, 1908, 13, made a reference to "the members of the building trades unions who went on strike three months ago as a protest against the open shop regime in Seattle."

as "Vags," and supply endless material for the infamous "Chain Gang."⁶⁴

The Chamber of Commerce, following long-established custom, sought charitable contributions for the needy, prompting *The Socialist* to comment sarcastically that "the Chamber of Commerce is deciding whether there are in Seattle any 'worthy poor' in this time of panic and great distress for the workers."⁶⁵

In preparation for the city elections that spring, the socialists belonging to "Local Seattle" hammered on the issue of unemployment. On Monday, January 6, at a mass rally in front of the office of the *Post-Intelligencer*, Local Seattle announced its platform demanding work for the unemployed. It urged the city to use its resources and credit "to provide work and bread for the unemployed" by setting up a public works program. The next day, *Post-Intelligencer* editor Erastus Brainerd offered a variation on the theme, urging the establishment of "vagrant camps, where tramps and hobos could be put to some useful task. . ." The *Socialist* tepidly seconded the proposal, but with the added proviso that "If a 'small wage' is allowable . . . the Socialists will see that it is made at least a 'living wage.' "⁶⁶

The platform of Local Seattle asserted: "The greatest problem before the American people is the Problem of the Unemployed." Pointing out the resulting social problems, it continued:

A Business Panic like that now in progress, aggravates this ever-present Problem of the Unemployed. It lets loose thousands of hungry and houseless men and women in every city.

It cited the resulting social problems, specifically, crime

⁶⁴ "What the Socialist Party Will Do," *Socialist*, Jan.11, 1908, 1.

⁶⁵ "Local Seattle," *Socialist*, Jan.18, 1908, 3.

⁶⁶ "Straws," *Socialist*, Jan.11, 1908, 1.

and "Coxey Armies." It urged political action, stating, "Something rational must be done for these unemployed masses or they will do something irrational for themselves."⁶⁷

On Monday, January 20, a crowd of eight thousand unemployed men, led by the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), socialists, and various unions, marched to city hall. They presented Mayor Moore with a list of demands, including food and shelter for the unemployed, weekly allowances to heads of families, and public works "at prevailing union hours and wages." The mayor politely informed them that he could do nothing. He claimed, said *The Socialist*,

that the County Commissioners have promised an appropriation of \$5,000 to establish road camps. He stated he was without power to make provision for impoverished families and all public work was now given out....

The delegation then took its list of demands to the city council meeting that night. The council approved the County Commissioners' plan to set up road camps, then referred the list to its labor and finance committees for study. Meanwhile, the IWW had brought food and set up a kitchen to feed the hungry crowd of unemployed men waiting outside the city hall. The implied message was clear: while politicians talk, labor will feed the people.⁶⁸

While traveling in the countryside, tramps and hoboes often stopped at farmhouses to ask for a hand-out in return for chopping wood or doing other chores. In rural areas, tramps who stayed for a meal and then moved on were usually viewed as a nuisance, but not a serious problem. A socialist organizer in the farming region of Wenatchee described the peculiar apathy he encountered among unemployed workers

⁶⁷ "What the Socialist Party Will Do," *Socialist*, Jan.11, 1908, 1.

⁶⁸ "Unemployed Are Banded a Lemon," *Socialist*, Jan.25, 1908, 1.

there:

Most of these people seem to be stunned. They take little interest in any proposed measures of relief. They generally have faith in Roosevelt, and believe that he will yet achieve wonders for our class.⁶⁹

A farm-woman in Oregon wrote to *The Socialist* about her experience with various types of tramps. Despite their generally shabby appearance, she said,

. . .if they are given a pleasant greeting, are met with a frank, fearless look, a distinctly human expression will cross the face of any of them in nine cases out of ten. The hand will go to the hat, and a civil greeting is returned.⁷⁰

However, when unemployed men concentrated in urban areas, they became a matter for public concern. By June of 1908, their make-shift dwellings created a health problem in Seattle. As the *Socialist* commented, "When human beings dwell in cities, sewers and water closets become necessary luxuries." In June the Seattle board of health began the systematic burning of the make-shift shelters, destroying 687 shacks and tents. Guessing at an average of three per dwelling, *The Socialist* estimated that two thousand people were deprived of their only homes. It editorialized:

Those evicted by this raid are merely members of the working class, who have endeavored to live in the city of Seattle without paying tribute to the owners of the earth.

They had built rude huts in groups in the waste places along the shores of Elliot Bay, out of driftwood, out of tin cans beaten into sheets of rusted metal, out of the rubbish of the city.

Yet the burning of these pathetic dwelling-places had occasioned no protest, "no relief committees, no outpourings

⁶⁹ "What Burgess Finds," *Socialist*, Jan.18, 1908, 3. The organizer was D. Burgess. The Roosevelt was Theodore, not Franklin.

⁷⁰ Effie Armstrong, "Tramps & Hoboes: A Nine Months' Study By a Woman," *Socialist*, March 6, 1909.

of human sympathy." Other newspapers, said the *Socialist*, had "given the matter less attention than the scandals of a millionaire, or the session of a Sunday school convention."⁷¹

Apparently there was no effort to take a census of the shanty-dwellers. What became of them? Most of them simply drifted away to some other place. A few found temporary food and shelter through the private charities. As a last resort, the city would still play host to the homeless. As the *Socialist* noted drily,

The unsanitary city jail, condemned through the efforts of the Socialists last fall, was not among the shacks destroyed by the order of the commissioner, and men are still incarcerated in it, for the crime of being "broke and out of work."⁷²

Although unemployment persisted for many months afterwards, most business activities were only temporarily disrupted by the panic of 1907. Seattle and the nation had been reassured by the prompt action of President Theodore Roosevelt in approving issuance of clearing house certificates in mid-November, 1907. At that time, the President stated:

What is most needed just now is that our citizens should realize how fundamentally sound business conditions in this country are....⁷³

The Panic of 1907 ran its course, just as the theory of the self-correcting mechanism of the business cycle predicted it would. Events seemed to justify the faith of economists and businessmen, that all would be well as long as the public had patience, confidence, and a conviction that business conditions were fundamentally sound.

⁷¹ "Dwellings Destroyed," *Socialist*, June 20, 1908, 3.

⁷² *Ibid.*

⁷³ "Panic Is Over...Banking Situation Relieved by Teddy--Government Puts in Circulation \$150,000,000," *Seattle Times*, Sept.18, 1907, 1.

Factionalism

While the Seattle socialists were taking on the city administration, they also had to contend with factionalism in their own ranks. Factionalism was a continuing source of anxiety. After all, the national platform of the Social Democratic Party in 1900 had included the exhortation from the *Communist Manifesto* of 1848: "Workingmen of all countries, unite!"⁷⁴ Socialist literature was filled with constant exhortations for unity. Nevertheless, various factions continually argued over tactics or ideology. Personality clashes also contributed to a general spirit of contentiousness. While publishing his newspaper in Idaho in 1906, Dr. Titus returned to Seattle several times, not only to solicit funds and public support, but also to defend his territory against rivals. Dr. Titus's personal nemesis, one Walter Thomas Mills, arrived in Seattle in November 1906, shortly after the first free speech fight had begun.

Socialists had been subject to factional struggles from the beginning. At the time Dr. Titus published his first issue of *The Socialist* in August 1900, two socialist parties at the national level, the Socialist Labor Party and the Social Democratic Party, had recently merged. Another merger in 1901 resulted in the Socialist Party of America. These mergers, by increasing the numbers and diversity of the membership, also increased the opportunities for factional disputes within the party.⁷⁵ In the state of Washington, some

⁷⁴ *Socialist*, Aug.12, 1900, 4.

⁷⁵ "Unity," *Socialist*, Aug.12, 1900, 2. See also Ira Kipnis, *The American Socialist Movement 1897-1912* (1952), and David Shannon, *The Socialist Party of America: A History* (1955). Kipnis and Shannon document early factional struggles, focusing on the eastern centers of the movement. For a brief overview, see Bernard Johnpoll, *Pacifist's Progress: Norman Thomas and the decline of American Socialism* (1970), 4-6. Johnpoll observed, p.4: "From the beginning, the party was rent with dissension. Ostensibly, disagreements were almost always over questions

sections of the Socialist Labor Party refused to join the Social Democratic Party. The recalcitrants were, said *The Socialist* scornfully, "people who follow Daniel De Leon, of New York, as King and Prophet, right or wrong." It added condescendingly, "They have only two or three active sections left in the state while the Social Democrats have over twenty."⁷⁶

When Hulet Wells joined the Party in 1905, he noted, "The Seattle socialists were already well divided into right and left wings,"⁷⁷ as were socialists in the nation-at-large.

In 1906, a faction calling itself the Socialist Propaganda Club challenged Dr. Titus's leadership. Even though it was expelled by the state party at the summer convention for advocating "fusion," or cooperation with other groups,⁷⁸ it took over the Local Seattle headquarters and invited Walter Thomas Mills, a Chicago Socialist and former evangelist, to come to Seattle as an organizer.⁷⁹ When Mills arrived in November, he scheduled Propaganda Club meetings at the same time as the Local Seattle meetings. However, Local Seattle meetings continued to draw membership, filling Egan Hall with its one thousand seats, while attendance at the Propaganda Club meetings dwindled. In January 1907, Club members re-joined Local Seattle. By mid-February these former Club

of tactics and theory, but in reality they were caused by clashes of personality." This general observation appears to be borne out in the history of Seattle Socialism, as reflected in the pages of *The Socialist*, the *Seattle Times*, and the *Post-Intelligencer*.

⁷⁶ "Not Socialism," *Socialist*, Aug.26, 1900, 2.

⁷⁷ Wells, "I Wanted to Work," 92.

⁷⁸ Titus, "Editorial Correspondence," *Socialist*, Aug.25, 1906, 4. The Populist Party had "fused" with the Democratic Party in 1896 to promote the cause of free silver, but lost its party identity in the process. The term "fusion" became a derogatory term, synonymous with "sell-out."

⁷⁹ "Washington," *Socialist*, Sept.6, 1906, 3. "Washington Socialists After Mills," *Socialist*, Sept.27, 1906, 3.

members had taken over Local Seattle, which then went into a decline. By June it was no longer a growing, financially sound organization as it had been in 1906, but was losing membership and had gone into debt.⁸⁰

Undaunted, Mills started a weekly newspaper to compete with *The Socialist*. The first issue of the *Saturday Evening Tribune* appeared on May 4, 1907, a few days before the start of Bill Haywood's trial in Idaho. While still publishing *The Socialist* in Seattle, Dr. Titus went back to Idaho to cover the trial, leaving the members of Local Seattle to cope with Mills and the *Tribune*. In June 1907, Richard Krueger, Washington state editor for *The Socialist*, reviewed Mills's activities in the previous months. According to Krueger, Mills thrived on telling half-truths and outright lies. Krueger called Mills "an intellectual knave and editorial windjammer," warning the Socialist Party of Washington State to beware of Mills's tactics.⁸¹

One of the controversies between the Titus faction and the Mills faction was whether the Socialist Party should claim the exclusive devotion of its members or whether it could work with other organizations. The Mills faction advocated "fusion," or cooperation with other organizations. Mills argued for tolerance on the grounds that forbidding members to belong to other organizations would mean "the certain destruction of the party."⁸²

The Titus faction argued for exclusivity. The membership pledge contained the declaration, "I have severed my relations with all other political parties." If a member

⁸⁰ Richard Krueger, "Some Local History," *Socialist*, June 15, 1907, 2. "Walter Thomas Mills is Back," *Socialist*, Sept. 7, 1907, 4.

⁸¹ Krueger, "Local History," *Socialist*, June 15, 1907, 2.

⁸² Titus, "Editorial Correspondence," *Socialist*, Aug. 25, 1906, 4. *Saturday Evening Tribune*, May 25, 1907; as quoted by Krueger, "Local History," *Socialist*, June 15, 1907, 2.

later changed his views, member Tom Sladden said, "his course must be to resign. . . . He could be an honest man outside but only a traitor inside the party." Sladden urged the expulsion of Walter Thomas Mills for condoning "fusion" and "compromise."⁸³

Cataloging the divisions within the socialist movement, *The Socialist* urged separate organizations for those who did not agree with its narrow interpretation of socialist doctrine:

It is time the working class Socialists and the middle class Socialists, the Revolutionists and the Reformers, the no-compromise branch and the fusionists, the scientifics and the opportunists, were completely separated and each given a fair show.... So let Mills go ahead with his "new Socialist party" and leave us alone to work for what we think is Socialism.⁸⁴

Even without Walter Thomas Mills, the socialists constantly contended with factionalism within their ranks. They argued over whether non-workers could be members, and about who was a "worker." Was a farmer, for instance, a "worker" or a "businessman"? A farmer wrote to *The Socialist* to protest "the unfair treatment that farmers who are Socialists receive at the hands of some of the comrades. We are told that we are capitalists, and cannot be true Socialists."⁸⁵

The word "opportunist" was applied to right-wing socialists or moderates, who supported immediate reforms short of total revolution. Left-wingers disdained opportunism because they believed that any improvement in the workers' conditions would only delay the real revolution. Walter Thomas Mills was not only an opportunist in the political sense; he was also an opportunist in the economic sense. He had a talent for getting other people to invest in fantastic schemes.

⁸³ Tom Sladden, "New Socialism," *Socialist*, Sept.21, 1907, 4.

⁸⁴ "Walter Thomas Mills is Back," *Socialist*, Sept.7, 1907, 4.

⁸⁵ Walter Price, "Wage Workers on the Brain," *Socialist*, Nov.2, 1907, 4.

When a scheme fell through, he left town, leaving the investors to deal with the deficits. In November 1907, having depleted the Seattle Socialists' treasury, he left for California. The mainstream newspapers poked good-natured fun at the socialists' discomfiture. The *Times* commented:

Walter Thomas' career much resembled the last trip of the one hoss shay. At the proper time, everything he starts is smashed up. . . . The Seattle Socialist revolution has busted.⁸⁶

Noting that Seattle Socialists were courting arrest in their Free Speech campaign, the *Times* suggested a reason for Mills's departure:

Walter Thomas, according to the records, is the scheme-smashing kid. But there is one thing he doesn't bust; he doesn't bust into jail.⁸⁷

The *Times* was premature in announcing Mills's permanent departure. Mills returned a few weeks later. The expulsion of Mills from the party occupied a top spot in the state Socialist convention in Seattle in July, 1908. As one of the six Seattle delegates, Hulet Wells gained an education in parliamentary procedures for handling dissent at the state level.⁸⁸

Even with Mills out of the way, factionalism continued. The Titus faction split off from the state organization in 1909. The Seattle Socialists underwent another shake-up in 1912. The national Socialist Party was seriously divided and rendered practically moribund by the manipulations of members of the newly formed American Communist Party in 1919. At the time of that fracture, Wells would leave the Socialist Party

⁸⁶ "City is Sad, for Mills has Gone--Silver-Tongued Expounder of Socialism Shakes Dust of Seattle from Feet," *Seattle Times*, Sept.3, 1907, 9. Thomas Morgan, "Walter Thomas Mills," *Socialist*, Sept.2, 1907, 3.

⁸⁷ "City is Sad, for Mills has Gone," *Seattle Times*, Nov.3, 1907, 9.

⁸⁸ Bushue, "Dr. Hermon F. Titus and Socialism," 117.

but maintain his ties with Seattle labor unions. During the Great Depression, the Unemployed Citizens' League would undergo similar experiences with factionalism. The free speech fights in Seattle in 1906 and 1907 had served to unify Seattle Socialists, but only temporarily.

A Detour -- Down the Aisle

In the summer of 1908 Hulet Wells took on a new responsibility. On July 16, he married Nesta King, a young schoolteacher. The daughter of a Methodist minister, she came from a very religious family. "No two persons could have differed more in background, interests and beliefs," Wells recalled, "but love laughs at obstacles . . . and she came to share my turbulent life, in defiance of her mother's warnings." Ruefully he added, "Nesta Wells married Adversity."⁸⁹

Adversity or not, Nesta shared her life with him for the next sixty-one years. She died in December 1969; he died two months later.⁹⁰ However, Nesta's mother had good reason to be concerned. When Nesta married Hulet Wells, a woman's social and economic status depended on her husband's position. Living in a city with a demographic ratio of three males to every two females, Nesta might have done better than to marry a low-paid postal clerk. However, the thirty-year-old clerk had been working steadily for four years, and he did have a law degree. He might yet be able to support a family.

In the economic milieu in which Hulet and Nesta Wells began their married life, the male had a direct relationship to the

⁸⁹ Wells, "I Wanted to Work," 102. In his autobiography Wells writes about work and politics. He says almost nothing about his home life. This is one of the very few places where he mentions his wife.

⁹⁰ "All Federal Employees Should Commemorate Hulet Wells," *Local 28 News*, United Federation of Postal Clerks, March 1970.

monetary economy; his income depended on his job. The female had an indirect relationship to the monetary economy, mediated by the male. Her income depended on her husband's job. Women who did participate directly were granted partial status as "honorary males" or they were restricted to a narrow sphere of "women's jobs," like teaching, nursing, or clerical help. A woman who had been self-supporting (or even partially so) before marriage was expected to quit her job and depend on her husband's income after marriage.⁹¹

A woman's economic dependence upon her husband was matched by his corresponding obligation to support her. A marriage manual of 1907, addressed to the young husband, advised the prospective bridegroom of his duty. "He is no longer to live for himself," said the author, "but for his wife, his children, and in a larger sense for his descendants--for the good of the race." The new husband should be inspired to diligent industry "by the obligation which rests upon him to make adequate provision for every present need and future emergency."⁹²

A companion volume addressed to the young wife warned the bride-to-be and her parents to see that the prospective husband would be able to support her before making an

⁹¹ Working-class women often worked outside the home at low-paying jobs to make ends meet, but middle-class women were expected to stay home and raise children. Because this dissertation is focused on white male wage-workers in a white male-dominated economy, women and minorities are practically invisible in this study. That does not mean they did not exist. Recent scholars have produced some excellent studies of women in the workforce. For example, see Dana Frank, *Purchasing Power: Consumer Organizing, Gender, and the Seattle Labor Movement 1919-1929* (1994); Joanne Meyerowitz, *Women Adrift: Independent Wage Earners in Chicago 1880-1930* (1988); and Margery Davies, *Woman's Place is at the Typewriter: Office Work and Office Workers 1870-1930* (1982).

⁹² Sylvanus Stall, *What a Young Husband Ought to Know* (1907), 25, 66. This book was one of a series, with volumes directed to the young boy, the young girl, etc. The series went through several re-printings and new editions in the first few decades of the twentieth century.

irrevocable commitment:

The man who has not already accumulated sufficient to support two, or who has not in his business relations a sure promise of such ability, has no right to ask any woman to join her fortunes with his.⁹³

Lest it be thought that the male would make all the sacrifices, the advisor reminded the young husband that it was the female who would "assume the pains and perils of maternity." Not only would she risk her own life, but she also faced "the subsequent possibility of being left by the death of her husband with a family of dependent children."⁹⁴

The social advisor based his cautionary tone on observable phenomena. In the early 1900s, industrial accidents and illnesses were as hazardous to males as childbirth was to females. In working-class families, when an accident or illness took the life of a male breadwinner, the widow and children had few options other than to seek support from kindly relatives or private charity. No state had enacted any workmen's compensation law before 1911, when Washington, Wisconsin, and a few other states led the nation in so doing.⁹⁵

⁹³ Emma Drake, *What a Young Wife Ought to Know* (1908), .63.

⁹⁴ Stall, *What a Young Husband Ought to Know*, 28.

⁹⁵ The maternal mortality rate in 1915 was 6.1 deaths per 1,000 live births. By 1945, that rate had been reduced to 2.1 per 1,000. *Historical Statistics of the United States 1789-1945*, supplement (1949), 46. For males age 25-34, the death rate from all causes in 1915 was 6.2. By 1945, it had been reduced to 3.5 per 1,000. *Historical Statistics of the United States, Colonial Times to 1957* (1960), 28-29. While the two sets of statistics are taken from different tables and not exactly comparable, they are close enough to indicate a trend. The dramatic reduction in mortality in young adults from 1915 to 1945 may be attributed to improvements in health care, medical science, city sanitation facilities, and industrial safety standards.

Once started, the idea of workmen's compensation caught on quickly. Samuel Mencher, *Poor Law to Poverty Program* (1967), 305. "By 1913," said Mencher, "twenty-two state laws had been passed."

A few women, seeing the connection between economics and politics, became active in labor, socialist, and suffragist movements. During the 1907 campaign for woman suffrage in Washington, a prominent suffragist argued that women needed political power for economic reasons. "A disfranchised class," she said, "is inadequately equipped for its necessary struggle for a livelihood in the business world." Women did not obtain the vote in Washington until 1910, nor in most other states until 1920.⁹⁶

Although Hulet Wells himself supported women's rights, the political and economic sphere in which he operated was a largely male sphere. The term "workingmen" meant literally, "males in the workforce." A "living wage" was one which would enable a male wage-worker to support a family. "The right to the conditions of being the head of a family," asserted one workingman's advocate, "implies the right to a family Living Wage, because nature and reason have decreed that the family should be supported by its head."⁹⁷ Issues concerning wages and working conditions were primarily male issues, to be fought out on male territory.

When, on taking a bride, Hulet Wells became a breadwinner and provider, he was no longer free to quit his job simply because he did not like it. Questions of wages, hours, and working conditions assumed a new importance.

⁹⁶ "Mrs. Duniway Gives Her Opinion," *Seattle Times*, Oct. 6, 1907, 12. An Oregon pioneer, Abigail Scott Duniway led many suffrage campaigns in the Pacific Northwest. Washington women had been able to vote for a brief period in the 1880s, but lost the suffrage before the territory became a state. Women in Wyoming, Utah, Colorado, and Idaho voted before 1900. On Tuesday, November 8, 1910, Washington became the fifth state, the first in the twentieth century, to grant women the ballot, ten years before the Nineteenth Amendment (1920) extended woman suffrage throughout the United States. "Equal Suffrage," *Seattle Times*, Nov. 7, 1910, 11. "Men Present Women Right of Suffrage," *Seattle Times*, Nov. 9, 1910, 1.

⁹⁷ John Ryan, *A Living Wage* (1906), 119.

Free Speech Fight #3: Postal Clerks Local 28

Through his involvement in socialism, Hulet Wells gained experience and motivation for labor organizing. While courting Nesta in the spring of 1908, he chafed under the long hours and low pay at the post office. In his own workplace, he soon encountered an all-too-familiar scenario of employer opposition to workers' rights. Once again, freedom of speech became an issue in his life.

Although letter carriers and unionized trades had gained the right to an eight-hour day by 1908, post office clerks often worked ten or more hours, plus Sundays and holidays with no overtime differential. The clerks in seven eastern cities, led by Chicago and Milwaukee, had formed a post office clerks' union, affiliated with the American Federation of Labor. With the help of the Seattle Labor Council, Wells and seventeen co-workers founded a similar union. On April 27, 1908, the Seattle clerks received a charter as Local 28. A month later the Postal Clerks Union, Local 28 held its first official meeting at the Labor Temple. Wells was elected a delegate to the Seattle Labor Council.⁹⁸

While organizing the union, Wells maintained his interest in socialism. Although he had entered the municipal election that spring as a candidate for the office of corporation counsel, with his new law degree, and had gained notoriety for street speaking the previous fall, his supervisor at the post office had ignored those activities at the time. Perhaps his involvement in the new labor union provoked his supervisor to take disciplinary action. The first thrust was directed not against the union, but against his political proclivities. In August 1908, a high-ranking civil service

⁹⁸ Wells, "I Wanted to Work," 106-107. "Poignant Quotes," *Union Postal Clerk*, June 1953.

officer reprimanded Wells for violating a presidential order known informally as the "gag rule." This order prohibited members of the classified civil service from engaging in political activity. Wells thought it peculiar that this rule did not apply to non-classified employees, that is, those who owed their offices to political appointments rather than competitive examinations. He protested that "the expression of opinion was a fundamental right," but the officer replied that "civil service workers were forbidden to make public speeches of any kind." Wells recalled his frustration: "So that was that. No slaves were ever more thoroughly gagged."⁹⁹

On September 15, 1908, Eugene Debs, the charismatic leader of the Socialist Party of America, arrived in Seattle on his cross-country presidential campaign tour aboard his specially chartered train, the "Red Special." Wells and a committee of local socialists met him at the station. The welcoming crowd, which included a large number of unemployed workers, escorted Debs to one of Seattle's largest halls. Wells, as master of ceremonies, had the honor of introducing the presidential candidate to an overflow audience of thousands of cheering supporters.¹⁰⁰

For the Seattle postal clerk, however, the political honor carried a severe economic penalty. Wells was not only reprimanded, but was docked in pay. His annual salary was reduced from \$1000 to \$900. Wells recalled:

⁹⁹ Wells, "I Wanted to Work," 103-106.

¹⁰⁰ "Debs Will Walk With His Escort," *Post-Intelligencer*, Sept. 14, 1908, as quoted in Hulet Wells, "I Wanted to Work," 102. The meeting was held at Dreamland Rink, a popular location for mass gatherings. It was estimated that 1,000 unemployed workers would accompany Debs from the station to the hall. For Debs' charismatic leadership, see Nick Salvatore, *Eugene V. Debs: Citizen and Socialist* (1982), 342: "His public life was a continuous sermon, a call for rebirth and regeneration that achieved greater force and urgency as he understood the broader dimensions of the crisis his society faced."

The aftermath of the Debs meeting was one out of many government encroachments on civil rights that finally drove me into a crusade for free speech in the civil service, and for relief from the intolerable conditions that prevailed in the postal service.¹⁰¹

In the presidential election on November 3, 1908, Theodore Roosevelt's hand-picked successor, William Howard Taft, handily defeated his Democratic opponent, William Jennings Bryan, 7,700,000 to 6,400,000. Eugene Debs came in a distant third, with 420,000, or three per cent of the votes. It was a creditable showing for a third party. However, the growing electoral strength of the party, while encouraging to its partisans, also served to galvanize the opposition to it.¹⁰²

Following the reprimand and salary reduction for his participation in the Debs campaign, Wells dropped his political activities. He directed his energy toward the new union. Again he ran afoul of the presidential order. While the general law prohibited political activity, a specific provision stated that classified employees were forbidden:

to solicit an increase of pay or to influence or attempt to influence in their own interest any other legislation whatever, either before Congress or its committees, or in any way save through the heads of the Departments in or under which they serve, on penalty of dismissal from the Government service.

In effect, said Wells, this order prevented postal employees from "calling the attention of Congress or the public to the slavish conditions under which they worked."¹⁰³

In March 1909, the fledgling Post Office Clerks' union

¹⁰¹ Wells, "I Wanted to Work," 103.

¹⁰² Wm. DeGregorio, *The Complete Book of U.S. Presidents* (1984), 399.

¹⁰³ Wells, "I Wanted to Work," 105-106, quoting the presidential order of Theodore Roosevelt, January 31, 1902. Sterling Spero, *The Labor Movement in a Government Industry: A Study of Employee Organization in the Postal Service* (1927), 109-113.

launched its own monthly newspaper, called the *Bundy Recorder* after the time clock, "the symbol of our working day." Wells became an editor and reporter. He recalled his policy: "in every issue I denounced the gag in reasoned language that at times grew passionate but never vituperative."¹⁰⁴

After publishing the *Bundy Recorder* with meager financial backing for eight months, Wells resigned and the paper folded. Late in October, postal inspector C. L. Wayland ordered Wells

to show cause in writing why you should not be removed from the postal service for insubordination, disrespect to your superior officers, and for inciting, or intending to incite, discontent and disorganization among your fellow-employees...."¹⁰⁵

Wells had given the post office "nearly six years of hard work at starvation wages," as he said, and there were no complaints about the quality of his work. In November, while his dismissal was pending, both the Seattle Central Labor Council and the American Federation of Labor drafted resolutions in his favor. They argued that a dismissal would "have the effect of discouraging union organization in the service, which is no doubt the principal object sought." Along with the congressional representative from Seattle, they urged the postal service not to discharge Wells.¹⁰⁶

Notwithstanding the show of support on his behalf, Wells was dismissed from the postal service in December, 1909, for "insubordination" and was also barred from any other job in

¹⁰⁴ Wells, "I Wanted to Work," 108. As far as known, no copies of the *Bundy Recorder* have survived.

¹⁰⁵ Wells, "I Wanted to Work," 109-110. Spero, *The Labor Movement in a Government Industry*, 122-123.

¹⁰⁶ Wells, "I Wanted to Work," 112-112. "Wells' Case Heard by A.F. of L. Leaders," *Seattle Times*, Nov. 20, 1909. Wells was a delegate to the A.F. of L. conference in Toronto, Canada, in November 1909.

the federal civil service. The *Times* in January, 1910, added insult to injury. It reported that Wells had been dismissed for "pernicious political activity."¹⁰⁷ A month later, inexplicably, the *Times* defended Wells' stand on free speech for civil servants. Criticizing the Civil Service Commission's aggressive enforcement of "the rule against political activity," the *Times* stated:

The rigid enforcement of the rule as interpreted by the Postoffice Department would quickly rid the service of active, alert, public-spirited citizens, eager to take their allotted part in a "government by the people," and would replace them with spineless creatures unable to vote intelligently because of having permitted the civil service system to rob them of their right to think.¹⁰⁸

In spite of losing his job, Wells continued to press for civil rights for civil servants. He drafted a free speech clause which was taken up by the American Federation of Labor. A modified version was then introduced into Congress with the support of Robert M. LaFollette, the progressive Senator from Wisconsin. On August 24, 1912, Wells noted with satisfaction, "Congress passed the Lloyd-LaFollette Anti-gag law and an eight-hour law beside."¹⁰⁹

Although Wells was out, the postal clerks' union continued to grow. Over the next twenty years, Wells later reported, postal workers "secured compensatory time for holidays and

¹⁰⁷ Wells, "I Wanted to Work," 112-113. Objecting to the use of the word "pernicious," Wells explained: "Once a newspaper has told a lie about a person, it can use the lie as a means of identifying him in future references. Thus, seven months later the *Times*...ran a headline, 'Post-office Clerk Who Was Discharged for *Pernicious Political Activity* Demands \$714 From Government.'" [italics added.]

¹⁰⁸ "Civil Service and Politics," *Seattle Times*, Feb. 21, 1910. Newspapers at that time frequently printed "postoffice" as one word. Sometimes they hyphenated it. This *Times* defense of Wells and free speech seems quite uncharacteristic for the period. Perhaps Col. Blethen was out of town that day?

¹⁰⁹ Wells, "I Wanted to Work," 114-115. Spero, *The Labor Movement in a Government Industry*, 172-173.

Sundays, sick leave, wage differential for overtime and night work, a 44-hour week, and a reasonable wage scale." These benefits were not secured without a struggle. Six months after passage of the Lloyd-LaFollette act, a new administration went on a cost-cutting spree, reducing pay and lengthening hours. Through organized protest, employees eventually secured a more enlightened management. In 1921 a new postmaster-general, Will H. Hays, instituted changes to "humanize" the postal service. The efforts of the early union organizers were beginning to bear fruit.¹¹⁰

* * * * *

Thus, the years in Seattle had served to give Hulet Wells practical experience in job hunting, public speaking, writing, editing, and labor organizing. His early experience as a "blanket stiff" had intensified his abhorrence of economic insecurity. In the Socialist Party he had met people who shared his yearning for reform. His new colleagues had introduced him to theories of economics, politics, and class conflict. In meetings and street-corner speaking, he had learned techniques for social protest. He had then carried the lessons learned in socialism to his own workplace, joining his fellow workers to found the postal workers' union. He developed his skills in writing and editing a newspaper. This time he suffered persecution, not from a capitalist boss, but from the government itself. It was a further lesson in power politics. And once again he personally faced the peril of economic insecurity.

¹¹⁰ Wells, "I Wanted to Work," 115. Spero, *The Labor Movement in a Government Industry*, 177-180, 186-191, 244-245.

Chapter III Power of the Press, 1910-1917

Hulet Wells faced the new year, 1910, with foreboding. Once again out of work, he now had a wife to support. He and Nesta had been married for a year and a half. His pay had been low and the hours long, but the work had been steady. Now he was not only barred from the post office, but from any other federal civil service job for life. Where could he turn?

In the ten years since Wells had returned from his adventures in the Klondike, the city of Seattle had changed dramatically. No longer a boisterous frontier town, it had grown into a lively commercial city. It had doubled its area and tripled its population. The incorporated area which had covered 34 square miles had increased to 71 square miles, mostly through the annexation of neighboring suburbs between 1905 and 1910. The population had grown from 80,671 in 1900 to 237,194 in 1910. More than two thirds of the residents had moved into the city within the past ten years.¹

Job Search, Seattle City Light

Since he was banned from federal civil service, Wells tried to find work in the private sector. Although there were many

¹ Calvin Schmid, *Growth of Cities and Towns, State of Washington* (1969), 154-155. Schmid notes that by 1910, the boundaries of the city were established for the next thirty years. From 1940 to 1956, several more annexations brought the city's territory up to 99 square miles, including 17 square miles of water. The boundaries have expanded only a little since then. For an early progressive view of the importance of city planning, see Frederic Howe, *The City: The Hope of Democracy* (1905). For a theoretical approach to city growth, see Jane Jacobs, *The Economy of Cities* (1969). Jacobs, p.126, argues that a city grows through economic diversification and differentiation, rather than simple expansion of existing systems.

more people and many more businesses than there had been when he first started working at the post office, Wells searched in vain for several months. As a socialist and labor organizer, he was at a disadvantage in applying to capitalist industries. However, he had previously taken a YMCA class in electricity from J.D. Ross, lighting superintendent for Seattle City Light, the municipally-owned electrical utility. Upon learning that the federal ban did not extend to the state or local civil service, Wells took an examination for electrical rate clerk at City Light and got the job.

At City Light, he found both the work and the political ambience congenial to his temperament. He joined the Electrical Workers' Union and became a delegate once again to the Labor Council. "I got along well with my new duties and took a pride in working in a socially owned industry," he recalled. "It was what I wanted for all the basic industries, operation for service instead of profit." In sorting mail, he had become familiar with city streets and districts. This background served him well in his new duties, where, as he said, "I mapped the city for the meter reading districts, and was put in charge of meter reading, residence light bills, and correspondence."²

Wells had found not only a job but a philosophical home in City Light. He also had a chance to compare two different systems of business management, one public and one private. Besides having a policy of service rather than profit, City Light was locally owned and favorable to unionization. In contrast, its competitor--then called Seattle Electric but later known as Puget Power--was organized for profit, owned by absentees, and hostile to unionization. Wells praised the public utility's efficiency and service:

² Hulet Wells, "I Wanted to Work" (1955), 128.

The common objection that public ownership fosters inefficiency and slackness of work was belied by City Light. It was well managed, was reducing prices, and rapidly taking away business from its private competitor.

Although City Light served most of the city's residential customers, its privately-owned competitor, Seattle Electric, had the greater share of the more profitable commercial and industrial accounts. In Wells' opinion, Seattle Electric kept this advantage "because of business men's dislike of a 'socialistic' enterprise."³

Seattle Electric had started out as one of several small, competing private power companies in the 1890s, when it operated the city's street railway. It went through several mergers and reorganizations between 1910 and 1912, when it became the Puget Sound Traction, Power and Light Company (hereafter referred to as Puget Power). Headed by Alton W. Leonard in Seattle, it was owned by the Stone and Webster Management Corporation, based in Boston. Puget Power supported the Employers' Association of Washington, which opposed unionization and promoted the open shop.⁴

The rivalry between City Light and Puget Power provided political fodder for many years. Partisans on both sides viewed it as a contest between public and private ownership.⁵ To partisans of social reform, like Hulet Wells, City Light represented a step toward the future, with low-cost public power, public ownership, and employees represented by their own independent organization. To partisans of unrestricted capitalism, like the Employers' Association, Puget Power

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ Richard Berner, *Seattle 1900-1920*, vol. 1 (1991), 162-163. Berner traces the rivalry between the two companies through the first two decades of the twentieth century.

⁵ Roger Sale, *Seattle, Past to Present* (1982), 72-73, 88-89.

represented free enterprise and rugged individualism, with the company exercising benevolent paternalism toward its employees. The competition between the two companies was not simply economic; it was one of social vision. Which company would better serve the public interest?

Wells' paycheck from City Light was small but steady, so he put a down payment on a home and took out a mortgage. As a dedicated member of the Socialist Party, he continued to be active in politics.⁶

The Socialist Voice

The Socialist Party in Seattle continued to grow, although Dr. Hermon Titus had moved away. When Wells had joined the party in 1905, there had been only one local. By 1911, there were numerous locals affiliated with a central coordinating committee, an organizational pattern commonly followed by labor unions and one which would later be duplicated by the Unemployed Citizens' League.

Due to a dispute at the Socialist state convention in the summer of 1909, Dr. Titus and his faction had seceded from the party. His newspaper, *The Socialist*, folded. Although Wells shared Dr. Titus's left-wing sympathies, he did not join Dr. Titus in walking out. He explained: "I did not believe in secession tactics." In 1910 Dr. Titus attempted a comeback. His new publication, *The Workingman's Paper*, carried the old slogan, "To Organize the Slaves of Capital to Win Their Own Emancipation." It promoted a new Labor Party open to union members only, with the object of electing "bona fide Wage Workers" to public office. Neither the paper nor the party lasted long.⁷

⁶ Wells, "I Wanted to Work," 127-130.

⁷ *The Workingman's Paper*, August 20, 1910. A few issues are on the

Left and right wings both remained active in Seattle. "The line between the right and left was sharply marked," said Wells, who belonged to the left-wing Fifth Ward Local. Dr. Edwin J. ("Doc") Brown, the attorney-dentist who had defended the Socialists in the Free Speech fight, belonged to the right-wing Fourth Ward Local. He became the party's most prominent leader, serving two terms as mayor in the 1920s. Wells described him as "a pure demagogue, but not a dictator like Dr. Titus."⁸

Left-wingers were oriented toward the working class, while right-wingers tended toward the middle class. Left-wingers taught class struggle and revolution. Right-wingers taught compromise and avoided the word "revolution." These divisions made the movement vulnerable to attack from outside. Wells recalled:

In Seattle, Col. Blethen of the *Times* fanned the fire of our factional strife by taking the side of the right wing, and denouncing the left wing as "dynamic socialists." He explained that this meant that we believed in blowing up our enemies with dynamite.⁹

In October 1911, Wells chaired a mass meeting at the Dreamland pavilion, co-sponsored by the Socialist Party and organized labor, in defense of John and James McNamara of

microfilm roll containing *The Socialist*, in the University of Washington library. Dr. Titus moved to Chicago, but his wife Hattie remained in Seattle and continued to support socialist and labor movements.

⁸ Wells, "I Wanted to Work," 127. For "Doc" Brown in the 1920s, see Richard Berner, *Seattle 1921-1940* (1992), 58.

⁹ Wells, "I Wanted to Work," 131. Blethen himself placed Wobblies and left-wing socialists in the same category. In a complaint to Police Chief Griffith, he wrote: "I heard a stentorian voice under my windows.... On looking out I discovered an I.W.W. or a Dynamic Socialist--I cannot tell them apart--in his shirt sleeves, hatless, with a soapbox, sending out his call for gatherers to hear his riotous speech." Blethen to Griffith, June 17, 1914, Austin E. Griffith papers, Manuscripts Division, University of Washington, Seattle.

California. The two brothers had been accused of the bombing of the *Los Angeles Times* building, whose owner, Harrison Gray Otis, was an outspoken opponent of unions. When the brothers were arrested, labor sympathizers across the country rushed to their defense, believing they were the victims of a frame-up. Just before the November elections, the brothers confessed to the crime, much to the chagrin and embarrassment of their defenders. Wells recalled, "When the McNamaras confessed, it was a great shock to all of us."¹⁰

From March 1911 to June 1912, Wells edited the local party newspaper, the *Socialist Voice*. Published every other Saturday, the little four-page paper contained a potpourri of articles, mostly taken from other socialist publications around the country, along with local news and commentary. It claimed a circulation of 20,000-25,000.¹¹

In keeping with Wells' interest in the unemployed, the *Socialist Voice* in March, 1911, published a report on Seattle's charitable provision for jobless workers:

Seattle has had a 'Breadline' all winter. Every morning, rain or shine, you can see these poor unfortunates in line waiting to get a cup of hot coffee and stale bun or a piece of bread.... They seldom get a square meal and any old place to flop

¹⁰ Wells, "I Wanted to Work," 129-132. Lewis Lorwin, *The American Federation of Labor* (1933), 102-105. The explosion in October, 1910, killed 21 people. John McNamara was secretary of the Bridge and Structural Iron Workers' Union, headquartered in Indianapolis. The *Los Angeles Times* was involved in disputes with unions of printers and metal workers. When the McNamara brothers were arrested in April, 1911, the A.F.L., convinced of their innocence, hired attorney Clarence Darrow to defend them. The case received national publicity.

¹¹ Hulet Wells, editor, *Socialist Voice*, March 4, 1911 to June 22, 1912. Wells in his autobiography said that he edited this publication. However, his name did not appear as editor; none of the staff was listed. The only by-line that appeared with any frequency was that of O.M. Thomason, who wrote a number of articles. Wells' name appeared several times in announcements of public activities, for instance, when he was to speak at a rally and when he ran for the mayor's office. Circulation figures were printed on the masthead, top right.

for the night is welcomed by them.¹²

The *Socialist Voice* reflected the prevailing attitude toward charity as it continued:

Charity degrades and humiliates the recipient. The socialist holds the key to the situation, that if we don't want bread distributed by "charity" we must provide a system that will make it possible for every human being, who is able, to earn his own bread by labor.¹³

Socialists consistently publicized the existence of unemployment, as well as other social justice issues. Yet they were not the only ones working for social justice.¹⁴ Many other groups, both religious and secular, also agitated for reform, especially in the period around 1912.

In Seattle, the city was growing up as well as out. In 1900 few buildings had been taller than four stories. By 1912, the downtown business district boasted numerous buildings of eight, ten, or even twelve stories. In February there was a deep hole in the ground at Second Avenue and Yesler Way. While electric street railway cars, horse-drawn wagons, and automobiles rattled up and down the street, curious pedestrians stopped to watch construction workers prepare the twenty-five-foot deep excavation for the foundation of a commercial building that would be the third tallest in the world and the tallest one west of New York City, the forty-two story L. C. Smith building. "The first steel is expected in March," reported the *Seattle Times*, "and from that time until the end of the eighteen months required for the completion of the building, work will progress

¹² "Charity Degrades," *Socialist Voice*, March 18, 1911, 3.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ Some years later Herbert Hoover commented, aptly: "The perpetual howl of radicalism is that it is the sole voice of liberalism--that devotion to social progress is its field alone." Herbert Hoover, *American Individualism* (1923), 67.

without delay."¹⁵

The activity in building construction was matched by activity on the social and political fronts.¹⁶ Progressive reforms caught the public imagination. Washington, Oregon, and California were in the forefront in enacting progressive legislation. Among other measures, Washington enacted woman suffrage in 1910. California and Oregon, two other states with strong progressive movements, followed suit in 1911 and 1912, respectively. Washington passed the initiative, referendum and recall in 1912. With regard to labor, Washington passed protective legislation for women and children. In 1913 it was one of eight states to pass a minimum wage law, following the lead of Massachusetts in 1912. Washington also made a start in providing for a worker's family in cases of job-related injury or death. In 1911 it was one of the earliest states to pass a workmen's compensation act.¹⁷

Across the country and in the state of Washington, a spirit of religious revival combined with a crusade for political reform to promote the goal of social justice. Missionaries of the social gospel urged businessmen to pay less attention to profit and more attention to service. Christian ethics challenged business ethics. A spirit of reform was in the

¹⁵ "Building Industry in Seattle Booms," *Seattle Times*, March 3, 1912, Business Houses section, p.6. See also "Death Will Not Stop Smith Building Plan," *Times*, Nov.7, 1910, announcing that Burns Lyman Smith, son of the recently-deceased typewriter magnate Lyman C. Smith, would carry out his father's plans for the building.

¹⁶ The Far Western states led the nation in progressive legislation. See Earl Pomeroy, *The Pacific Slope* (1965), ch.VIII, "The Progressive Movement," on California, Oregon, Washington, Idaho, Utah, and Nevada.

¹⁷ "More than 2,000 Ask Payment of Claims," *Seattle Times*, Feb.11, 1912, 27, a report on the first four months of the workmen's compensation act in Washington. Influenced by John R. Commons, a prominent labor historian, Wisconsin also passed a workmen's compensation act in 1911. By 1913, twenty-two states had passed similar acts. Samuel Mencher, *Poor Law to Poverty Program* (1967), 305.

air. Hulet Wells and the Seattle Socialists no longer seemed so isolated or extreme in their views; they were now but a small part of a general movement to create a more humanitarian society. The high tide of socialism coincided with a rising tide of progressive reform in business, politics, and religion.

Social Gospel versus Gospel of Wealth

Although church members were a minority of the population in Seattle, organized religion had a strong influence on public opinion in the city, as well as across the nation. Many churches had begun to advocate the social gospel, as opposed to the gospel of wealth, with a missionary fervor.¹⁸

In February 1912, the "Men and Religion Forward Movement" arrived in Seattle, led by evangelist Fred B. Smith of New York. It was, said its promoters, "unique, in that it is entirely devoted to city men, and also unique in its recognition of the fact that religion at the present time is not a part of the everyday life of business men." The program involved a week of mass meetings, street gatherings, discussions, prayer services and music to promote "the practical side of religion" in business and community life. In Seattle, a committee of one hundred men handled the arrangements and publicity. The Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA) served as local headquarters. Programs were held at Presyterian, Methodist, Baptist, Congregational, and other Protestant churches. Additionally, noon meetings were held "at shops, offices, schools, factories, docks and

¹⁸ Donald Gorrell, *The Age of Social Responsibility: The Social Gospel in the Progressive Era 1900-1920* (1988), 155-163. From 1911 to 1912, the Men and Religion Forward Movement campaigned in some seventy cities across the nation, culminating in the Christian Conservation Congress at Carnegie Hall in New York City in April 1912.

all industrial centers."¹⁹

The Men and Religion Forward Movement rallied church members of all classes to commit themselves to social activism. Raymond Robins, social service expert of Men and Religion Forward, spoke to a large audience of both men and women on a Thursday evening. "The problem of production has been solved," declared Robins, "but now we have to face the problem of distribution." He identified the economic causes of industrial unrest, using an analysis that was already familiar to socialists and other reformers: "The first cause of the unrest is that modern production is for profit and not for use and that gives us the relationship of employer and employed." Among other causes, he listed the passing of the frontier, the change from the small proprietary firm to the large impersonal corporation, and the willingness of women to take men's factory jobs at less pay. Robins deplored the large number of itinerant workers without family ties in logging camps and lumber mills, "the class of labor which in the off season fills the lodging houses of the cities and constitutes a serious menace to the moral welfare of the communities." To promote the democratic idea in industry, said Robins, the worker "should have adequate wages, reasonable working hours and opportunity for social life as a right."²⁰

As the progressive impulse or "the social awakening," as some called it, gained strength, there were numerous attempts

¹⁹ "Churches Will Open Big Campaign Sunday," *Seattle Times*, Feb.12, 1912, 11. *Seattle Times*, February 17, 1912, 7.

²⁰ "Social Unrest Gives Topic to Lecturer," *Seattle Times*, Feb.23, 1912, 5. Robins, a social activist from Chicago, later went to Russia as a high-ranking member of the American Red Cross delegation, 1917-1918. He spoke personally with Kerensky, Trotsky, and Lenin; he also mingled with the Russian people. Although anti-Bolshevist himself, he criticized American policy for its blindness to political realities in Russia. See William Hard, *Raymond Robins' Own Story* (1920).

to identify and explain it, to encourage it or to resist it. Of the numerous writings that appeared in 1912, two books in particular showed the multiple facets of reform, one from a religious perspective and the other from a secular perspective. From the religious perspective, a Protestant theologian, Walter Rauschenbusch of New York, published *Christianizing the Social Order* (1912). "When a great spiritual movement like the social awakening shakes our nation to the depths," he said, "we may be sure that the churches will respond to it and have an active part in it." Advocating a Christian duty to improve conditions on earth, he explained, "The great aim underlying the whole social movement is the creation of a free, just, and brotherly social order."²¹

Rauschenbusch traced the evolution over the centuries of four great social institutions: the family, organized religion, education, and politics. The first three had evolved, he explained, from socially sanctioned despotism to more humanitarian forms, "through which the spirit of Christ can do its work in humanity." The one great area of social life which in 1912 A.D. still wielded despotic powers with impunity was business. Noting that the country had gone from a predominantly agricultural economy to a complex industrial system in the short space of one generation, Rauschenbusch explained:

The moral objection lies, not against the size and complexity of the modern system, but against the fact that this wonderful product of human ability...has gravitated into the ownership and control of a relatively small class of men.²²

²¹ Walter Rauschenbusch, *Christianizing the Social Order* (1912), 7, 104, 394. Rauschenbusch had been converted a quarter of a century earlier, when he was 25 years old. He recalled, "I owe my own first awakening to the world of social problems to the agitation of Henry George in 1886."

²² *Ibid.*, 154, 163.

In order to promote social and economic reform, social gospel missionaries intended to regain control of government for the people. The initiative, referendum, recall, and direct primaries were, said Rauschenbusch, "the political counterpart of the struggle for economic democracy and emancipation."²³

In a secular vein, political writer Walter Weyl observed that the nation as a whole exhibited a "new social spirit." In *The New Democracy* (1912), he argued that the country was actually in the midst of a revolution, a word he used, "because no other word so aptly designates the completeness of the transformation now in process." He defined a revolution as "a change, however gradual . . . which has for its cumulative effect a radical displacement of the center of gravity of society," from a profit orientation to a service orientation.²⁴

In explaining the progressive movement, both Weyl and Rauschenbusch identified many varieties of reform. Both saw the reform spirit as hopeful and redemptive. Noting that reformers often spent much time and energy fighting each other, they both rationalized that the in-fighting was part of the learning process as humanity struggled to accommodate major changes in the conditions of life. Whether reformers called their creed the social gospel or social democracy, their goal was to turn the public mind away from individual acquisition and toward the greater good of all.

The most well-known and flamboyant proponent of the social

²³ *Ibid.*, 362. Reflecting popular enthusiasm for political reform, the people of the state of Washington, with the votes of the recently enfranchised women of the state, enacted the initiative, referendum and recall in the general election in November, 1912.

²⁴ Walter Weyl, *The New Democracy*, (1912), 165-166, 274, .279. Historian Richard Hofstadter described *The New Democracy* as a "penetrating and now all but forgotten book." Hofstadter, *The Age of Reform* (1955), 146.

gospel in Seattle (indeed, in the Pacific Northwest) was the Reverend Mark A. Matthews, pastor of the First Presbyterian Church. Rev. Matthews had come to Seattle from the South in 1902. Under his leadership, the church grew to a membership of 9,000. He was among the handful of church leaders in the city who gave active support to organized labor. The First Presbyterian Church sponsored, among other social services, an employment bureau.²⁵

Besides the churches, there were numerous civic, fraternal, and other voluntary organizations with varying degrees of commitment to social activism. Many groups sprang up in response to particular political issues, then subsided again. Others, such as the Municipal League of Seattle, were more enduring. Rev. Matthews was among the civic leaders who belonged to the Municipal League. Founded in 1910, it had a broad-based, long-lasting effect on city politics. The Municipal League advocated nonpartisan, cooperative action to promote city planning, parks and playgrounds, well-paved streets, efficiency in government, and a greater sense of community. It appealed to newcomers who sought a voice in the development of the city and who wanted to secure the benefits of urban growth while preventing detrimental side effects such as slums, crime, and congestion. Most of the League members were professionals, artisans, and small businessmen of the middle and upper-middle classes in their thirties and early forties. They subscribed to traditional values of free enterprise, private property, and individualism. Although they did not recruit working-class members, they did invite delegates from social justice groups and organized labor to serve as a liaison between the League

²⁵ David Buerge and Junius Rochester, *Roots and Branches: The Religious Heritage of Washington State* (1988), 160-161.

and other constituencies.²⁶

Although the Municipal League claimed to speak for "the people," it became evident that there were differing views about who "the people" were. Within the Municipal League itself, there were differing priorities and approaches to civic improvement. There were moderate Republicans, for whom "the people" were upper middle class, and whose interests lay in more efficient and economical government. There were social justice progressives, for whom "the people" were the lower middle and working classes, whose interests lay in economic reforms and public ownership of utilities.²⁷

Like the Municipal League, socialists and organized labor sought civic improvement, but they also encountered differences within their own ranks. Coalitions were constantly forming, splitting apart, and forming again as a result of both internal and external pressures. For groups like the socialists, the social gospel represented one form of external pressure. By openly encouraging reform, it provided a counterbalance to external pressures resisting reform. Whether in religious or secular guise, it promoted a humanitarian ideology as opposed to the social darwinist doctrine of the survival of the fittest. The new climate encouraged social activism on all fronts.

For Hulet Wells, this new climate had a special benefit. It allowed him to follow his conscience without fear of losing his job. In an unfavorable climate, he had lost his post office job. He now had a congenial job at Seattle City Light, yet he continued to pursue both economic and political action on behalf of his fellow workers. As a wage-worker, he belonged to the electrical workers' union. As a private

²⁶ Lee Pendergrass, "The Formation of a Municipal Reform Movement," *Pacific Northwest Quarterly*, vol.66 no.1 (Jan. 1975), 16-19.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 22.

citizen, he kept his membership in the Socialist Party.

Mayor's Race, 1912

Riding the tide of reform in the municipal elections in the spring of 1912, the Seattle Socialist Party fielded a slate of candidates for city offices. By this time, the party had grown to include several chapters with a central coordinating body, an organizational pattern which was followed by organized labor and one which would be repeated by the Unemployed Citizens' League two decades later. As a participant in local politics, Hulet Wells gained experience in group dynamics and the process of creating social change.

When the Socialist Party nominated him for mayor, Wells ran as a workingman's representative, saying:

I do not pretend to represent anyone but the workingman, and I have been a workingman all my life and understand all their problems.²⁸

In this election, Hulet Wells and the Socialists stood virtually alone in calling attention to the problem of unemployment. The *Socialist Voice* reported:

The Socialist platform on which Candidate Wells stands is the only one in this election which really has anything to say that is of real interest to the working class. The very first plank in this platform deals with the question of the unemployed and proposes ways and means for handling the problem.²⁹

Yet the problem of unemployment was by no means new to the city. Seasonal workers regularly gravitated to Seattle from logging camps, fisheries, canneries, farms and coal mines in the hinterlands. The *Socialist Voice* commented, "Seattle has had a 'Breadline' all winter. . . . Soup houses and bread

²⁸ "Jobs for Jobless is Wells' Promise," *Post-Intelligencer*, Feb. 11, 1912, 7.

²⁹ "What Seattle Needs," *Socialist Voice*, Feb. 17, 1912, 2.

lines are regular occurrences in our large cities every winter." Seattle residents took it as a matter of course that the city would begin to fill up with unemployed men as the leaves began to fall, and that, just as surely, the men would disperse to the hinterlands when the weather warmed up in the spring. In February, with the weather still wet and cold, unemployed men could be seen on the streets of Seattle, particularly in the vicinity of Pioneer Square. They wandered about, congregated in small groups, lined up at soup kitchens, and occasionally asked for a handout.³⁰

Wells had a personal sympathy for such men, for he had experienced their frustrations. He advocated more than sympathy and a charitable handout; he urged remedial action which would not only provide for the workers' physical needs but would maintain their self-respect. He advocated the timing of public works to provide employment during the slack season. "By doing necessary city work in the winter," he explained, "we can take care of these men, whose only crime is that they are out of a job."³¹

The sources of aid for unemployed workers were few. Local charities like the Salvation Army and the Volunteers of America set up soup kitchens and offered shelter. There was no unemployment insurance. The very concept of unemployment insurance was just beginning to be discussed in the United States, although it was a matter of great interest in Europe and particularly in England. In 1909, the British Labour Exchanges Act created a system of public employment offices. In 1911, the National Insurance Act created health insurance and unemployment insurance protections for the workers of Great Britain. American reformers watched these European

³⁰ "Charity Degrades," *Socialist Voice*, March 18, 1911, 4. Carlos Schwantes, *Hard Traveling* (1994), 37.

³¹ "Jobs for Jobless," *Post-Intelligencer*, Feb. 11, 1912, 7.

precedents closely, using them as models for similar reforms in America.³²

In Seattle the concept of government-sponsored unemployment insurance had not yet reached the talking stage. The idea of using public works to create jobs was just beginning to make an appearance in public discourse. In campaigning for the strategic use of public works, Wells was ahead of his time. "If I am elected mayor," he told a large audience in Rainier Hall, "I will endeavor to have all the street improvements and other city work that can possibly be handled in the winter done during that season of the year."³³

Although Wells came in fourth in the primaries, he made a respectable show of strength against three mainstream candidates. His competition included Thomas A. Parish, "the business men's candidate"; Hiram Gill, a former mayor; and George F. Cotterill, a progressive Democrat. The *Post-Intelligencer* supported Parish. The *Times* supported Gill and ardently opposed Cotterill, while ignoring Wells. Gill had been recalled in a special election in 1911 for his tolerance of gambling and brothels. In the spirit of the times, he had now "reformed" and promised to get tough on vice. Cotterill, a city engineer and a progressive Democrat, had campaigned earlier for prohibition, woman suffrage, the single tax, and other reform legislation. With the ardent support of Colonel Blethen of the *Times*, former mayor Hiram Gill won the primary, but it was George Cotterill, the progressive Democrat, who won the final election in March.³⁴

Wells was pleased with Cotterill's election. He was also

³² Karl de Schweinitz, *England's Road to Social Security* (1943), 174-175. Mencher, *Poor Law to Poverty Program*, 303.

³³ "Jobs for Jobless is Wells' Promise," *Post-Intelligencer*, Feb. 11, 1912, 7.

³⁴ *Post-Intelligencer*, *Seattle Times*, February-March 1912, *passim*.

pleased by the support shown to the Socialist Party. Detecting a change in the public attitude, he commented on "the polite treatment the socialists received from most of the press and public." He added:

We were not respectable, but we were respected, because of the strength we had acquired.

...It seemed that we had come a long way from the days when we had been jeered and jailed. Fewer people confused us with the anarchists and nihilists. Not so often were we pictured as dirty men with ragged beards and bombs peeping out of our pockets.³⁵

City voters in March 1912, in addition to electing a mayor, councilmen, and other civic offices, also had several propositions to vote on. One of these propositions was to impose a single tax on the appreciation of land values, as Henry George had advocated in the 1880s and 1890s. Living in the Far West during the frenetic railroad-building era following the Civil War, George had witnessed the dramatic appreciation of property values as transportation networks expanded. He reasoned that, since the community as a whole had caused the appreciation while the landlord had done nothing but claim title to the land, the community should reap the reward. By taxing the appreciation of the land (but only the land itself, not the improvements on it), government would have the revenue it needed and society could distribute its wealth more equitably. The landlord would give up part of his gain (which he had done nothing to earn, anyway), but capital and labor would keep a greater part of the common wealth that they helped to create. George and his followers, who became known as "single taxers," believed that the problem of the distribution of wealth could be solved by putting a single tax on land.³⁶

³⁵ Wells, "I Wanted to Work," 136, 137.

³⁶ Henry George, *Progress and Poverty* (1879), 406 ff.

Seattle voters on March 5, 1912 rejected the argument that the single tax was a panacea for economic problems. The "single tax" measure was defeated.³⁷

Potlatch Riot, 1913

During the nineteen-teens, Seattle continued to grow and change rapidly. Old-timers strove to keep their way of life, while floods of newcomers moved into the city with varying expectations, resources, and demands. In the midst of conflicting interest groups, Hulet Wells continued to get a practical education in democracy and grass-roots organizing. The city's mainstream newspapers had never been friendly to socialists. Soon the city's largest newspaper would turn openly hostile to left-wing activists in general and to Hulet Wells in particular.

Seattle in the nineteen-teens had three daily newspapers to serve a population of nearly 240,000: the evening *Times*, the morning *Post-Intelligencer*, and the evening *Star*. The *Times* and *Post-Intelligencer* had a middle-class orientation, while the *Star* had a working-class orientation. The largest of the three was the *Times*. Colonel Alden J. Blethen, publisher and editor-in-chief, had bought the *Times* in 1896. With a combination of aggressive promotion and lively news coverage, he took it from a circulation of perhaps 5,000 in 1896 to more than 65,000 in 1913. Its nearest rival that year was the *Post-Intelligencer*, with 52,000. The *Star* came in third, with 41,000.³⁸

³⁷ "Single Tax Would Not Reduce Rents," *Seattle Times*, Feb.13, 1912, 3. Editorial, *Seattle Times*, March 6, 1912, 6.

³⁸ N.W. Ayer & Son's *American Newspaper Annual and Directory*, (1914), 21, 998. For an excellent biography of Blethen, see Sharon Boswell and Lorraine McConaghy, *Raise Hell and Sell Newspapers: Alden J. Blethen & The Seattle Times*, (1996).

Colonel Blethen had strong ideas about city politics. Hulet Wells had strong ideas about city politics. The two clashed. The *Times* began a vendetta against "reds" -- left-wing socialists, anarchists, the IWW, and "Hulet Wells and his Gang,"³⁹ singling out Wells in particular as an object of vilification.

The feud dated back to 1910. When Wells appealed his dismissal from the post office, the *Times* reported that he had been dismissed for "pernicious political activity."⁴⁰ When Wells ran for mayor in 1912, the *Times* pointedly ignored his candidacy. During the campaign, Wells and the Socialists opposed one of Colonel Blethen's pet projects, a bond issue to acquire Harbor Island for private development. Although the voters approved the bond issue, the port commissioners refused to go along with it, so Colonel Blethen's pet project fell through.⁴¹

Two months later, the *Times* vendetta against Wells began in earnest. To celebrate International Labor Day, May first, eight hundred men and women from the socialists, labor unions, and Industrial Workers of the World marched in a parade downtown. At the front of the column they carried two flags, the Stars and Stripes and the red flag. From that point on, observers gave conflicting accounts. It seems that a group of Spanish-American War veterans rushed out of the crowd and seized the red flag. From the alley at the rear of the *Times* building, another group of men rushed out and

³⁹ "Wells and His Gang Trying to Dishonor Patriotic Socialists," *Seattle Times*, Sept. 25, 1912, 1. Richard Berner, *Seattle 1900-1920* (1991), 154-155.

⁴⁰ Wells, "I Wanted to Work," 112-113, citing the *Seattle Times*, Jan. 3, 1910.

⁴¹ Sharon Boswell and Lorraine McConaghy, *Raise Hell and Sell Newspapers: Alden J. Blethen & The Seattle Times*, (1996), 207-208. Wells, "I Wanted to Work," 135-136. "Seattle Presents Solid Front for Terminal Project," *Post-Intelligencer*, Jan. 29, 1912, 9.

seized the American flag, displaying it with a torn corner for the *Times* photographer. While the *Post-Intelligencer* reported that the American flag was "trampled in the dust" in the ensuing melee, the *Times* reported indignantly that "the women who headed the parade tore the flag of the Union from its staff, spat upon it and trampled it under foot." Both newspapers expressed outrage at the despicable treatment of Old Glory. Both declared emphatically that the red flag should be banned from public display because it was a symbol of anarchy. The *Times* followed up by accusing Hulet Wells of denouncing the American flag as a "dirty rag."⁴²

Later the stories were shown to be fabrications. Wells believed that Colonel Blethen himself had stage-managed the flag-desecration incident to inflame public opinion against radicals. "Can it be true," Wells asked, "that the editor of a big daily paper can stoop to the deliberate concoction of lies to destroy other men's reputations?" He answered his own rhetorical question: "Yes, they can and do. Many men who enter politics as reformers have learned that to their sorrow."⁴³

When the *Times* continued to print libelous stories about Wells and other socialists, Wells went to court. The presiding judge in the spring of 1913 was Colonel Blethen's friend, Judge John Humphries. The proceedings were so

⁴² "Flag Trampled as Band Plays Marseillaise," *Post-Intelligencer*, May 2, 1912, 1, 4. "Emblem of American Liberty Trampled in Street by Paraders" and "Denouncing Flag as Dirty Rag May Cost Wells Citizenship," *Seattle Times*, May 2, 1912, 1, 2. Wells, "I Wanted to Work," 138-143. Murray Morgan, *Skid Road* (1978), 183.

⁴³ Wells, "I Wanted to Work," 141. Col. Blethen must be understood in the context of his time and place. As Earl Pomeroy noted, "Far Western journalism was known rather for fervor and vehement partisanship.... Sometimes it seemed that most Far Western editors invited libel suits.... Scandalmongering and insults may have amused more than they deceived, for they became customary, almost automatic." Earl Pomeroy, *The Pacific Slope* (1965, 1973), 155.

blatantly biased in Blethen's favor that Wells wrote a satirical play, "The Colonel and His Friends," based on the trial transcript. In June the Socialists started rehearsing for a performance at the Moore Theatre on July 27. When Colonel Blethen heard about it, he was furious.⁴⁴

This ongoing feud played a part in the potlatch riot of 1913, in which Wells and his friends barely escaped from a mob. In 1911 the city's business community had initiated a summertime festival modeled loosely on the potlatch tradition of Pacific Northwest tribes. The celebration drew thousands of tourists for parades, pageantry, and a carnival atmosphere. The second annual potlatch, 1912, was even larger than the first.⁴⁵

By 1913, the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) had become highly visible. Carleton Parker, a University of Washington professor who studied transient workers in the early 19-teens, commented that, by 1913: "Where a group of hoboes sit around a fire under a railroad bridge, many of the group can sing IWW songs without the book. This was not so three years ago." The IWW had been founded in Chicago by Eugene Debs and "Big Bill" Haywood in 1905, a few months before Haywood's arrest in the Steunenberg case. An industrial union as opposed to a crafts union, it was open to all workers, regardless of skill or trade, but in the Pacific Northwest it appealed especially to seasonal workers in the logging camps and lumber mills.⁴⁶

The IWW was sometimes known as "the singing union," because

⁴⁴ Wells, "I Wanted to Work," 153-168.

⁴⁵ "Potlatch Will Break Record," *Seattle Times*, March 3, 1912, special section p.1. The 1912 potlatch took place July 15-20.

⁴⁶ Robert Tyler, *Rebels of the Woods: the I.W.W. in the Pacific Northwest* (1967), 5. Carleton Parker, *The Casual Laborer and Other Essays* (1920), 190. Parker (1879-1918) studied migrant workers in California and Washington in the nineteen-teens.

many Wobblies carried their copies of the "Little Red Songbook" from job to job. Many of their songs mocked conventional wisdom or satirized the disparity between the preachings of the work ethic and the realities of the economic order. An example may be found in the first verse of the IWW song, "Hallelujah, I'm a Bum":

"O, why don't you work
like other men do?"
"How in hell can I work
when there's no work to do?"⁴⁷

In Seattle, the IWW headquarters in the skid road area served a social function for the migrant laborers, as a club and reading room. It was located near a popular street corner for soapbox speakers, where large crowds gathered nightly.⁴⁸

Although the socialists and the IWW both advocated class struggle and a workers' revolution, they disagreed with each other on many other counts. The *Times* had called Hulet Wells an "IWW-red flag anarchist,"⁴⁹ although Wells was not a member of the IWW and had never advocated anarchy. Wells sympathized with "the men of the woods and mills," but, contrary to Colonel Blethen's allegations, he did not agree with their philosophy. "To connect me with the IWW was a joke to anyone who knew the facts," he said. "I had always opposed them on two counts: because they were a dual union, and because they scorned political action; and they in turn called me a labor faker."⁵⁰

⁴⁷ Song, "Hallelujah, I'm a Bum," to the Salvation Army tune, "Revive Us Again," adapted by Spokane IWW in 1908. *Songs of the Workers to Fan the Flames of Discontent*, Industrial Workers of the World (1976), 9. See also Franklin Folsom, *Impatient Armies of the Poor* (1991), 192. Hulet Wells quoted the verse in his Railbird column, *Vanguard*, December 1930.

⁴⁸ Wells, "I Wanted to Work," 169.

⁴⁹ Berner, *Seattle 1900-1920*, 154.

⁵⁰ Wells, "I Wanted to Work," 140.

Another difference was in the meaning ascribed to the word "revolution." IWW members often talked of seizing power by violent means, although it was mostly talk. To Wells, a riot was not a revolution. He advocated social change through democratic means. During the free speech fight of 1907, the authorities had justified their arrests of socialist speakers on the grounds of preventing a riot. Wells had written a commentary for *The Socialist*:

There is nothing more cowardly than mob violence; there is nothing more difficult to control.... The fact is that Seattle crowds have been already educated up to the necessity of preserving order. They...realize what Socialists continually warn them, that there is nothing that will injure Socialism so much as a display of disorder.

But the authorities who desire to injure Socialism realize that fact also. It will not be strange if their desire to see Socialists discredited by a riot will not lead them to encourage one.⁵¹

Six years later, it appeared that Wells' prediction would be borne out.

Seattle's third annual potlatch opened on Wednesday, July 16, 1913. The city's honored guest, Secretary of the Navy Josephus Daniels, was feted at a banquet at the posh Rainier Club. He then reviewed a parade of two thousand soldiers and sailors, plus another two thousand men from local fraternal orders. City fathers hoped Secretary Daniels would take a recommendation back to Congress to vote additional funds for the navy base at Bremerton, just across the sound from Seattle.⁵² Meanwhile, in another part of town, several men

⁵¹ Wells, "Danger of Riot," *The Socialist*, Sept. 2, 1907, 1.

⁵² "Secretary of Navy Reviews Military Parade" and "Visit of Secretary Daniels is of Vital Interest," *Seattle Times*, July 17, 1913, 1. Murray Morgan, *Skid Road* (1978), 182-190. Boswell and McConaghy, *Raise Hell and Sell Newspapers*, 217-224.

created a scuffle during a suffragist's soapbox speech.

The *Times* seized the opportunity to inflame public opinion against "reds," the IWW, and Mayor George Cotterill, who had incurred the ire of Colonel Blethen by defending freedom of speech for socialists, the IWW, and others whom the Colonel considered un-American. Although Secretary Daniels had given a stock patriotic speech at the banquet preceding the parade, the Friday afternoon *Times* carried the banner line, "Daniels Denounces Tolerance of Red Flag," implying that Daniels had specifically chastised the Seattle mayor. The soap box scuffle, through creative reporting, became a street fight in which a lawless mob of undesirables brutally attacked five patriotic sailors and soldiers. The front-page story began:

PRACTICALLY at the very moment a gang of red flag worshipers and anarchists were brutally beating two bluejackets and three soldiers who had dared protest against the insults heaped on the American flag at a soap box meeting on Washington Street last night, Secretary of the Navy Daniels, in the great banquet hall of the Rainier Club, cheered on by the wildly enthusiastic and patriotic Americans present, flayed as a type the mayor of any city who permits red flag demonstrations in the community of which he is the head.⁵³

The inflammatory story that afternoon was only the beginning. That evening, July 18, a mob of some two hundred sailors, soldiers, and potlatch revelers set out to prove their patriotism by avenging the alleged attack on the five servicemen. Two of the leaders were later identified as men from the *Times*' staff. They went first to the IWW headquarters in the skid road area, where they smashed a glass sign over the door. From there the mob wended its way a mile north to Fourth and Pike, where Millard Price's Red News Wagon had an advertisement for "The Colonel and His

⁵³ "Daniels Denounces Tolerance of Red Flag," *Seattle Times*, July 18, 1913, 1.

Friends." They smashed the wagon and scattered newspapers and pamphlets in the street. They went another few blocks to the Fifth Ward (Wells' ward) Socialist headquarters at Fifth and Virginia. The mob broke doors, windows, a piano, office equipment, and chairs. They threw books and broken chairs into the street.⁵⁴

Meanwhile, Hulet and Nesta Wells and several other Socialists were rehearsing his play, "The Colonel," in the basement of a building a block away, near the corner of Fourth and Pine. With them was Millard Price, owner of the Red News Wagon, playing the part of "Judge Humpty Dumpty." A messenger rushed in to tell them about the riot outside. Wells tried to persuade his friends to ignore the mob and go on with the show. "Happily," he recalled, "I was overruled." He added,

My wife and I had just reached the corner less than a block away, when, looking back, we saw a gang of men pouring down the steps to our basement. We had escaped by little more than a minute.⁵⁵

From the Fifth Ward headquarters the mob proceeded to the Fourth Ward (Edwin J. Brown's ward) headquarters at Seventh and Olive streets. Again they smashed doors and windows and threw furniture, books, a piano, and papers into the street. The mob, growing larger and more unruly as the night went on, mistook a gospel mission at Seventh and Union for a socialist hall. They kicked in the doors, but retreated as soon as they realized their mistake. They then returned to the IWW hall in the skid road area, where they not only smashed the doors, windows, and furniture, but threw everything movable

⁵⁴ Wells, "I Wanted to Work," 171-173. See also the *Seattle Times*, *Post-Intelligencer*, and *Seattle Star*, July 19, 1913, and days following. A fourth daily, the *Seattle Sun*, also covered the story. The *Sun* was a newcomer, having started a few months earlier. It lasted only a couple of years. Harvey O'Connor, *Revolution in Seattle* (1964), 22-26.

⁵⁵ Wells, "I Wanted to Work," 171-173.

into a large pile on the street. Someone produced a match, so they set the pile of debris on fire. With excitement heating up to a feverish pitch, they marched back to the two socialist headquarters and set fire to the other piles of broken furniture and books in the streets. Late that night the mob disbanded.⁵⁶

The next day Mayor Cotterill, furious, took charge of the police, closed the saloons, and held up the distribution of the *Saturday Times*. Colonel Blethen, with the aid of his friend Judge Humphries, obtained a restraining order to prevent the mayor from preventing distribution. The *Times* was delayed by only a few hours; the Saturday edition appeared on the streets a little after three o'clock that afternoon. In typical Blethen hyperbole, it announced triumphantly:

Anarchy, the grizzly hydra-headed serpent which Seattle has been forced to nourish in its midst...was plucked from the city and wiped out in a blaze of patriotism last night."⁵⁷

Despite the exuberance of the *Times*, other newspapers treated the event as a matter of civic embarrassment, to be forgotten as quickly as possible. The *Post-Intelligencer* on Monday urged "forgiveness and forgetfulness." It commented, "The severest rebuke and the most effective is to consider the incident unworthy of further notice. So let us end the matter now once and for all."⁵⁸

While the city returned to business as usual, the Socialists and Wobblies set about to repair their damaged halls. In the wake of the riot, the Moore Theater cancelled the scheduled production of Wells' play. A week after the

⁵⁶ O'Connor, *Revolution in Seattle*, 22-23.

⁵⁷ "Anarchy in Seattle Stamped Out," *Seattle Times*, July 19, 1913, 2. Wells, "I Wanted to Work," 175.

⁵⁸ "Mayor Cotterill's Mistake," *Post-Intelligencer*, July 21, 1913, 6.

riot, Judge Humphries issued an injunction to prevent Millard Price and other Socialists from speaking in the vicinity of Fourth and Pike, where Price's Red News Wagon had been parked. The Socialists went to court to protest the injunction, but, since Judge Humphries was presiding, they lost. A month later, August 25, the Socialists held a public meeting outside city hall to protest Humphries' action. Humphries cited the speakers for contempt of court. In protest, the Fifth Ward local sent the court a resolution containing the signatures of ninety-nine Socialists who, in effect, dared the judge to hold them, too, in contempt. Judge Humphries obliged them by issuing warrants for their arrest. This action inspired more Socialists and their sympathizers to sign the same resolution. In the next few weeks, 545 citizens declared their willingness to be held in contempt. The trials started in October. Judge Humphries fined defense attorneys Glenn Hoover and Hulet Wells \$100 each and then disbarred them from practicing law. He then fined ninety-seven defendants for contempt and, in addition, sentenced several men to six months in jail for expressing disrespect. He gave one man eleven months for stating out loud in the courtroom that the judge was "making an ass of himself." The ensuing public outcry over the travesty of justice attracted the attention of state officials. After Governor Ernest Lister started for Seattle to investigate the situation, Judge Humphries released the prisoners and rescinded the injunction.⁵⁹

Hotel de Gink

In the fall of 1913, while the Socialists were tangling

⁵⁹ Millard Price, "The Seattle Injunction and Contempt of Court Cases," "Socialist Party (U.S.) Papers 1912-1930," microfilm, U. of Washington. O'Connor, *Revolution in Seattle*, 24-26.

with Judge Humphries, Seattle social service agencies renewed their annual efforts to provide for the unemployed men who drifted into the city from the hinterlands. In addition to the Salvation Army, the Volunteers of America, and the various church-sponsored charities, a new privately-sponsored organization called the Brotherhood League offered sleeping quarters for 150 men. Those who could afford a dime could sleep on a cot upstairs in a large, well-ventilated room. Those unable to pay slept on the floor in a poorly ventilated room downstairs. A citizens' committee reported: "We saw a number of men wrapping their feet and legs in newspapers, presumably to keep warm."⁶⁰

That winter a number of unemployed men, dissatisfied with their charitable options, organized their own self-help institution. Using the slang term for "man" or "guy," they christened it the "Hotel de Gink." Like the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), they had formed their own union, the International Itinerant Workers' Union (IIW), but with a difference: instead of defiance, they stressed their loyalty to American principles. A reporter noted: "No incendiary or revolutionary propoganda is tolerated." An American flag decorated the hotel, located in a building formerly used by Providence Hospital. The Seattle Central Labor Council donated the \$55-a-month rent. Otherwise, the men themselves supported the institution. Each member who got a job paid some of his earnings back to the hotel. Under the management of Henry Pauly, chairman of IIW Local 22, the Hotel de Gink that winter provided food and lodging for more than two thousand men, as many as five hundred at a time. Cleanliness and discipline were strictly enforced by the men themselves. As the reporter noted, "Co-operation and self-help are the

⁶⁰ "Report of Seattle Citizens' Committee on Unemployment," *Welfare-The Journal of Municipal and Social Progress*, May 1914, 22.

basic principles of the institution."⁶¹

Two decades later, cooperation and self-help would again be the themes of an organization of the unemployed. In both cases, the emphasis was on cooperation for the common good rather than competition for individual gain. The concept of self-help might better be described as "mutual self-help" or "cooperative self-help"; it referred to a willingness to put forth one's own effort to secure the necessities of life for oneself and one's neighbors instead of depending on charity or handouts.

Although Hulet Wells was not himself involved in the Hotel de Gink, he had an opportunity, as a member of the Central Labor Council, to observe its operation. The Hotel de Gink offered an example of one way in which jobless men with little money might pool their resources to help themselves.

Seattle Central Labor Council

As a member of the electrical workers' union at City Light, Wells became a delegate to the Central Labor Council. In August, 1915, he was elected to a year's term as president. The Council, formed at the turn of the century, was a coordinating body for all of the labor organizations in the city. By 1915, most Seattle labor unions had a conservative orientation, reflecting the policies of their national body,

⁶¹ "Report of Seattle Citizens' Committee" and "A Letter from the Manager of Seattle Hotel de Gink," *Welfare-The Journal of Municipal and Social Progress*, May 1914, 22-23. William McKibben, "Henry Pauly, Hobo and Captain of Industry," *Ibid.*, August 1914, 10-11. During the winter of 1914-1915 the name was changed to Hotel Liberty. See correspondence from J.B. Powles to Griffiths, Nov.20, 1914 and Feb.18, 1915, and from Unemployed League of Seattle to Griffiths, Nov.27, 1914, in Austin E. Griffiths papers, Manuscripts Division, University of Washington, Seattle. Similar Hotels de Gink were established in Portland, Tacoma, Boston, and New York. Leah Feder, *Unemployment Relief in Periods of Depression* (1936), 273. "Emergency Relief," *American Labor Legislation Review*, 5:2 (June 1915), 514-515.

the American Federation of Labor (A.F. OF L.). As craft unions, they were theoretically restricted to members of a particular trade, although Seattle unions often took on industrial characteristics, admitting non-craft workers as well. They were oriented not toward class conflict but toward cooperation with employers, on the basis that capital and labor needed each other. The Industrial Workers of the World was also represented in the Seattle Labor Council, but as a distinct minority. Wells presided at board meetings, while James A. ("Jimmy") Duncan, secretary and chief executive officer of the Council, supervised day-to-day activities. Wells described Duncan as "a fine intelligent progressive." Acknowledging the prevailing conservatism, Wells observed, "I became a radical president of a body which, during my term of office, always had a conservative majority."⁶²

Upon Wells' election, the *Star's* labor reporter noted that Wells had a reputation for working smoothly with men of varying political viewpoints: "Wells is radical, but not intolerant." He asked Wells how he justified working with his more conservative associates. "I will lock arms," he says, "with anybody who is going my way--even though I know we must separate before I reach the end of my journey."⁶³

While continuing to work for City Light and represent his union at the Central Labor Council, Wells pursued his libel case against the *Times*. In the meantime, Colonel Alden Blethen died in 1915. One of his sons, Colonel C.B. Blethen, became head of the *Times*. Although the *Times'* attorneys used one legal tactic after another to delay the trial, the case finally went before a judge and jury in 1916. Wells was

⁶² Wells, "I Wanted to Work," 181.

⁶³ Fred Boalt, "Hulet Wells Knocks All Nice Theories of Authors Galley West," *Seattle Star*, Aug.13, 1915, 6.

awarded damages of \$500. He considered it "a moral victory," unique in the annals of history. "For," he said, "I doubt if any other socialist anywhere ever won a libel suit against a big daily newspaper."⁶⁴

* * * * *

Thus, Wells' experiences during his years at City Light served for his further education in the theory and practice of social organization. His job confirmed his belief in public ownership as a means to better jobs and service. His hopes were reinforced by the wave of reformist agitation that crested around 1912, involving leaders in religion, business, and politics, as well as labor. He gained further experience in politics by running for office. As editor of a monthly newspaper, he learned to use the press; as the target of a publisher's vindictiveness, he learned how the press could be used against him. He experienced the dark side of politics in the *Times* campaign against "reds." The potlatch riot confirmed his earlier prediction that men in positions of power might provoke a riot themselves. It gave him a taste of the fearsomeness of a mob on a rampage, thereby reinforcing his aversion to violence. It deepened his conviction that a workers' revolution should be accomplished by democratic means, not by physical force. His stint as president of the Labor Council gave him a more congenial part to play in city politics.

But the feud with the *Times* was not yet over. Within the next three years, even without concocting any more patently libelous stories, the *Times* would fan the flames of public opinion against anyone suspected of disloyalty and would name one Hulet Wells in particular.

⁶⁴ Wells, "I Wanted to Work," 177-179.

Chapter IV World War and General Strike, 1917-1919

In the period from 1917 to 1919, the city of Seattle experienced a dramatic boom and bust due to wartime spending followed by its abrupt withdrawal. Seattle labor enjoyed a heady surge of strength, tried a bold experiment in a general strike, and suffered a severe setback in the aftermath. Hulet Wells, still intimately involved in labor's cause, gained further experience in grass-roots organizing, the power of the press, court proceedings, and mob psychology.

When England, France, and Germany went to war in August, 1914, most people thought it would be a short-lived affair. Instead, it dragged on for the next four years. As the warring nations used up their own resources, they turned to the United States as a provider of foodstuffs and military supplies. The European conflict induced a period of expansion in the American economy and particularly in the Seattle economy, as foreign investments, private investments, and federal dollars flowed into the private sector for shipbuilding and other industries.¹

At first, public opinion in America favored neutrality, keeping the United States out of the European conflict. In the summer of 1916, the federal government sponsored "Preparedness Day" events across the nation, on the grounds that a show of strength on the part of the United States would persuade European combatants to lay down their arms. Militant pacifists denounced Preparedness Day as a sham and a pretext to draw the United States into the war. In San Francisco, a bomb went off in the middle of a Preparedness

¹ Ronald Schaffer, *America in the Great War: The Rise of the War Welfare State* (1991), 32-33, 58-63. Robert Friedheim, *The Seattle General Strike* (1964), 24, 55-58.

Day parade, killing ten people and setting off a wave of public hysteria against radicals, labor unionists, and anarchists. Labor activists Tom Mooney and Warren Billings were tried on flimsy evidence, convicted, and sent to prison, becoming martyrs to labor's cause.² Tension on the home front continued to escalate throughout the fall, as the war issue dominated the presidential campaign.

The Industrial Workers of the World (IWW)

In western Washington, labor struggles contributed to the general level of tension, as low-paid wage workers began to exhibit a spirit of militancy. While lumber barons ardently opposed unionization, the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) had gained considerable strength among seasonal and itinerant workers. Strikes in the woods and lumber mills broke out frequently. Observing one of the strikes in 1917, Carleton Parker, an economics professor at the University of Washington, estimated IWW membership in the state as "not over 3,000," but, he said, their influence extended far beyond their official membership. He estimated that "the number of those active in the strike and joining in support of the I.W.W. numbered approximately 7,000."³

Parker described the IWW member as "consistently of one type, and one which has had a uniform economic experience." The typical member was an unmarried male, without ties to

² Sixteen years later another man confessed to having unwittingly planted the bomb on July 22, 1916. Two strangers--neither one resembling Mooney or Billings--had offered him \$5 to deliver a large black suitcase to San Francisco. He had no idea of the contents until after the explosion. "Man Says He Placed Bomb Used in S.F. Parade Blast," *Post-Intelligencer*, Sept. 28, 1932, 1.

³ Carleton Parker, *The Casual Laborer and Other Essays* (1920), 114. Parker died unexpectedly in 1918; his essays were published posthumously by his wife. Parker, an economist with a sociological bent, studied migratory labor extensively in the nineteen-teens.

family or community. He seldom lived in one place long enough to be eligible to vote. He drifted from job to job, working for low wages under tedious and often hazardous conditions, with no job security and no hope of improvement.⁴

IWW songs satirized both traditional religion and the capitalist system. Parker observed the psychological importance of these songs of alienation:

In the dignifying of vagabondage through their crude, but virile, song and verse, in the bitter vilification of the jail turnkey and county sheriff, in their condemnation of the church and its formal social work, they find the vindication of their hobo status which they desire.⁵

IWW rhetoric capitalized on the worker's sense of alienation. With regard to the European conflict and America's pending entry into it, IWW speakers urged resistance, declaring that there was "only one war, and that the class war between the 'master class' and the 'slaves'." One IWW leader explained to Parker why the IWW took an anti-patriotic stance:

If every person who represented law and order and the nation beat you up, railroaded you to jail, and the good Christian people cheered and told them to go to it, how in hell do you expect a man to be patriotic?⁶

In the lumber mill town of Everett some thirty miles north of Seattle, conflicts over unionization and freedom of speech became more incendiary than ever when intermingled with the question of support for the war. On Sunday, November 5, 1916, two hundred Wobblies (as IWW members called themselves)

⁴ *Ibid.*, 113-114. Parker also commented on nomenclature: "They are migratory workers currently called hobo labor. The terms 'hobo miner,' 'hobo lumberjack,' 'the blanket stiff' are familiar and necessary in accurate description of Western labor conditions."

⁵ "The Hop Fields Report," in Parker, *The Casual Laborer*, 190 ff.

⁶ Parker, *The Casual Laborer*, 101-102.

took the steamship *Verona* from Seattle to Everett. Sheriff's deputies, well-armed, waited for them on the dock. Shots were fired, killing five Wobblies and two deputies. The event became known as "the Everett massacre." Seventy-four Wobblies were arrested and taken back to Seattle for trial. They were defended by attorney George Vanderveer, later known as "counsel for the damned," who within the next few months would defend Hulet Wells against a charge of sedition. On May 5, 1917, the IWW defendants were acquitted.⁷

On Tuesday, November 7, incumbent President Woodrow Wilson was elected to a second term of office on the slogan, "He kept us out of war." Yet the federal government was gearing up, not only on the industrial front but also on the public relations front with a patriotic propaganda campaign.⁸ Wilson was inaugurated on March 4, 1917. A month later, America went to war.

Seattle had had a small wooden boat-building industry for many years, but until 1914, it had only one yard for building steel ships. By the fall of 1917, it had four steel yards, along with twelve yards for building wooden steamships. The steel yards' total workforce had risen to fifteen thousand. Starting in 1916, the Skinner and Eddy Corporation built ten new shipways for large steel-hulled vessels, quickly becoming the largest of Seattle's shipyards. As Skinner and Eddy expanded its plant and its workforce, so did other

⁷ Norman Clark, *Mill Town* (1982), 200-214. Clark, "Everett, 1916, and After," in Carlos Schwantes, ed., *Experiences in a Promised Land* (1986), 228-241. Harvey O'Connor, *Revolution in Seattle* (1964), 29-57. Lowell Hawley, *Counsel for the Damned: a Biography of George Francis Vanderveer* (1953), 182-209. Both Vanderveer and Clarence Darrow earned reputations as defenders of the underdog, the socially disreputable, the "damned." See Arthur Weinberg, ed., *Attorney for the Damned* (1957), a selection of Darrow's speeches and closing arguments. Weinberg, pp.xv, 183n, attributes the phrase "attorney for the damned" to Lincoln Steffans, who reviewed Darrow's autobiography, *The Story of My Life*, in 1932.

⁸ Schaffer, *America in the Great War*, 4-12.

shipbuilders. Reflecting a ripple effect, so did the manufacturing shops that supplied the shipyards, plus the groceries, retail stores, and other services that supplied the workers. Lured by the promise of good jobs and good pay, workers started pouring into the city. Union membership grew from 15,000 in 1915 to 40,000 in 1917. Both business and labor welcomed a new boom.⁹

Draft Protest, 1917

After the United States declared war on April 6, 1917, Congress opened debate on a national conscription act. The United States had not had a military draft since the Civil War. The prospect aroused heated controversy.¹⁰

Seattle pacifists had earlier mobilized to oppose the war. Led by Anna Louise Strong, a member of the school board, and her father, Dr. Sidney Strong, minister of the Congregational Church, they had organized a branch of the American Union Against Militarism. When the bill to create a military draft was introduced into Congress, they changed the name to the Seattle Branch of the No Conscription League.¹¹

Early in May, two weeks before Congress passed the conscription act on May 17, the League voted to distribute a one-page circular urging citizens to resist the draft. This circular bore the heading "No Conscription! No Involuntary

⁹ William Williams, "Accommodating American Shipyard Workers 1917-1918," *Pacific Northwest Quarterly*, April 1993, 51-59. Friedheim, *Seattle General Strike*, 24-25.

¹⁰ Schaffer, *America in the Great War*, 175-182. The 1917 conscription act applied to men from age 21 to 31. Later it was expanded to include men from age 18 to 45.

¹¹ Hulet Wells, "I Wanted to Work," 186-192. Scott Roley, "Hulet Wells and the Specter of Revolution," master's thesis, Western Washington University (1988), 1-35. Roley examines the war-time climate and Wells' subsequent trial in Seattle, 1917-1919. He argues that no revolutionary plot existed, but that social tensions, exacerbated by the propaganda campaign, created a climate in which class war plots became believable.

Servitude! No Slavery!" It urged men, "Resist! Refuse! . . . Better to be imprisoned than to renounce your freedom of conscience." Although Hulet Wells had not written the circular himself, he delivered the text to the printer and afterwards took the printed copies to a designated location for bundling and distribution.¹²

Sedition Trial

As soon as the circulars started appearing around the city, the *Times* in a banner headline proclaimed, "Treason Seen in Attack on Conscription Spread Secretly Over Seattle," while the *Seattle Star* hurled charges of "sedition" at the protesters. Even though the No Conscription League had been well within its rights in expressing its opposition before the draft law was passed, an inflamed public opinion demanded a target for its wrath. Since most of the members of the No Conscription League belonged to mainstream organizations, they were not subjected to scrutiny. The public wrath settled upon two well-known socialists, Hulet Wells and Sam Sadler, and two Russian-born men--"aliens"--who had simply attended one of the meetings, the brothers Joe and Morris Pass. No law had been broken, but, Wells explained,

In a time of public hysteria it is always possible for a prosecutor to put enough hocus-pocus into an indictment to get the case before a jury, and Federal juries in such cases are not instruments for upholding civil rights."¹³

Soon after charges were filed, the three mainstream

¹² Wells, "I Wanted to Work," 190. Wells identified the author of the circular as Bruce Rogers, a Spanish-American War veteran. Ten thousand copies of the circular were printed. Roley, "Hulet Wells and the Specter of Revolution," 111. A copy of the No Conscription circular is on file in U.S. v. Hulet Wells et al., Case File 3397, U.S. District Court Criminal Docket, National Archives, Pacific Northwest Region.

¹³ Wells, "I Wanted to Work," 192.

newspapers, the *Times*, *Star*, and *Post-Intelligencer*, urged that Wells be dismissed from his job at City Light. Wells' superintendent, J.D. Ross, tried to protect him by giving him a 30-day suspension followed by reinstatement pending court action. The mayor, Hiram Gill, also came to Wells' defense, but the public pressure was too much. The *Times* in scathing editorials urged City Light to fire Wells, while the *Star* and *Post-Intelligencer* followed suit, clamoring for his removal. To keep City Light from becoming a target itself, Ross had to let Wells go.¹⁴

Once again, Wells was out of a job. His situation was worse than it had been when he had been dismissed from the post office in 1909. Ruefully, he recalled his dilemma:

Now I was seven years older than I was in those other fear-ridden days when I tramped the streets of the unfriendly city. Now I had a little boy as well as a wife to care for.

The skill gained in the seven years would buy me nothing now. I had acquired the necessary knowledge to pass creditably four civil service examinations, teaching, law, postal service, lighting service; and neither that knowledge nor the experience of fifteen years could get me the chance to earn an hour's pay.

All I had was my two hands, a blasted reputation, and a heavily mortgaged home.¹⁵

Wells struggled through the summer with a few odd jobs. The first criminal trial began on September 13, 1917, and lasted eight days. Wells, Sadler, and two Pass brothers were charged with sedition and brought before the Western District Court of Washington, Judge Jeremiah Neterer presiding. The four defendants were represented by attorney George Vanderveer, who had successfully defended members of the IWW on several occasions. "I can see Van now as he prowled the courtroom with a panther-like grace," Wells later recalled.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 193-194.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, " 194-195.

"He was as great a labor defense lawyer as [Clarence] Darrow, if less famous." Wells' wife and mother were both in the courtroom. Anna Louise Strong was also there, reporting for the *Seattle Call*. Wells gave a closing address which moved courtroom spectators to tears and applause. "World peace can only come through the spread of internationalism," he said, "and the despised socialist and pacifist are working for that purpose. When that day comes, I want my boy to be able to say, 'In those grim times, my father was on the side of humanity, and was not afraid to stand for what he believed to be right, when all the world was mad.'"

In rebuttal, the prosecuting attorney referred again to the "No Conscription" circular and declared, "Wells has done everything his feeble body and mind could do to precipitate riot and murder." The result was a deadlocked jury.¹⁶

There was no conviction, but neither was there an acquittal. The federal government insisted on a new trial, assigning Special Assistant Attorney General Clarence Reames to prosecute the Wells case, along with other such cases in the Northwest. Vanderveer had gone to Chicago to defend a large group of IWW members who had been arrested *en masse* under the Espionage Act, so he was not available. Wells' new trial started on February 19, 1918, at a time when, as he observed, "American troops were being sent to the battle lines and the country was in a high pitch of excitement." After a short trial, the verdict came in, "Guilty." A month later Wells and his co-defendants were each sentenced to two

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 199-200. "Jury Disagrees in Conspiracy Case," *Seattle Call*, Sept. 21, 1917, 1. Hawley, in *Counsel for the Damned*, 59-60, describes Vanderveer's tactics and demeanor: "He built his cases methodically through the presentation of evidence.... During the course of a trial he would parade back and forth before the bench, hammering home his points one by one, and nodding with satisfaction toward the jury as each point was irrefutably made."

years in the federal penitentiary at McNeil Island.¹⁷

Wells' friends in the labor movement raised money to appeal his case to the Circuit Court of Appeals. By posting new bail, he was released from jail. It would be at least a year before he could expect a decision from the Circuit Court; in the meantime, he could look for work to support his family. Yet, despite the business boom in process, it was not a good time to be looking for work. Glowing advertisements of good jobs and high wages had lured far too many job-seekers to the region. The *Daily Call* just the month before had reported: "Over seven thousand men are here in Seattle vainly looking for work in the ship yards. . . . All of them are discussing and cussing the great reported 'shortage of labor!'"¹⁸

At length, through a complicated set of circumstances, Wells got a job in a rather unlikely location for a pacifist: the Skinner and Eddy shipyard. The irony of his situation did not escape him; nor did the irony of the contrast between the placid setting and the demonic activity on the waterfront. There, with a gorgeous view of the blue waters of the Sound and the snow-capped Olympic Mountains just across the way, men and machines worked at a furious pace, making instruments of war. "What a scene it was," said Wells:

---a combination of Dante, and Chaplin's "Modern Times," on a thirty-acre canvas. It was a wilderness of strange machines, whirling belts and belching fires. Ten thousand men went through their motions wordlessly, for they had to shout to be heard above the din.¹⁹

¹⁷ Wells, "I Wanted to Work," 202-204. Hawley, *Counsel for the Damned*, 228 ff. "Wells Held Guilty," *Post-Intelligencer*, Feb.22, 1918, 1, 7. "Two Year Sentence for Wells," *Ibid.*, March 19, 1918, 1. "Wells, Sadler, Pass Bros. Found Guilty," *Seattle Daily Call*, Feb.22, 1918, 1.

¹⁸ "7,000 Men Flood Seattle's Labor Market Looking For Work," *Seattle Daily Call*, Jan.18, 1918, 5.

¹⁹ Wells, "I Wanted to Work," 204. Harvey O'Connor, *Revolution in Seattle* (1964) gave another version of the quotation, p.109: "It was

Wells started out as a member of the boilermakers' union, the largest union on the docks, but switched to the steam and operating engineers' union when he was promoted from bolting steel plates together to oiling the bearings of a vast assemblage of machinery.²⁰

The United States' involvement in the Great War lasted only a year and a half. The warring nations signed an armistice on November 11, 1918. The federal government, through its arms contracts, had poured millions of dollars into the Seattle economy during that period. Abruptly after the Armistice, it began to cancel its orders for ships and supplies. As a result, shipyards announced pay cuts and started cutting back their workforces.

Seattle General Strike, 1919

On January 21, 1919, the shipyard workers went out on strike. Hulet Wells went with them. Soon he would become involved in organizing a general strike. Several of his compatriots in the general strike would later play a part in the Seattle Labor College and the Unemployed Citizens' League. Some, like Phil Pearl of the barbers' union, would stay in Seattle and take positions in League leadership. Others, like Harvey O'Connor, would go back East to continue their activism. Yet another, Anna Louise Strong, would go to Russia. Both O'Connor and Strong would maintain their ties with Seattle through regular reports in the Labor College newspaper, the *Vanguard*. These ties would give the

Dante's *Inferno* and Chaplin's *Modern Times*, all in one." Dante, a fourteenth century Italian, wrote *The Divine Comedy*, in which part I, *The Inferno*, describes a journey through hell. Charlie Chaplin was a well-known comic actor of the 1920s and 1930s. In the movie *Modern Times* (1936) he satirized mass production, unemployment, and other social problems.

²⁰ Wells, "I Wanted to Work," 206.

Unemployed Citizens' League national and international connections from its inception.

By the time of the shipyard strike in 1919, organized labor in Seattle had undergone an enormous growth. Seattle labor in 1915 had 15,000 union members. By 1917, union membership had more than doubled, to 40,000 members. By 1918 there were 60,000 members in 110 locals, nearly all affiliated with the Seattle Central Labor Council.²¹

Seattle hoped that the wartime boom would be continued with the conversion of the shipyards to serve peacetime commerce. The city was proud of the large number of ships it had produced on short notice.²² On at least two occasions, shipyard unions had threatened to strike but had been dissuaded by an appeal to patriotism. After the signing of the armistice, the unions believed they were entitled to negotiate to keep their wage gains for higher paid workers, improve wages at lower levels, and obtain better working conditions for all. Furthermore, since labor had just entered a period of heady growth, it would not take cuts in pay or manpower lightly. At the end of the war, Seattle was in a radical mood.

However, as Hulet Wells observed, "The radical labor sentiment which existed in Seattle at the close of the war was not typical of the country as a whole."²³ Contrary to the expectations of Seattle labor, the federal government would not respond as if it needed to take labor seriously, and the

²¹ Friedheim, *Seattle General Strike*, 24-25. The *Seattle Union Record* regularly reminded its readers of the spectacular growth in employment, displaying the following figures at the top of its "Industrial Seattle" page: "Seattle Union Men, 1908--15,000; 1918--65,000. Seattle Pay Roll, 1914---\$10,000,000.00; 1918--\$125,000,000.00." See, for example, *Union Record*, Jan.29, 1919, 7.

²² "Seattle Gets Prominent Place in History of War," *Seattle Times*, March 2, 1919, 26.

²³ Wells, "I Wanted to Work," 212.

general strike fervor which spread through the city like a flash fire would fail to spread beyond Seattle.

In January 1919, Seattle labor was ready to try something new, spurred on by militants on the far left. Wells recalled, "The communists and the I.W.W. hated each other bitterly, but they both preached "mass action" and almost reverently proclaimed the general strike as labor strategy supreme."²⁴

During the war the Metal Trades Council, the largest component of the Central Labor Council, had negotiated with the shipyards for its unions as a unit. Under wartime regulations, the Metal Trades Council could not negotiate directly with shipyard owners but had to go through a federal agency, the Emergency Fleet Corporation, headed by Charles Piez. Since Piez controlled the steel allotments to the shipbuilding industry, he had strong leverage with the shipyard owners. One of his main objectives was to keep wages down. To that end, it was in his interest to keep employers from negotiating directly with their employees, but he promised the unions that they would be free to negotiate directly with employers when the war ended.²⁵

Within a month after the armistice, an overwhelming majority of metal-trades workers voted to give their unions strike authority. In January the Metal Trades Council, the workers' organization, opened negotiations with the Metal Trades Association, the employers' organization. The employers agreed to wage increases for the higher-paid workers but not the lower-paid ones. The Council held out for raises for the lower-paid workers. A mis-directed telegram changed the course of events. The telegram was

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 214.

²⁵ Friedheim, *Seattle General Strike*, 59, 67.

addressed to the Metal Trades Association. It was delivered--whether by accident or on purpose, no one would say--to the Metal Trades Council. The intercepted telegram contained a confidential warning from Charles Piez to the employers. Piez told the employers that if they negotiated with the union, he would stop their steel allotments. The telegram enraged Seattle workers; they charged that the government had betrayed them.²⁶

Hulet Wells, as a shipyard worker and loyal union member, walked out with his fellow workers on January 21. The next day, the Central Labor Council held its regular meeting. Passions ran high. A. E. Miller, chairman of the conference committee of the Metal Trades Council, proposed a general strike to show labor solidarity. Amidst frequent cheers, Wells spoke in support of Miller's motion to poll the membership. "Seattle is one place where a universal strike can be pulled off with success." he said. "I am confident that the shipyard workers could win alone. . . . But if we win it with a universal strike, every union in the city will get the benefit of the victory."²⁷

Ironically, the top leadership of the Central Labor Council was out of town that day, January 22, when the forces to call a general strike were set in motion. Twenty-five Labor Council leaders had gone to an International Workers' Defense League conference in Chicago to defend Tom Mooney, accused of planting the San Francisco Preparedness Day bomb in 1916. One of the items on the agenda was a resolution calling for a nationwide general strike on the Fourth of July to secure "real and substantial justice" in the case. The sponsors of

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 70. Anna Louise Strong, *I Change Worlds: The Remaking of an American* (1937), 75.

²⁷ "General Strike to be Voted Upon by Unions," *Seattle Union Record*, Jan. 23, 1919, 1.

the resolution cautioned that a massive educational effort would be needed,

in order that the great body of citizens of America be in sympathy and understanding with the labor movement in its purpose to place the Mooney case not as an issue of class war particularly, but as an issue of the broad fundamentals of human rights and liberty.

The sponsors further warned that substantial preparation would be needed, and that "no sporadic strike, not properly organized, will be of value." After heated debate, the Conference voted to poll its members across the nation for strike authorization.²⁸

Anna Louise Strong, a labor journalist who accompanied the Seattle labor leaders, described their surprise and dismay upon learning of the Seattle vote in their absence:

They discussed it on the train on the way back to Seattle. Ten days earlier they had left an energetic, progressive but properly constitutional labor movement. To what were they returning?²⁹

If the labor leaders had been in town, they probably would have tried to stop the strike, because they had much to lose by hasty action. The Seattle general strike had taken form too quickly, with little time to prepare either the union membership or the general public. It was just what the Workers' Defense League had warned against, a "sporadic strike, not properly organized." Moreover, the national leaders of most of Seattle's local AFL unions opposed the Seattle strike. Some of them threatened to revoke the charters of locals who went along with it. But this was a rank-and-file movement. It was not to be stopped. In the

²⁸ E.B. Ault, "Not Time to Strike," *Seattle Union Record*, Jan.28, 1919, 7.

²⁹ Friedheim, *Seattle General Strike*, 81-82. Strong, *I Change Worlds*, 72-73.

next two weeks, support for the general strike snowballed, as local after local reported back in favor of walking out. Despite its misgivings, the Labor Council leadership had little choice but to go along.³⁰

The mainstream press covered the impending strike with a mixture of fascination and alarm. The *Times* injected a little humor into its coverage in its headline of Saturday, February 1: "Plans Afoot to Prevent Walkout." On Sunday, a full-page spread from the Conference Committee on National Preparedness asked workers, "How Long Can You Afford to Be Idle?" On Tuesday, the *Seattle Star* urged, "STOP BEFORE IT'S TOO LATE," and the *Times* the following day repeated the *Star's* message.³¹

On Sunday, February 2, the Central Labor Council held an all-day meeting, attended by some 300 delegates from 110 of the 120 unions affiliated with it. The delegates voted unanimously to join in a general strike. Unless the federal government changed its stand toward the shipyard workers, there would be no turning back. Since a committee of 300 was unwieldy, a committee of fifteen was appointed to plan the details. In the next few days, the executive committee screened requests for various essential services, set up milk depots, organized feeding stations, handled public relations, and organized strike patrols to keep order.³²

³⁰ Strong, *I Change Worlds*, 72. "Favor Having Great Strike," *Seattle Union Record*, Jan.24, 1919, 1. "Attempt to Frighten Strikers Peters Out" and "Workers Are Not Getting Rich," *Union Record*, Jan.25, 1919, 1. "Mass Meeting Endorses Big Strike," *Union Record*, Jan.27, 1919, 1. "Wives of Men Asked to Help," *Union Record*, Jan.29, 1919, 4. "Plans Complete for the General Strike," *Union Record*, Jan.30, 1919, 1. "More Unions Favor Strike!" *Union Record*, Jan.31, 1919, 1. Jeremy Brecher, *Strike!* (1972), 104-114. Brecher explores mass strikes under various conditions, emphasizing the rank-and-file.

³¹ *Seattle Times*, Feb.1, 1919, 1; Feb.2, 16; *Seattle Star*, Feb.4, and *Seattle Times*, Feb.5, 10.

³² Friedheim, *Seattle General Strike*, 97-99. "How Decision to Call Big

Hulet Wells was elected to the general strike committee as a member of Electrical Workers' Union No. 77. That union's business agent, Leon Green, described by Wells as "a smooth talker with plenty of self-confidence," created an extra element of tension between the strikers and the city's elected officials by threatening to shut down all of the city's electricity, with no exemption for either hospitals or the cold storage facilities at the port. Wells expressed his disapproval of Green's tactics:

I do not think it would have been wise to shut off the city's electric power.... To arouse public anger by making threats that he had no power to enforce meant that Green was making a stupid nuisance of himself.³³

This may have been Wells' first personal encounter with communist tactics. Although the American Communist Party had not yet been organized, it was suspected that Green was, at the very least, an "incipient Communist." Following his mysterious disappearance at the end of the strike, the *Times* identified him as a Russian whose real name was Leon Butouetsky.³⁴

On Tuesday, February 4, the final edition of the *Seattle Union Record* carried a front-page editorial under the heading, "ON THURSDAY AT 10 A.M." The editorial, written in a spirit of enthusiastic idealism, announced:

Strike Was Reached," *Seattle Times*, Feb.3, 1919, 2.

³³ "Electrical Workers of City Called," *Seattle Union Record*, Feb. 5, 1919, 1. Wells, "I Wanted to Work," 216-217. Friedheim, *Seattle General Strike*, 116-120, 150-151.

³⁴ Friedheim, *Seattle General Strike*, 45. Friedheim states, "the Communist party of the United States and its rival splinter, the Communist Labor party, were not organized until the summer after the general strike (August-September, 1919)." He uses the term, "incipient Communists." "Plot to Take Green's Life Called Myth," *Seattle Times*, Feb.13, 1919, 1.

We are undertaking the most tremendous move ever made by LABOR in this country, a move which will lead--NO ONE KNOWS WHERE!

.....

LABOR WILL FEED THE PEOPLE.

.....

Labor will not only SHUT DOWN the industries, but Labor Will REOPEN, under the management of the appropriate trades, such activities are needed to preserve public health and public peace....

And that is why we say that we are starting on a road that leads--NO ONE KNOWS WHERE!³⁵

The intention of the editorial, said its author, Anna Louise Strong, was to appeal "to the faith of the pioneer in inevitable progress," to stir up "the passion of the march to the undiscovered West." The actual effect, given the post-war passions of the local populace, was to stir up fears of impending chaos. The mainstream newspapers seized upon the editorial to warn their readers that a general strike would lead to Bolshevism, revolution, and red-flag anarchy.³⁶

While the strike committee made its preparations, the mayor and city fathers sought to prevent the strike and, barring that, to provide additional security. Mayor Ole Hanson deputized 600 extra police officers. Troops from Camp Lewis were stationed at various locations around the city.³⁷

At 10 o'clock on Thursday morning, February 6, a whistle blew two long blasts, and Seattle workers all around the city set down their tools and walked off their jobs. The effect was dramatic. The most noticeable thing was the sudden quiet. As one observer said, "Nothing moved but the tide."³⁸

³⁵ "On Thursday at 10 a.m." *Union Record*, Feb.4, 1919, Final Edition, 1. Friedheim, *Seattle General Strike*, 110-112. Friedheim reprints the entire editorial and analyzes its effect. Jeremy Brecher, *Strike!*, 109-110, reprints the editorial without comment.

³⁶ Strong, *I Change Worlds*, 79.

³⁷ Friedheim, *Seattle General Strike*, 128-130.

³⁸ Rob Rosenthal, "Nothing Moved But the Tide," *Labor's Heritage*, Fall

On Friday, day two of the strike, Mayor Hanson met with a six-man delegation from the strike committee, including Hulet Wells, to attempt to negotiate an end to the strike. The trouble was that the committee just did not know how to call it off. Negotiations between the city and the strikers resumed that afternoon and again in the evening, to no avail.³⁹

On Saturday, day three, there were signs of cracks in labor's solidarity. Streetcar men went back to work. Some restaurants and retail stores opened for business. The newspapers, led by the *Seattle Star*, stepped up their inflammatory statements against the strikers, calling their leaders anti-American radicals and Wobblies, and advocating the use of force to stop the strike. Furthermore, the strike had become a serious embarrassment to the American Federation of Labor. Under pressure from within and without, the executive committee prepared a resolution to have the strike called off at midnight, but the debate on it lasted well past the proposed deadline, until 4 a.m.

Sunday, day four: many more of the rank-and-filers were beginning to have second thoughts about continuing the strike. In the Sunday papers, the *Star* and the *Times*, Mayor Hanson announced that the strike was "an attempted revolution." He compared it to the Bolshevik revolution in Russia and called upon labor unions to "cleanse themselves of their anarchistic element." Wells presented to the strike committee a face-saving plan to end the strike in an orderly manner. The majority of the committee greeted his proposal

1992, 34.

³⁹ Friedheim, *Seattle General Strike*, 133. Besides Wells, the committee of six included James A. Duncan, A.E. Miller, Martin Flyzik, John Von Carnop, and Jim Taylor.

with enthusiasm, but a small group of dissidents prevented its acceptance.⁴⁰

Monday, day five: more workers returned to work, including streetcar workers, teamsters, and barbers. The strike committee met again and voted to end the strike at noon on Tuesday. There was an attempt to get the workers who had gone back to work to walk out again, so that all the workers could go back to work together as an expression of labor solidarity, but it was only partly successful.

Tuesday, February 11, day six: by noon, all strikers except the shipyard workers were back at work. The shipyard unions were still on strike, but the general strike was over.⁴¹

The history committee of the general strike, headed by Anna Louise Strong, prepared a post-mortem in the hope that Seattle's experience would be useful to the labor movement across the country. The committee stated that, among the strikers, there were "many varied motives and reasons" for going out, but that "the vast majority were striking 'just for sympathy,' just as a show of solidarity." As a constructive result, strikers had experienced "the stimulus to cooperative enterprise and to the enthusiastic working-together of unions." They had learned much about the complexities of managing a large city. No definite end was gained, perhaps because "no end was stated quite definitely and simple enough." The committee advised the leaders of future strikes to "make your aim so clear and simple that everyone in the city will know the one man on whom to bring pressure, and what one act to demand of him."⁴²

⁴⁰ Friedheim, *Seattle General Strike*, 143. Wells, "I Wanted to Work," 220.

⁴¹ Friedheim, *Seattle General Strike*, 123-145.

⁴² Seattle General Strike Committee, *The Seattle General Strike* (1919),

What did Hulet Wells learn from the strike? At a later date with the benefit of hindsight, Wells tempered and rationalized his original enthusiasm. "I was curious to see whether the power of labor could suppress all industrial activity," he explained. It was an opportune time, since labor was strong and militant, workers had savings on which to draw, and, "being a strike against the government, it was political in its nature, and nothing but a spectacular demonstration would have any chance of success."⁴³

His assessment was that, as he had suspected, "general strikes for ordinary union purposes are not good strategy." He summed up his thoughts in his autobiography:

If I have any pride in the Seattle strike, it is that there was not a blow struck, not a drop of blood shed, not a piece of property injured. Otherwise there is no cause for either pride or shame, for the strike did no good and it did no harm. It was a labor experiment with a new weapon which failed to justify the boasts of its advocates.⁴⁴

In other words, it did not work.

Yet it was a bold experiment. It was an important event for Hulet Wells and for labor in general, as an attempt to test theory against reality with regard to the prospects for mass action. The Seattle general strike had lasted almost a week. It was conducted in an orderly manner, but it ended virtually of its own accord. Seattle workers were not ready for any revolution. Nonetheless, the strike badly frightened much of the populace and fed into the post-war "Red Scare" hysteria.

4, 6, 60-63.

⁴³ Wells, "I Wanted to Work," 215.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, " 213.

The supercharged emotional climate had cut both ways: it had mobilized the workers for the strike, but it had also galvanized the opposition. Mayor Ole Hanson made political capital out of his own role in putting down the forces of anarchy. Magnanimously, he urged Seattleites "to forgive the workers for their mistake in following false gods."⁴⁵ Quickly, very quickly, the strike was blamed not on the established labor leaders and not on the rank and file, but on aliens, anarchists, and the IWW. The mainstream papers took up the cry to rid the city of dangerous radicals. Before the week was out, a roundup had begun. That Thursday evening, thirty-nine alleged radicals were arrested, most of them from the IWW headquarters.⁴⁶

That same Thursday, just two days after the strike ended, the *Times* reminded its readers that one Hulet Wells, a strike organizer and convicted draft protester, was still at large. After hearing Wells tell the Central Labor Council that Leon Green had gone into hiding to avoid an assassination plot, a *Times* reporter contacted Capt. Thomas B. Foster, Secret Service agent responsible for Wells' conviction on charges of "seditious conspiracy." Foster alleged that Wells hated government officers, wanted to bring Federal authorities into disrepute, and was "an unqualified falsifier." Foster repeated his opinion that Wells had "printed and issued one of the most damnable and most treasonable circulars ever published in this or any other country." The *Times* then informed its readers:

Wells, after his conviction on the seditious conspiracy charge early last year, was sentenced by

⁴⁵ "Forgiveness for Workmen Sought; Mayor Hanson Asks Employers to Forget Deeds Brought About by Radicals; Praises Rank and File," *Seattle Times*, Feb.15, 1919, 3.

⁴⁶ "39 Jailed in War on Radicals," *Seattle Times*, Feb.14, 1919, 1. "53 Men Caught in Dagnet Set for Bolsheviki," *Seattle Times*, Feb.15, 1.

Judge Jeremiah Neterer in the United States District Court to two years in the penitentiary. He is now at liberty under bond, pending the determination of an appeal to the United States Circuit Court.⁴⁷

Wells was given no opportunity to respond. Given the emotional climate of the post-war, post-strike period, there was little he could do. The Circuit Court promptly set a new hearing date. In May the Court upheld the earlier conviction and set a date, June 5, for Wells to begin his sentence.

Federal Penitentiary

Before he left for prison, Wells' friends gave him a farewell banquet. On June 5, he kissed his wife and son goodbye. Accompanied by a U.S. marshal, he boarded a small boat for McNeil Island, the prison island in Puget Sound. Upon his arrival he was photographed and fingerprinted. Prisoner #3387 was 41 years old; height 5'7"; weight 138 lbs. Complexion, medium; eyes gray-brown; hair brown with gray. Occupation: farming, woodsman.⁴⁸

Wells was then placed in a cell with his fellow defendant Sam Sadler. Three months later Wells was put into solitary confinement in the "black hole" for refusing to submit to what he called "slave labor." His wrists were handcuffed to the bars of his darkened stone cell at the level of the top of his head. He remained in that position for eight hours a day, with only a little bread and water to eat. About two weeks later, the Seattle labor press got word of Wells'

⁴⁷ "Plot to Take Green's Life Called Myth; Charge Made by Hulet M. Wells Before Labor Council Declared False." *Seattle Times*, Feb.13, 1919, 1.

⁴⁸ U.S. v. Hulet Wells et al., case files 3671 and 3797, U.S. District Court Criminal Docket, National Archives, Pacific Northwest Region. Wells' photograph, prisoner #3387, is on file with his McNeil Island record, case file 3671. Only a portion of the record has survived; exhibits were destroyed per General Order in 1962.

treatment. The *Union Record* ran a front-page story with a drawing of Wells handcuffed to his cell. Under the glare of publicity, the warden relented, the manacles were removed, the food improved, and visitors were allowed in. The reprieve was temporary; when the excitement in the press abated, the warden again ordered Wells chained in the dark, on bread and water. On September 23, three physicians showed up at the prison. After examining Wells and finding that his weight had dropped to 131 pounds, they stated that his diet was insufficient. Threatened with a grand jury investigation, the warden restored Wells to an ordinary cell upstairs. Soon Wells was transferred to the penitentiary at Leavenworth, Kansas.⁴⁹

While Wells was in prison, post-war tensions continued to flare up in strikes, riots, and violence. On November 11, 1919, the first anniversary of the armistice, a group of war veterans in the American Legion clashed with a group of IWW members in Centralia, resulting in the deaths of four Legionnaires. Angry Legionnaires captured one of the Wobblies and lynched him; Wesley Everest became another martyr to labor's cause. This incident, the Centralia massacre, fed into a wave of political repression known as the "Red Scare" which was already sweeping the country. The forces of reaction and repression received an additional boost in the Pacific Northwest. Police in Tacoma, Spokane, and Seattle raided IWW offices and arrested Wobblies.⁵⁰

In other parts of the country, socialists, Wobblies, and suspected anarchists were rounded up and put in jail. People of foreign birth were deported. Socialist leader Eugene Debs

⁴⁹ Wells, "I Wanted to Work," 222, 231-238.

⁵⁰ John McClelland, Jr. *Wobbly War: The Centralia Story* (1987), 73-86. Robert Murray, *Red Scare: A Study in National Hysteria 1919-1920* (1955), 181-189.

was sent to the Atlanta penitentiary. While in prison he ran once again for president and received more than 900,000 votes. From November 1919 to January 1920, Attorney General A. Mitchell Palmer headed a crusade to round up radicals. On January 2, 1920, police carried out simultaneous "Palmer Raids" in thirty-three major cities. Seattle did not participate, probably because Seattle had already purged most of its suspected "reds" following the general strike. In the targeted cities, police arrested more than four thousand suspects, including most of the leaders of the two main Communist Party organizations in America.⁵¹

After this dramatic purge, the Red Scare lost its momentum. Although harsh sentences had been meted out to many radicals, dissidents, and unfortunates during and immediately after the war years, many of those sentences were reduced when the emotional climate abated. Depending on political connections or simply chance, prisoners were released at varying times. Louise Olivereau, a typist in the Seattle IWW office who had been sentenced in December, 1917, to ten years for writing an anti-war circular, was released from a Colorado penitentiary in March, 1920, eight months before Wells' sentence was commuted.⁵² Sam Sadler was released a month before Wells, but the Pass brothers were not released until a month later. By the time Hulet Wells was released in November, the Red Scare had nearly run its course.⁵³

⁵¹ Murray, *Red Scare*, 212-213. William Leuchtenburg, *The Perils of Prosperity 1914-32* (1958), 71-81.

⁵² Sarah Sharbach, "Louise Olivereau and the Seattle Radical Community 1917-1923," master's thesis, University of Washington (1986), 125.

⁵³ Murray, *Red Scare*, 239. Murray identified January 1920 as the height of the Red Scare. "By the fall of 1920," he said, "the public pulse had become considerably calmer and hair-raising warnings of impending revolutions were largely missing from the scene."

* * * * *

Thus, the war years furthered Hulet Wells' education in social activism, its strategies and its costs. The IWW had an emotional appeal but no practical program; they were no match for the lumber barons and the government. As a pacifist and draft protester himself, Wells learned how quickly free speech could be squelched by an inflamed public opinion. After he was fired from City Light, he learned the value of his loyal friends in the labor movement who helped him get another job. The general strike was instructive on many counts. Wells' position as one of the organizers gave him an opportunity to learn its lessons well: the difficulties of organizing a broad coalition of workers; development of strategies and goals; resolution of conflicts; the complexities of managing a modern city; and the differences between theory and practice. Perhaps the most important lesson was the test of Marxist theory and the revelation that Seattle workers were not ready for a revolution. Once again he found himself at the mercy of the press and its ability to sway public opinion. On being confined in the federal penitentiary, leaving a wife and child behind with no means of support, Wells endured yet another lesson in the conditions of the working class.

Chapter V

A Consumer Economy: The 1920s

When Hulet Wells returned to Seattle in November 1920, the Red Scare had nearly run its course, but a nationwide depression was beginning. In Seattle the depression was well under way. In the aftermath of the general strike, the Seattle labor movement had succumbed to internal and external pressures. While radical IWW members attempted to turn Seattle A.F. of L. labor to their own ends, the employers launched an open-shop movement. In this endeavor the employers were aided by the postwar economic situation. In the spring and summer of 1919, the government withdrew its shipbuilding contracts. Since the shipyards were not prepared to convert to peace-time manufacturing, they cut back their operations and laid off thousands of workers. By the spring of 1920, jobs in Seattle were hard to find. Between 1919 and 1921, the number of manufacturing establishments in Seattle dropped from 1200 to 900. The number of industrial workers dropped from more than 40,000 to fewer than 14,000, and the total industrial payroll dropped from \$63 million to \$19 million. The Seattle economy had gone from boom to bust.¹

Hulet Wells, now a middle-aged ex-convict, once again faced the daunting prospect of looking for work. In the next three months he obtained only a few odd jobs. Although his friends in the labor movement could not secure his employment, they did send him to Russia as a delegate to the first congress of the Red International of Trade Unions (RILU), later known as the Profintern. It had been nearly four years since the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917, when the Communists had seized

¹ Robert Friedheim, *Seattle General Strike* (1964), 153-165.

power. How fared the revolution? Wells jumped at the chance for a first-hand look. Besides Wells, the American delegation included representatives from Massachusetts, Canada, Michigan, Minnesota, and Kansas, with William Z. Foster as an observer.²

Before leaving on his trip, Wells obtained credentials as a foreign correspondent for the *Seattle Union Record*, to which he sent infrequent dispatches. He arrived in Latvia on May Day, 1921, allowing two months to travel through Russia before the start of the Trade Unions' congress in Moscow, July 3-19. He met many of the Russian leaders, including Lenin and Trotsky. He also spoke with many of the Russian workers and peasants.³

In his report to the Seattle labor community, Wells expressed admiration for the revolutionary spirit of the workers. He compared the soviet structure to that of organized labor in America:

The soviets of the industrial centers are nothing more nor less than the central labor councils of Russia. The village soviets of the farmers are similar to the town meetings of early American history, so here we have a farmer-labor government in an industrial democracy that includes all the useful workers. All power to them!⁴

Although Wells was optimistic about the Russian experiment and strongly urged American labor to support Russian labor, he did not believe that Russian Communism could be

² Theodore Draper, *The Roots of American Communism* (1957), 316. Draper said, "It came to be known more familiarly as the 'Profintern', a telescoping of the Russian form of the name." Well-known American Communist representatives included Ella Reeve ("Mother") Bloor from Minneapolis and Earl Browder from Kansas. Foster had just founded the Trade Union Educational League (TUEL) in November 1920.

³ Hulet Wells, "Russia in 1921," unpublished manuscript. Hulet Wells papers, University of Washington.

⁴ Wells, "Through a Seattle Unionist's Eyes," *Union Record*, no date. Clipping in Hulet Wells papers, University of Washington.

transplanted to America. Instead, he favored working within the American democratic system. He supported the Farmer-Labor Party, with its platform pledged "to restore all power to the people," which had done well in Washington state in the elections of 1920.⁵

Job Search, Self-Employment

Upon his return from Russia in the fall, Hulet Wells once again faced the problem of finding a job. How could he support his wife and young son? Although he had acquired many skills, he had also acquired several handicaps. In addition to being over forty and blacklisted from civil service jobs, he was now a convicted felon. Locally, he was well known as a labor agitator and suspected by many of being a Communist. If that were not enough, his opponents had gone to court to have him disbarred on the grounds of "moral turpitude," based on his opposition to the proposed conscription law, so he could not use his law degree to earn a living. He later recalled:

A man's struggle for a livelihood is not dramatic except to himself, but to me it is the plot around which my life story has been knit. Every time I came back to make a fresh start I was frightened. The one thing I longed for was security, and in 1922 it seemed farther away than ever.⁶

After an unsuccessful search for employment, Wells decided to create his own job. He went into business as a builder of homes. He sold the house he was living in to obtain his

⁵ Hamilton Cravens, "A History of the Washington Farmer-Labor Party 1918-1924," thesis, UW (1962), and "The Emergence of the Farmer-Labor Party in Washington Politics 1919-20," *Pacific Northwest Quarterly* LVII no.4, 1966, 148-157. Nathan Fine, *Labor and Farmer Parties in the United States 1828-1928* (1928), 395-397. Helen Radke, "Third Parties Since 1872," thesis, UW (1936), 275.

⁶ Wells, "I Wanted to Work," 250.

start-up capital, about \$1000. Working by himself, he built another house. He moved into it with his wife and son, took out a mortgage, and used the proceeds to build another house. Over the next few years, he built four such houses. "It was a hard slow grind, but I did it and between times picked up what odd jobs I could find," he said. Although he hoped to have found "a way to beat the capitalist system," he learned to his dismay the drawbacks of attempting to do all of the work himself. "All the wages and all the profits could not compensate for my slowness."⁷

His competitors in the residential building business had the advantage on him in their use of tools and technology, specialization of labor, and mass production techniques. "I was up against cruel competition," said Wells. He described the way in which modern companies were displacing independent craftsmen such as himself:

Building companies bought large tracts and slammed houses together with beltline speed. Carpenters worked in gangs driven by bosses at high pressure. They knew the tricks of fabrication and other labor saving devices, and had mechanical saws and cement mixers and gadgets I had never heard of. Other mechanics did the same specialized job so often that they would have it finished while I was planning how to do it.⁸

Wells found that building houses single-handedly was a hard way to support his family. In addition to the need to invest money in tools and materials long before a house could be sold, and in addition to the slowness of on-the-job learning, there was the unreliability of potential buyers. "There was nothing to hold them to their contracts," he complained. "They always proceeded to get divorces or lose their jobs...." He managed to keep his own home, but, when buyers

⁷ *Ibid.*, 251-252.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 252.

defaulted, he lost his other houses to foreclosures.⁹

Wells tried other ways to make a living. He tried selling water pumps to farmers, with no success. "There were plenty of farmers without running water," he recalled, "but none of these had any money." On a logging job, he cut down alders and cedar trees on the Tulalip Indian Reservation, which he described as "a large tract of roadless forest," on Puget Sound about forty miles north of Seattle. He had little to show for a summer and fall of hard work, because, he recalled, "The partners [his employers] had not made much on their contract, and a part of my wages was never paid." By the winter of 1928, he was barely getting by on odd jobs, carpentry, shingling, and painting. "How I envied the humblest worker who went regularly, dinner bucket in hand, on his way to a steady job," he recalled. "I was fifty years old, and it was growing more certain every day that I would never have a job like that again."¹⁰

In his reading, Wells continued to expand his understanding of social problems. He read *Sister Carrie*, one of the early muckraking novels. Written by Theodore Dreiser in 1900, it chronicled the struggles of finding a job in the big city. Dreiser's middle-aged protagonist, George Hurstwood, lost his job in Chicago, fled to New York, and went through a long, drawn-out physical and moral decline as he searched in vain for a job. In a poignant passage, Dreiser wrote of Hurstwood: "He felt as if he were being driven. The cold world held no place where he might go. He must now walk, he knew not where, ungreeted by a single friendly face." Finally reduced to begging for subsistence, Hurstwood ended his life in a cheap room with the aid of an unlit gas jet.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 252.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 252-254.

Wells recalled his own state of mind in the late 1920s: "I read *Sister Carrie* and saw a picture of my own fate in that of Hurstwood."¹¹

Wells did not succumb to such an extreme fate as Hurstwood. In the spring of 1929 he got a job on a road-building crew, digging, blasting, and grading the Natchez Pass highway to Mt. Rainier. Despite his age (fifty) and his slight build, Wells did heavy physical labor, swinging an axe, chopping trees to clear the trail. The work was hazardous. Blasters dynamited huge boulders, sometimes without warning the other workers. Wells went up to the site with the road gang in March. One of the other workers had a reputation as "a paid stool pigeon," as well as a heavy drinker. Four months later, this worker denounced Wells to the boss as a "labor agitator" who was "trying to stir up a strike." Without giving Wells a chance to refute the charge, the boss promptly fired him.¹²

Poverty and Progress

Hulet Wells was not the only worker who endured hard times in the prosperous twenties. The growth in national productivity benefited owners, managers, and stockholders to a greater extent than low-end workers. Although there was a decline in child labor, there was an increase in two-income families as married women entered the workforce to supplement a husband's earnings. Older workers who lost a job found it difficult to get another one.¹³

¹¹ Theodore Dreiser, *Sister Carrie* (1900, 1981). See chapters 37-46, 48, 50. The "cold world" quote appears in ch.46, p.441. Wells, "I Wanted to Work," 255.

¹² Wells, "I Wanted to Work," 255-260.

¹³ Irving Bernstein, *The Lean Years: A History of the American Worker 1920-1933* (1960), 55-62.

On the one hand, conditions for many workers were in fact improving. The attitude of many business leaders underwent a change in the 1920s. Before the war, the prevailing attitude was one which considered the worker a disposable commodity. After the war, with increasing specialization and a growing class of white-collar workers, business turned to "scientific management," using social science techniques to promote maximum efficiency. Business leaders encouraged the development of company unions, funded and controlled by the owners for their employees. Companies promoted the "American Plan," or the open shop. Through enlightened management, workers' conditions in many industries improved. A few of the more advanced companies offered benefits such as health insurance and pension plans. A handful of trail-blazers offered unemployment insurance.¹⁴

On the other hand, conditions for many other workers were declining. While technological change created many new jobs, it meant the loss of many old ones. Economist Stuart Chase observed, "A new phrase has appeared in the jargon of economics, 'technological unemployment'." The supply of new jobs had not kept up with the demand; Chase claimed the net increase in unemployment between 1920 and 1927 was more than 650,000 people.¹⁵

As the decade progressed, other researchers studied conditions of life at the low end of the economic scale. Historian James Truslow Adams used dollar amounts to show the standard of living of an average worker. As an example, he selected a Seattle street railway employee's family of five in 1917. The family budget was just under the poverty level of \$2,000 per year. After paying for the basic necessities

¹⁴ Foster Rhea Dulles, *Labor in America* (1949), 256-258.

¹⁵ Stuart Chase, *Prosperity: Fact or Myth* (1929), 153, 157. For statistical data, Chase cites Wesley Mitchell, *Recent Economic Changes*.

of food, housing, and clothing, there was little left for other amenities such as reading matter, children's education, old-age savings, or insurance. By 1926, said Adams, the average 'gainfully employed' worker's income had risen to \$2,210 a year, but it still provided barely more than a subsistence for a family of five.¹⁶

Like Adams, Stuart Chase also documented poverty in the midst of plenty. According to the United States Department of Labor in 1920, a small family required an annual income of at least \$2,000 to meet minimum standards of health and decency. In that year, Chase reported, "from seventy to eighty per cent of all American families" failed to meet the minimum. During the twenties, per capita income increased about twenty per cent. This was an improvement, Chase admitted, but it still left many families in poverty:

That means that many families have passed the modest limits of the budget, but it also means that the bulk of them are still below it, and by no stretch of the imagination can the average American be said to be in a position to buy great quantities of luxuries.¹⁷

As to the extent of unemployment, Chase cited a government study headed by Wesley C. Mitchell, *Recent Economic Trends*:

During the recession of 1921-1922, unemployment had shot up to as high as 15 per cent. From 1923 to 1927, it ranged from 5 to nearly 8 per cent. In 1927, at 6.3 per cent, an estimated minimum of more than two million urban wage and salary workers were unemployed, looking for work.¹⁸

These statistics, Chase said, disproved the commonplace assertion that "anyone who really wants a job can find one." That assertion was, he said, "an excellent example of what

¹⁶ James Truslow Adams, *Our Business Civilization* (1929), 37.

¹⁷ Chase, *Prosperity: Fact or Myth*, 78-79.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 157.

the sociologists call 'cultural lag'," or "something that used to be true for one day and age, and which still persists in the language, though the circumstances which made it true have disappeared." The circumstances of the frontier period had disappeared with the shift to an industrial economy:

When the factory with its specialized tasks called the cottagers from their self-sustaining fields and farms, a steady job...became an elusive and uncertain quantity, available when the factory was running, gone when the factory was closed.¹⁹

The hardship of unemployment was exacerbated, said Chase, by the fact that the nation "has been shifting year by year to a pecuniary economy. Money has become the *sine qua non* of existence."²⁰

While a farm family might survive by raising its own food and bartering goods and services, the family in an urban setting required a monetary source of income. A paying job had become a prerequisite for survival.

The Worker Becomes a Consumer

Despite the lag at the bottom of the economic scale, as the nation recovered from the post-war slump the outward signs of prosperity proliferated. Among the visible manifestations were automobiles, radios, electrical appliances, and a multiplication of consumer goods which appeared in the markets, on the streets, and in the homes. The visibility of consumer goods was enhanced by mass advertising. In 1926 a national news dispatch announced that the American people had reached "the highest standard of living ever attained in the

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 152-153. See also Robert and Helen Lynd, *Middletown Revisited* (1937), p.409, for the Middletown belief that "ordinarily any man willing to work can get a job," with the footnote explaining, "This, like some of the other assumptions regarding economic matters in this section, is a commoner business-class than working-class point of view."

²⁰ Chase, *Prosperity: Fact or Myth*, 177.

history of the world."²¹

Many observers identified the automobile industry as the driving force in the commercial prosperity. "The automobile was something which people really wanted with a desire that amounted to a passion," said Stuart Chase. "It stimulated business, and it suffused the country with the visible appearance of a prosperity in which everybody seemed to share."²²

Economists William Trufant Foster and Waddill Catchings pointed out that the extraordinary growth of the automobile industry had a ripple effect in stimulating industries for supplying parts and materials, providing automotive services and maintenance, and building new highways. It created many new jobs, putting new dollars into consumer pockets. In addition to the explosive growth in the private sector, government spending increased greatly, in effect expanding the money supply in promoting public works, "such as highways, harbors, canals, parks, and bridges." As the economists pointed out, "when governments finance public works by loans which involve expansion of bank credit, as is often the case, they do add to consumer income," thereby helping business to prosper.²³

Foster and Catchings identified two factors which helped working-class families participate in the expanding consumer economy: (1) the development of installment sales, and (2) improved working conditions and wages. They estimated that the growth in installment sales had contributed to prosperity "by distributing to consumers about three billion dollars' worth of automobiles and other goods for which they have not

²¹ Adams, *Our Business Civilization*, 37, quoting a news dispatch from Washington, D.C.

²² Chase, *Prosperity: Fact or Myth*, 43.

²³ Wm. T. Foster and Waddill Catchings, *Road to Plenty* (1928), 92-97.

yet paid."²⁴

Improved working conditions and wages meant better health, more leisure, and more purchasing power in the local community. Chase attributed the improvement in working conditions, not to a change of heart on the part of business owners, but to "more intelligent management." In previous generations, he said, "stupid management" had fought against better wages and working conditions on the grounds that it would be ruinous to business. Contrary to their pessimistic predictions, he said, raising the workers' standard of living had "proved sound, profitable, productive, and helpful in the promotion of prosperity." Workers' incomes promoted the further expansion of business.²⁵

Andrew Carnegie's workers did not buy Carnegie steel rails, but Henry Ford's workers did buy Ford automobiles, and, along with other companies' workers, they bought toasters, vacuum cleaners, radios, pianos, home furnishings, cosmetics, and a host of other manufactured items. As Herbert Hoover, Secretary of Commerce, noted in *American Individualism*, "In less than four decades we have added electric lights, plumbing, telephones, gramophones, automobiles, and what not in wide diffusion to our standards of living."²⁶

Sumner Slichter, a business economist, identified the consumer as an important element in the economy and treated the worker as a potential consumer. The business community was beginning to recognize its stake in the workers' ability to buy. As Slichter pointed out, a falling demand for goods meant a falling demand for labor, which meant a further reduction in demand for goods: "An unemployed man . . . is a

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 94. Stuart Chase, *Prosperity: Fact or Myth*, 79.

²⁵ Chase, *Prosperity: Fact or Myth*, 49.

²⁶ Herbert Hoover, *American Individualism* (1923), 33-34. John Hicks, *Republican Ascendancy 1921-1933* (1960), 111-115.

poor customer." Moreover, he added:

The existence of severe unemployment also affects men who have not lost their jobs, for they fear that they too may soon be without work. Consequently they do not spend their money so freely as formerly."²⁷

Mass production of consumer products required a corresponding mass market of consumers. The worker's function as a *consumer*, not just as a producer, became an essential component of the economic system. This was a significant change, but, except for Slichter, Chase, Foster and Catchings, and a few others, hardly anyone noticed it at the time. The main thrust of studies and proposals in the 1920s was to promote an understanding of the business cycle, to prevent or at least mitigate recurrent booms and busts. Government had entered the picture as a source of data, a collector of statistical information, but otherwise it was still supposed to play only a minimal role in the operation of the economic system.²⁸

Studies and Proposals

Despite the uneven distribution of income, public demands for reform were muted. The progressive movement appeared to have lost its momentum, a casualty of the war. Yet behind the scenes, some individuals and organizations were still going forward with programs to improve economic security. It was not a time of public protest and political action, but it

²⁷ Sumner Slichter, *Modern Economic Society* (1931, 1935), 461. The first edition of *Modern Economic Society* was published in 1928, 1929, and 1930. With a new preface and some slight revisions, it was re-published in 1931. Slichter was a professor at Harvard.

²⁸ James Robertson, *America's Business* (1985), 182. Robertson states, "Few big-business leaders...have realized the importance of business in the distribution of wealth to consumers. Believing that their rational self-interest lay in accumulating assets as rapidly as possible..., they resisted most efforts to wrest money away from them."

was a time for research, gathering data, and thoughtful reassessment of economic theory. The groundwork that was laid in the 1920s would prove useful in the 1930s.

Sumner Slichter examined the business cycle and unemployment. "Among the most extraordinary economic phenomena of the age," Slichter observed, "are the periods of unemployment and depression which recur at frequent intervals. . . . It is as if some magic hand had applied brakes to the wheels of industry."²⁹

Where classical economists had attributed the business cycle to irremedial "natural law," the business economist Sumner Slichter saw that a human agency was involved. He argued that intervention in the economic sphere was a proper function of government, whether it took the form of restraining undesired practices or encouraging desired practices. "Indeed," he stated,

the guidance of economic activity...is rapidly becoming a major function of government--comparable to the functions of protecting life and property and enforcing contracts.³⁰

Amplifying his argument, he added,

In fact, the guidance of economic activity is really an extension of the government's function of protecting life and property. Workmen's compensation laws, for example, which give employers an incentive to prevent accidents are simply an additional way in which the government protects life.³¹

Slichter proposed several directions for government action, such as public employment offices, public works, and

²⁹ Sumner Slichter, *Modern Economic Society* (1931, 1935), 5. The "magic hand" could be an oblique reference to Adam Smith's benign "invisible hand," which theoretically led an individual's pursuit of self-interest to further the common interest. Smith, *Wealth of Nations* (1776), 456.

³⁰ Slichter, *Modern Economic Society*, 51-52, 725.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 725n.

unemployment insurance. Specifically, he urged better "facilities for collecting and distributing market information," and "the development of a chain of efficient public labor exchanges."³²

A significant stimulus to the study of unemployment was a top-level conference held in 1921. This conference was initiated by the new Secretary of Commerce, Herbert Hoover. During the post-war depression of 1920-1922, an estimated four to five million Americans were unemployed. In 1921 Hoover persuaded President Warren Harding to convene the President's Conference on Unemployment. It was the first such attempt by the federal government to address the problem directly. By calling together leaders in business, labor, academia, and government, Hoover hoped to stimulate the private sector to make whatever changes might be needed.

The President's Conference recommended voluntary action at the local level, the establishment of community employment bureaus, and coordination of relief efforts. The Census Bureau under the Department of Commerce started to gather statistics pertinent to business and economic conditions generally; in July 1921 the *Monthly Survey of Current Business* was launched. Committees were set up to make surveys and gather statistical data. A committee report, *Business Cycles and Unemployment*, was published in 1923. Hoover himself in 1923 wrote a short book entitled *American Individualism*, in which he set forth his belief in individual initiative tempered by social responsibility. Throughout the decade, reports appeared in newspapers, journals, and government documents. During Hoover's Presidency, findings were compiled in two major works, *Recent Economic Changes* (1929) and *Recent Social Trends* (1933). As possible

³² *Ibid.*, 854-855.

remedies, public works and unemployment insurance were brought up for discussion, but no action was taken.³³

Despite the steadily increasing prosperity, critics of the business civilization throughout the 1920s continued to analyze weaknesses and offer solutions. Toward the end of the decade, even as the stock market rose to remarkable heights, a number of researchers urged another look at the economy. They pointed out the growing gap between rich and poor. They decried the persistence of poverty, with the average working wage pegged at a bare subsistence level. They cautioned that business could not continue to prosper unless the benefits of prosperity were extended to workers and their families. One of the critics, James Truslow Adams, captured the spirit of the 1920s in the title of his book, *Our Business Civilization*. He observed that America had become "almost wholly a *business man's civilization*," lacking the refining influence of liberal arts, fine arts, science, or philosophy. The business man viewed the world in terms of profit, which meant short-term thinking, a carelessness of social consequences, and a blindness "to the aesthetic qualities of life." Adams urged more attention to culture, education, and spiritual development. He did not recommend government action, but simply urged a voluntary return to "the art of living."³⁴

Like Adams, Stuart Chase expressed his disdain of crass materialism as manifested through mass production, advertising, and ever-increasing consumption. In *Prosperity*:

³³ David Burner, *Herbert Hoover: A Public Life* (1979). Craig Lloyd, *Aggressive Introvert: Herbert Hoover and Public Relations Management 1912-1932* (1972), 126-127. Herbert Hoover, *American Individualism* (1923), 72 pp. President's Conference, *Business Cycles and Unemployment* (1923). President's Conference, *Recent Economic Changes in the United States* (1929). President's Research Committee on Social Trends, *Recent Social Trends in the United States* (1933).

³⁴ Adams, *Our Business Civilization*, 14-20, 29, 289-306.

Fact or Myth (1929), he argued for some type of over-all social coordination; i.e., government regulation, of business activities. Chase completed his manuscript and sent it to the printer just before the stock market crashed in October 1929. In a prophetic paragraph, he wrote:

But it still escapes me why a prosperity founded on forcing people to consume what they do not need, and often do not want, is, or can be, a healthy and permanent growth. There will be enormous suffering when and if it cracks.³⁵

The economic basis for the present prosperity, argued Chase, rested on a precarious foundation. The pursuit of profit had resulted in prosperity for some, but not for most of the people. The competitive system had resulted in a vast amount of waste of materials, capital, and manpower, while at the same time failing to achieve an equitable distribution of goods and services.

A third pair of researchers, William Trufant Foster and Waddill Catchings, looked beyond the surface appearance of prosperity in the 1920s, focusing on the discrepancy between the consumer's buying-power and the producers' producing-power. In *The Road to Plenty* (1928), they described the weaknesses in the economy and proposed a remedy. Many would-be consumers were unable to consume because of low wages and unemployment. Classical economic theory attributed the fault to a deficiency in productive capacity: "over-production." In reality, argued Foster and Catchings, it was instead an insufficiency in the consumer sector, resulting in "under-consumption." The chief weakness in the economy, they argued, was the lack of any governmental means to regulate

³⁵ Chase, *Prosperity: Fact or Myth*, 17. Chase indicated his basic agreement with James Truslow Adams on p.24, calling him "one of our soundest historians" and quoting Adams' statement, "Our prosperity can be maintained only by making people want more, and work more, all the time," from *Our Business Civilization*, p.58.

the relationship between consumption and production. They urged the creation of a government agency to gather statistics on production, consumption, and employment, with the ultimate goal of enabling the government to aid in stabilizing the economy. They pointed out that the government was the logical agency to take the lead, because, they said, it was "the only agency which represents all of us--consumers and producers, everybody; and it is the only agency which has authority to make everybody hand over the information."³⁶

The decade of the 1920s witnessed a period of discussion and reflection, both at governmental levels and in the private sector. Despite the lack of legislation, there were noteworthy changes in general practice. Slichter identified a shift "in the ethical conceptions both of business leaders and of the entire community," as a result of public debate. "The discussion of the the problem of unemployment during the last decade has resulted in little legislation in the United States," observed Slichter, "but it has deeply affected the thinking and the policies of the business leaders of America."³⁷

Education and the Seattle Labor College

Besides more enlightened management and a generally rising level of prosperity, another factor which made a difference in the 1920s was the increasing availability of public education. Business needed more educated workers; workers saw education as a means to obtain better jobs. Junior high and high school facilities expanded. Vocational schools proliferated. Higher education took a spectacular jump.

³⁶ Foster and Catchings, *Road to Plenty*, 158, 185.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 15.

Colleges and universities broadened their curricula and influenced a new generation of business managers.³⁸

As a long-range strategy to rebuild their depleted ranks, unions also turned to education. Post-war repression had dealt a severe blow to organized labor. The imprisonment of radical leaders, the strike-breaking tactics of business and government, the economic slump, the rapid demobilization and the ensuing rise in unemployment had severely weakened labor's position as the new decade began. From a peak membership of five million in 1920, organized labor in the next three years lost a million and a half members.³⁹

In 1921, the American Federation of Labor convened the First National Conference on Workers' Education in New York City. Out of that conference emerged the Workers' Education bureau, designed to encourage and facilitate union-sponsored educational programs. During the 1920s, both trade union schools and independent labor colleges grew up in urban areas throughout the country, from New York to San Francisco. Three of the best-known independent colleges were Brookwood Labor College in New York, Commonwealth College in Arkansas, and Work People's College in Minnesota. These colleges offered full-time residential programs, as well as classes for students living off-campus.⁴⁰

The Seattle Labor College was part of this general trend to promote working-class education. In the early 1920s, under the instigation of John C. Kennedy, a socialist, the Seattle Central Labor Council sponsored the Seattle Labor College. Kennedy had been involved in the Farmer-Labor Party campaign

³⁸ John Hicks, *Republican Ascendancy 1921-1933* (1960), 187-189.

³⁹ Dulles, *Labor in America*, 231-238, 241-245.

⁴⁰ Richard Altenbaugh, *Education for Struggle: The American Labor Colleges of the 1920s and 1930s* (1990), 38, 60. Helen Vogt, *Charlie Frye and His Times* (1995), 94.

in 1920. Previously he had been an instructor at Cornell University and secretary of the Socialist Party in Illinois. In 1903 he had inspected packing plants in Chicago and, like muckraking author Upton Sinclair in the same era, had been appalled at conditions. In philosophy and idealism, the Seattle Labor College was similar to the Brookwood College. Although it did not have a full-time residential program, it did offer classes, forums, discussion groups, dramatic performances, and social entertainments, using the facilities of the Labor Temple.⁴¹

A few years later, under the directorship of Carl Brannin, the Seattle Labor College would be instrumental in the formation of the Unemployed Citizens' League of Seattle.

Carl Brannin

In the fall of 1925, the Seattle Labor College welcomed a pair of dedicated volunteers. Carl and Laura Brannin arrived in Seattle. Social activists both, they devoted their energies to labor's cause. Upon their arrival, they renewed their acquaintance with John C. Kennedy at the Labor College; they had worked with him on the Farmer-Labor Party campaign in 1920. They met one of Seattle's most notorious local activists, Hulet Wells. Because Carl Brannin and Hulet Wells would, within a few years, organize and lead the Unemployed Citizens' League together, it is worth looking at Carl Brannin's background.

Genial, mild-mannered and unassuming, Brannin had a passion for social and economic justice going back to his early childhood years. Brannin, born in Cisco, Texas, in 1888, was ten years younger than his colleague at the Labor College, Hulet Wells. Like Wells, he had grown up on a farm with

⁴¹ *Vanguard*, January 1930, 3, "Labor College Notes."

numerous brothers and sisters. Like Wells, also, Brannin started reading at an early age. Later he recalled the influence of books in developing his social conscience: "One who reads and does some thinking along with it is likely to ask the question *why* -- and that can be a dangerous word in any language."⁴²

Brannin earned money for college by selling magazine subscriptions. At Texas Agricultural and Mechanical College, while studying technical subjects like engineering and textile manufacturing, he discovered that his real interests lay in social justice, civil liberties, and writing. In his junior year he joined a student strike to protest the policies of the college president. He also joined the student newspaper, the *Battalion*. The next year, as editor, he wrote an editorial defending the strike, but the faculty publications committee refused to let him print it.⁴³

Upon graduation from college with a bachelor of science degree in textile engineering, he took a job at the Dallas Cotton Mills. Despite his college education, he shared the grim, unhealthy environment of the other mill workers. He worked eleven hours a day, six days a week, breathing dust and cotton lint in a hot, noisy building. After a year, he turned down an offer of a promotion and left the mill.⁴⁴

Brannin tried selling life insurance and real estate, with indifferent success. During this period, he used his Dallas Public Library card to expand his horizons. One day he checked out a book with the provocative title, *Progress and*

⁴² Brannin's acceptance speech at the May 1968 presentation of the Father John LaFarge Award, by the Catholic Interracial Council in Dallas, quoted in Miriam Allen DeFord, *On Being Concerned: The Vanguard Years of Carl and Laura Brannin* (1969), 55-56.

⁴³ Miriam Allen DeFord, *On Being Concerned: The Vanguard Years of Carl and Laura Brannin* (1969), 3.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 4.

Poverty. This book had a profound effect on him, as it had had on many other readers in the three decades since its first publication.⁴⁵

The book had become a best-seller in the 1880s, but its thesis, to Brannin, seemed just as relevant in the nineteen-teens. Henry George's *Progress and Poverty* was more than an economic treatise; it was a spiritual odyssey. It provided a conceptual framework, with carefully developed arguments, to explain the apparent paradox of poverty in the midst of plenty. It offered a prescription based on moral premises, combined with an evangelistic faith in the perfectibility of man, for the cure.

In the 1870s, and especially during the panic of 1873, Henry George had been appalled by "the strange and unnatural spectacle of large numbers of willing men who cannot find employment." George himself had been among those numbers. Poverty had existed from time immemorial, but America was a land of plenty, taking pride in its progress. Could it be that some feature inherent in progress itself created poverty? If that flaw could be found, could it be corrected?⁴⁶

George's thesis, simply stated, was this:

The basic elements of the economic system are land, labor and capital. Through social action, land increases in value. (Social action includes such phenomena as population

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 4-5. Mark Lause, "Progress Impoverished: Origin of Henry George's Single Tax," *The Historian*, May 1990, 394-410. Lause explores historical antecedents for the single tax idea, showing the influence of California land struggles in the 1850s. Lause states, p.408, "The list of men and women influenced by George's work would be a "Who's Who" of turn-of-the-century progressive movements."

⁴⁶ Henry George, *Progress and Poverty* (first published in 1879; centennial edition 1879-1979, 1992), 270. Rhoda Hellman, *Henry George Reconsidered* (1987), 15-16. Hellman explores the paradox that, despite George's great popular influence, his specific ideas for land reform largely failed to be adopted.

increase, technology, transportation, civic amenities, and any and all activities which may cause property values to appreciate.) Theoretically, said George, land, labor, and capital should share equally in the gains from the increase in productivity, but, in actuality, the owners of the land seized the largest portion of the gain in the form of rent. The economic system enabled land owners to take the gains of social action away from both labor and capital--the wages from labor, and the interest from capital.

George's intellectual predecessors, political economists like Adam Smith, Malthus, and Ricardo, had defined the economic universe in purely mechanistic terms. They had postulated a "natural law" that operated inexorably regardless of human intention or intervention. In contrast, George allowed human decision-making to enter into his hypothetical construct. He disagreed, also, with his contemporaries, the social Darwinists who defended *laissez-faire* policies. He said the system was neither created by God nor ordained by Natural Law. Social action had created poverty; therefore social action could correct the situation. "The human will," he said, "is an initiatory force."⁴⁷

For a progressive like Carl Brannin, it was reassuring to find a logical justification for the belief that the human will could be "an initiatory force." But Henry George also addressed the question of human motivation in a way that challenged the thinking of his times. In describing economic behavior, political economists from Adam Smith onward had assumed that human beings were motivated primarily by self-interest. The concept of self-interest might conceivably be extended to a quest for the common good, but it was usually translated into terms such as greed, selfishness, or desire

⁴⁷ George, *Progress and Poverty*, Conclusion, 561.

for material gain. Altruism as a motivation was suspect; for altruistic actions might be performed to secure selfish ends, such as power or prestige.

Henry George, however, argued that altruism was a natural and a valid motivation. "Shortsighted is the philosophy which counts on selfishness as the master motive of human action,"⁴⁸ he stated.

Call it religion, patriotism, sympathy, the enthusiasm for humanity, or the love of God--give it what name you will; there is yet a force which overcomes and drives out selfishness; a force which is the electricity of the moral universe; a force beside which all others are weak.⁴⁹

George was optimistic, not only about human motivation, but also about the eventual outcome. He envisioned a future in which mankind's natural altruism would gain ascendancy:

And, then, as the man develops his nobler nature, there arises the desire...that he, even he, may somehow aid in making life better and brighter. ...He builds for the future; he cuts the trail that progressive humanity may hereafter broaden into a highroad.⁵⁰

Altruistic motivations were not only real, but they were compatible with a scientific approach to social problems. Moreover, George argued, altruism was entirely in accord with natural law, for the true natural law was not an impersonal,

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, Book IX ch. 4, 462.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 463. Henry George had lived through the Civil War, a period in which patriotism, heroism and self-sacrifice were strongly evident.

⁵⁰ George, *Progress and Poverty*, Book II ch. 3, 136. Edward Bellamy, who wrote the utopian novel *Looking Backward* in 1887, a few years after George's *Progress and Poverty*, also believed that altruism was a natural motivating factor, one which would emerge more strongly when humanity learned to be less competitive and more co-operative. He envisioned a time in his fictional year 2000, when it might be said: "Humanity has entered on a new phase of spiritual development, an evolution of higher faculties.... The betterment of man-kind from generation to generation, physically, mentally, morally, is recognized as the one great object supremely worthy of effort and of sacrifice." Bellamy, *Looking Backward*, Modern Library (1951), 238.

mechanistic force but the purposeful unfolding of a divine plan, incorporating morality, liberty, and justice: "The law of human progress, what is it but the moral law?"⁵¹

George's influence gave Carl Brannin a direction in life, to seek, as he later described it, "the remedy for the iniquities of the present economic system."⁵² In 1912, age 24, he took a job as a desk clerk at the Dallas YMCA. He organized discussion groups and classes on current events. To assist young men from the surrounding farms and small towns, he set up a job referral department, along with classes in vocational skills like typing, salesmanship, and basic English. Soon he was in charge of both the employment and the education departments.⁵³

In the fall of 1914, he left Dallas to become an assistant to an idealistic and energetic young minister, the Rev. Herbert S. Bigelow. The People's Church in Cincinnati, Ohio, was essentially Unitarian in doctrine. It welcomed interested parties of any creed or none. It embraced general principles of the social gospel, such as brotherhood, social justice, and freedom to follow one's conscience in thought and worship. Rather than wait for people to come to the church, the members organized the People's Power League, which took the church out into the streets to the people. Among other duties, Brannin edited the *People's Bulletin*, which advocated civil liberties, old age pensions, and unemployment insurance, and urged opposition to war.⁵⁴

By 1915, Brannin's religious convictions had crystallized

⁵¹ George, *Progress and Poverty*, Book X ch. 3, 526.

⁵² Brannin letter toward the end of 1917, quoted in DeFord, *On Being Concerned*, 11.

⁵³ DeFord, *On Being Concerned*, 6-7.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 6-8. These causes found their way into the pages of the *Vanguard* some fifteen years later.

into a liberal, humanitarian form. He expressed his religious convictions:

To me, religion is something which has to do with man's social as well as his individual problems.... To me it is life, the relation between myself and God and, whatever may be the ideas of some as regards external control, I recognize no authority, but the voice of reason and the still small voice within.⁵⁵

For Brannin, the motivating factor in his life was not material gain, but a spiritual desire to improve the environment on earth for the betterment of mankind. "I cannot bring myself to believe that permanent progress is made toward the liberation of humanity by appeals to selfishness and desire for gain," he said. "I believe that the ideal, the heartspring of human action in man, must be appealed to if real gain is to be made toward the abolition of poverty."⁵⁶

After three years with the People's Church, Brannin left in November 1917 to manage a Single Tax campaign in Kansas City, Missouri.⁵⁷ This ballot measure would have enacted Henry George's idea of a single tax on land values, but it lost, partly because it was overshadowed by a larger issue: the United States' entry into the European conflict.

The advent of war brought a crisis of conscience. The United States declared war on April 6, 1917. Six weeks later President Wilson signed the conscription bill, making able-bodied males between the ages of twenty-one and thirty-one subject to the military draft. On June 5, the day designated for nationwide registration and patriotic observances, nearly

⁵⁵ Brannin letter dated April 28, 1915, quoted in DeFord, *On Being Concerned*, 9-10.

⁵⁶ Brannin letter toward the end of 1917, quoted in DeFord, *On Being Concerned*, 11.

⁵⁷ DeFord, *On Being Concerned*, 12.

ten million men registered for the draft.⁵⁸

Like Hulet Wells, Carl Brannin opposed the war and the compulsory draft. Brannin, age twenty-eight, registered under protest. In December, he risked imprisonment for stating his objections in a strongly worded letter to his draft board. Lambasting "the forces of privilege and plutocracy within our own gates," he declared: "Militarism and wars are the natural consequences of special privilege and law protected plutocracy in any nation." He affirmed his faith that a perceptive few would continue to "stand out against the tyranny of militarism and for liberty of conscience and true democracy," regardless of public opinion.⁵⁹

Since the slightly-built Brannin was classified 4-F for being underweight, the issue of military induction never came to a head. Instead, Brannin obtained a civilian position in Washington, D.C., as an investigator for the War Labor Board, where he gained experience on work-related issues from another angle. He was assigned to investigate union-management disputes in war industries.⁶⁰

In March 1918, Brannin married Laura Haeckl, whom he had met when he was working at the People's Church. Laura had taken over the editorship of the *People's Press* after Brannin went to Missouri.⁶¹ She, too, had been deeply moved by Henry George's *Progress and Poverty*. Independently, she had developed a strong motivation to work for social justice. Carl and Laura reinforced each other's views. They worked

⁵⁸ Arthur Link, *American Epoch* (1955), 198. The following year, on August 31, 1918, the draft was expanded to include men between eighteen and forty-five.

⁵⁹ Brannin letter to Kansas City Draft Board, dated December 19, 1917, quoted in DeFord, *On Being Concerned*, 13-15.

⁶⁰ DeFord, *On Being Concerned*, 13.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 18.

together as a partnership in social causes for forty-seven years, until Laura's death in 1965.

With the signing of the Armistice on November 11, 1918, the war ended and so did Brannin's job at the War Labor Board. Carl and Laura experienced briefly the plight of the jobless in the middle of winter in Washington, D.C. Soon Laura found a job with the American Red Cross. While investigating the relief claims of many of the unemployed war veterans, she experienced first-hand the slums in the nation's capital. Carl found a temporary job with the National Farmers' Council, a lobbying group.⁶²

In the fall of 1919, Carl obtained a job as an organizer for the Plumb Plan, a nationwide campaign to retain public ownership of the railroads which had been nationalized during the war. On his way across the country, he and Laura stopped at a number of penitentiaries, including Leavenworth, to visit political prisoners who had opposed the war. Unbeknownst to the Brannins, a Seattle socialist whom they had not yet met, but who later would become a close friend and colleague, was also serving time. Hulet Wells was on McNeil Island in August 1919; he would be transferred to Leavenworth soon afterwards. Two years later, in the winter of 1921-22, Carl took a boat to McNeil Island to visit a Russian political prisoner,⁶³ but by this time Wells had been released.

The Brannins arrived in Seattle in 1920, in time to join the fall campaign for the Farmer-Labor Party. This party,

⁶² *Ibid.*, 20.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 21, 23. The prisoners whom the Brannins visited in Leavenworth included Earl Browder, future leader of the American Communist Party, and Ricardo Flores Magon, who had urged Mexicans in the United States not to enlist for the war. The Russian prisoner was Anton Karachun, who later hosted the Brannins and served as their guide when they visited Russia.

newly forged from disaffected Democrats and progressives, ran a strong primary campaign in the state in September. In addition to William Bouck, State Master of the Grange, the party attracted the support of Anna Louise Strong, Phil Pearl, and John C. Kennedy. In the November election the Republicans won handily, as expected, but the Farmer-Labor Party out-pollled the Democrats in several races, including the gubernatorial race.⁶⁴

The Brannins had been attracted by Seattle's reputation as a pioneer in the public ownership of utilities and a leader in progressive causes.⁶⁵ Moreover, despite its ignominious ending, the General Strike of 1919 had put Seattle on the map. The Brannins were curious.

Due to the post-war closing of the shipyards, it was difficult to find work in the Seattle region. In the fall of 1921, the Brannins became hired hands at a goat ranch. After enduring an exceptionally cold winter, the Brannins left the ranch and moved into a deserted shack which was located among the remnants of a turn-of-the-century utopian community, the Home Colony. A few of the old colony members still lived in the area, digging clams and raising chickens and vegetables. The Brannins enjoyed this introduction to anarchism and cooperative living.⁶⁶

In the spring of 1922 the Brannins returned to Texas temporarily. Oil had recently been discovered on a West Texas peanut farm, an inheritance from an aunt who had died some ten years before.⁶⁷ The oil royalties, although never extravagant, gave them enough income on a regular basis so

⁶⁴ Hamilton Cravens, "A History of the Washington Farmer-Labor Party 1918-1924," (1962), 99, 115, 133-134.

⁶⁵ DeFord, *On Being Concerned*, 21-22.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 23.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 23-24.

they could travel, write, and volunteer their services for social causes.

Now, as landlords, they acquired the gains from social progress. As a peanut farm, the land had been worth a little. As an oil field, it was worth a lot. Labor and capital had gone into the drilling for oil; oil had become valuable because of the mechanization of industry and the advent of the automobile; a transportation system had been put in place to bring tools and equipment to the oil field and to carry the oil from the field to the marketplace; a monetary system had been devised so that labor (the oil drillers) and capital (the money investors) and the land owners (the Brannins) might all share in the proceeds from the oil. Had anyone challenged the Brannins' right to share in the proceeds, a system of law and customary usage was already in place to defend their property rights--their right to collect a sum of money (called "royalties" or "rent" or "a percentage of the profits") for the use of their land to produce oil instead of peanuts. Since Henry George's proposed solution of a land tax had not been adopted, the Brannins kept their proceeds. They imposed a kind of a self-tax on themselves, using their full-time energies as volunteers for social betterment.

To learn about other cultures, the Brannins traveled to Mexico. While there, Carl Brannin sent regular reports to the Federated Press, a labor-oriented news service headquartered in San Francisco. In the spring of 1923, they moved into a house in Berkeley. Carl took the ferry to San Francisco, volunteering as an editorial assistant for *Labor Unity*, a left-wing labor weekly. On Monday, September 17, a hot, dry wind swept down through northern California, fanning brush and timber fires from Eureka to Alameda County. In Berkeley, a fire raged out of control, destroying more than

six hundred homes in a two-square-mile area north of the University of California. The Brannins lost their house and their Model-T Ford, along with their Mexican artifacts and all their other possessions. In an adventurous spirit, they decided to use the experience as an education in homelessness. They hitch-hiked back to Texas, where family members helped them get re-established.⁶⁸

The following year, late in 1924, they boarded a ship for a year's stay in Europe. They attended the 1925 convention of the British Trade Union Congress; Carl sent reports on the proceedings to the Federated Press. Besides England, they went to France, Germany, and Italy. They spent three months in Russia. The Brannins, like Hulet Wells a few years earlier, were curious to know how communist theory was working in practice. As they traveled through Europe and Russia, they talked to the people, rather than politicians or other officials. Carl continued to send human interest stories to the Federated Press.⁶⁹

The Brannins returned to the States in September 1925, stopping to visit the Commonwealth Labor College in Arkansas along the way. After they reached Seattle, they built a small frame house on a hill overlooking Lincoln Park and Puget Sound, doing much of the construction themselves. They also adopted an eighteen-month old boy, Robert.⁷⁰

Both of the Brannins joined the Seattle Labor College. Carl started out as a lecturer and debater, then took charge of its weekly discussion session, "Open Forum," while Laura

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 24-25. Although DeFord gives the time of the fire as spring 1924, this is probably an error. There was a disastrous Berkeley fire earlier, that of Sept. 17, 1923. *San Francisco Chronicle*, Sept. 18, 1923, 1, "FIRE SWEEPS BERKELEY," and Sept. 19, 1923, 1, "Berkeley Rebuilds As Fire Ruins Smolder."

⁶⁹ DeFord, *On Being Concerned*, 26-27.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 27.

took a special interest in child welfare. In the fall of 1929, director John C. Kennedy went back East to join the faculty of Brookwood Labor College. Carl Brannin became the new director of the Seattle Labor College.

* * * * *

Thus in the 1920s, while Hulet Wells was relegated to the sidelines, the overall economic environment rapidly changed. People noticed the physical evidence: automobiles, radios, household appliances. Less obvious was the changing role of the worker. With mass production and mass marketing, the worker became not only a producer, but a consumer, thereby gaining a degree of economic leverage. Economic changes prompted studies of under-consumption and the importance of workers' income for general prosperity.

The changing economic environment did not help unions. Faced with declining membership, labor organizers turned to education. The Seattle Labor College kept the vision alive. It also provided a network of contacts with labor and socialist groups across the country. When Carl Brannin arrived, Hulet Wells gained a friend and colleague. The two men together would play an important part in preparing the groundwork for political and economic action. Through their combined efforts, the Labor College and its newspaper would become the nucleus of the Unemployed Citizens' League.

Chapter VI

Recovery or Revolution? 1930-1931

From the time of the stock market crash of 1929 to the founding of the Unemployed Citizens' League of Seattle, a year and a half elapsed. Why did it take so long? Why did not the government step in sooner? Why did not the jobless workers get themselves organized sooner?

According to expert opinion and common wisdom, the depression would correct itself in due time. At first, the prevailing impulse was to wait. Business and government adopted a strategy to maintain confidence, avoid panic, and let the natural forces of the market take their proper course. While waiting, however, civic and political leaders were not inactive. On the contrary, they used existing institutions and techniques to the best of their ability to prop up the wavering economy. As Secretary of Commerce in the 1920s, Herbert Hoover had extended the role of the federal government in public relations and information-gathering. As President, he further extended federal participation in the private sector on a voluntary basis, mobilizing business and industry to cooperate in the public interest.¹

In the fall of 1929 the stock market went through a series of downward jolts. A selling panic occurred on Thursday, October 24, followed by another one, even more severe, on "Black Tuesday," October 29. The lowest prices of the year were registered on November 13.² President Herbert Hoover

¹ Albert Romasco, *The Poverty of Abundance: Hoover, the Nation, the Depression* (1965), 26-38. Joan Hoff Wilson, *Herbert Hoover, Forgotten Progressive* (1975), 137-146.

² Frederick Lewis Allen, *Only Yesterday* (1931), 271, 277-279. John Kenneth Galbraith, *The Great Crash* (1954, 1972), 103-105, 116-118, 140.

took prompt action. As Secretary of Commerce, he had dedicated his attention to economic issues. His conference on unemployment had generated on-going reports and studies. He had expanded the Census Bureau to collect data on industrial trends. He had used publicity, conferences, and committees to facilitate and coordinate voluntary community action. After the stock market crash, he used the techniques he had developed with such success in the past few years. Between November 19 and November 27, he held a series of conferences in the White House, bringing together representatives from business, labor, and finance.³

Following these conferences, Hoover delivered a message to Congress. Noting the connection between wages and consuming power, he reported that he had "instituted systematic, voluntary measures of cooperation . . . to make certain that fundamental businesses of the country shall continue as usual."⁴

Reflecting national policies, Seattle's mainstream newspapers ran articles and editorials to bolster public confidence. When Hoover addressed Congress, the *Seattle Times* and the *Post-Intelligencer* both ran the full text of his remarks. After the "recent panic in the stock market," said Hoover, there was a danger that the emotions of "undue pessimism, fear, uncertainty, and hesitation" would create a self-fulfilling prophecy, as in previous depressions. It was necessary to restore confidence in "the fundamental stability of our vast organism of production and distribution." Employers had promised not to reduce wages and labor leaders had promised not to strike. Industry had grown away from the

³ Craig Lloyd, *Aggressive Introvert: Herbert Hoover and Public Relations Management 1912-1932* (1973), 123-142, 156. Galbraith, *The Great Crash*, 142-146.

⁴ "President Seeks..." *Seattle Times*, Dec.3, 1929, 14. "President's Message to Congress," *Post-Intelligencer*, Dec.4, 1929, pages A-D.

"dog-eat-dog attitude" of the past and had pledged to cooperate, Hoover stated, "in prudent measures to solve a national problem."⁵

At the same time, the Secretary of Labor, James J. Davis, predicted a bright future. Technology, he said, would mean "more time for leisure and culture; less drudgery and more enrichment of our lives." Cities would continue to grow as centers of manufacturing and commerce, but slums would disappear. With modern transportation, workers could move out to the countryside, where they would have "a paradise in which to raise vegetables, flowers, chickens and children."⁶

Along with the *Times*, the *Star* and *Post-Intelligencer* also promoted a spirit of optimism. The day after the stock market crash, the *Star* editorialized, "Well, the market break won't hurt the country. Nothing has been lost but some hot air. And some paper profits." A little later the *Post-Intelligencer* described many signs of economic strength in the city, stating, "The future of this part of the country never appeared brighter. If its citizens study next year's outlook, there will be no room for pessimism."⁷

State of the City, 1929-1930

Seattle by 1929 had thoroughly established its position as the metropolitan center of the Puget Sound region. With an advantageous geographical site and the largest population of any city in the region, it was the center for shipping, wholesale and retail trade, manufacturing, and banking. It

⁵ "Find Work for Every Man to Disprove Pessimistic Views," *Seattle Times*, Dec.5, 1929, 10. "President's Message to Congress," *Post-Intelligencer*, Dec.4, 1929, A-D.

⁶ James J. Davis, "How the Working Man Will Live Tomorrow," *Seattle Times*, Dec.1, 1929, "National Weekly" supplement, 2.

⁷ "From Wall Street to Where?" *Seattle Star*, Oct.30, 1929, editorial. "No Room For Pessimism," *Post-Intelligencer*, Dec.2, 1929, 26.

was also the payroll center of the region. With more than 50,000 workers in diverse mechanical and manufacturing industries, it had nearly recovered from the post-war collapse of the shipbuilding industry.⁸

At the end of the year 1929 and throughout the year 1930, the attitude of Seattle's mainstream newspapers was one of optimism and boosterism. By comparing the year-end reports from 1929 and 1930, one gets a picture of the city's growth and its approach to the economic situation. Despite the recent flurry on Wall Street, at the end of December 1929 Seattle's business community looked back with pride in its achievements and looked ahead with confidence to an even better year. Twelve months later, the city had been "tempered and seasoned in the crucible," as the *Seattle Times* put it, but business experts again looked ahead with confidence; the new year would surely be a better one.⁹

The year-end report of the *Times* in 1929 painted a rosy portrait of a thriving metropolitan city. The city had grown both outward and upward in the past few years. A drawing showed recent changes in the Seattle skyline, with the addition of tall buildings such as the Bon Marche, the Benjamin Franklin Hotel, the Northern Life Tower, the 23-story Exchange Building, the Joseph Vance Building, and the County-City Building addition. Ground was broken for the new *Seattle Times* plant. An array of headlines proclaimed the city's vitality:

Building in Seattle Due for Big Gain
Big Strides are Shown in Aviation
Northwest has Busy Season for Rail Lines

⁸ Laura Hoffland, "Seattle as a Metropolis: The Integration of the Puget Sound Region Through the Dominance of Seattle, an Ecological Study," master's thesis, University of Washington (1933), 144-145.

⁹ *Seattle Times*, Dec.29, 1929; Dec.28, 1930. *Post-Intelligencer*, Dec.29, 1929; Dec.28, 1930. *Seattle Star*, Dec.31, 1929; Dec.31, 1930.

City's Growth Forces County to Match Pace
Public Works Improvement Will Continue¹⁰

Manufacturing included both automobiles and airplanes. By 1929 Seattle had a Ford plant with 900 employees producing up to 125 automobiles a day. In 1929 a Fisher automobile body factory was built, the new Boeing air field was dedicated, and the Pacific Coast Cement Company produced its one-millionth sack of cement. The port was thriving. The *Times* reported, "With the giant strides of a world port, linked with every clime by shipping services, Seattle in 1929 broke all of her previous records for maritime commerce and enters the new year assured of still greater achievement."

Looking around the state, the *Times* found more reasons for optimism. Roads and railroads were improving. Some 210 new factories had been built in the last twelve months. The fishing industry was promising: "With the biennial salmon run in Puget Sound last year the heaviest since 1919, spawning beds are said to be well seeded and the future prospects are particularly bright." Moreover, the *Times* expected national prosperity to enhance local prosperity. Since Congress had just voted to spend millions of dollars for new construction in 1930, federal money would flow into Seattle and the Pacific Northwest. Projects would include a new federal office building in downtown Seattle, an immigration station and assay office in the south end of the city, and continuing development work at the Sand Point Navy air station, north of town.

In short, the *Times* in December 1929 looked back on a great

¹⁰ "Business Strength is Reflected in Many Bank Mergers," "City Population of 519,000 is Expected," and "\$1,500,000 New School Buildings Planned for Next Year," *Seattle Times*, Dec. 29, 1929, 12, 13. See also "Ford Plans \$3,000,000 Plant Here," *Post-Intelligencer*, March 1, 1930, 1, in which the Ford company announces plans for a new plant which would add another 600 employees and double the output

year and predicted another prosperous year ahead.¹¹

Throughout 1930, the mainstream newspapers kept up the drumbeat of optimism. In March, for instance, President Hoover announced the imminent return of prosperity. Seattle newspapers gave prominent coverage to any and all indicators of impending recovery. The *Post-Intelligencer* started a regular feature, "Good News of Good Times." In December the *Star* launched a campaign to promote holiday spending with the slogan, "Buy Now!"¹²

However, the year 1930 failed to live up to the great expectations held out for it in 1929. The year-end summary in the *Times* for 1930 acknowledged that the previous year had been disappointing, but asserted with confidence that the next year would be better. As in 1929, the headlines gave reasons for optimism: more buildings, more government spending, more population growth, and more tourism. In the special year-end section, an array of headlines proclaimed:

City will spend millions in 1931 for new projects
 Millions of new construction is assured....
 Modern schools here rank with best in country
 Record influx of tourists expected in Seattle...
 Bank deposit totals gain during 1930
 Active building year for U.S. is prospect here
 King County scans year of building....
 Seattle sets record with new business¹³

¹¹ *Seattle Times*, Dec.29, 1929, 13. An eight-mile railroad tunnel had been bored through the Cascades, and the new Seattle-Tacoma Highway was opened.

¹² "Business Near Normal Again, Says Hoover," *Post-Intelligencer*, March 8, 1930, 1. "Help to Make MORE 'Good News of Good Times'," *Post-Intelligencer*, March 13, 1930, 6. "Hoover Sees Return of Good Times" and "Good News of Good Times," *Post-Intelligencer*, March 17, 1930, 1. "Good News of Good Times," *Post-Intelligencer*, March 27, 1930, 1. "All Seattle Takes to New 'Buy Now' Slogan Contest," *Seattle Star*, Dec.10, 1930, 16.

¹³ *Seattle Times*, Dec.28, 1930, 17.

An article by the nationally known economist, Roger Babson, reassured readers that the depression would soon be over. Based on historical statistics, Babson asserted: "Industrial depression is like the measles. Measles run their course, clear up and are forgotten. It is the same with hard times."¹⁴

Asserting that hard times would only make the city stronger, the *Times* observed: "Tempered and seasoned in the crucible of 1930 that at times severely tried the city's fiber, but that in the process brought to the surface the true metal of Seattle's stability, the Queen City of the Northwest now strides forward into 1931."¹⁵

On New Year's Eve, 1930, the *Times* ran a series of full-page ads sponsored by the business community, with slogans such as "Seattle--Straight Ahead!" and, "With head up, shoulders squared, eyes to the front, Seattle strides forward into 1931." Mayor Frank Edwards gave citizens an upbeat message:

Adopt a policy of boosting our city, county, state, and the Northwest. Create work and keep money in circulation.... There can be but one result--Prosperity and Industrial Supremacy.¹⁶

Faced with the inexplicable persistence of economic stringency, Seattle's business community presented a united front of optimism -- at least in the newspapers.

The Vanguard

In contrast to the business community's campaign of optimism, Seattle's newest labor newspaper exuded pessimism.

¹⁴ Roger Babson, "Will America 'Come Back' Next Year?" *Seattle Times*, Dec.28, 1930, National Weekly supplement, 4,

¹⁵ *Seattle Times*, Dec.28, 1930, 1.

¹⁶ *Seattle Times*, Dec.31, 1930, 5, 7, 12 and *passim* (advertisements).

It carried stories of hard times and injustice. It urged workers to fight for better wages and working conditions.

The new monthly newspaper, the *Vanguard*, was the joint effort of Carl Brannin and Hulet Wells, under the sponsorship of the Seattle Labor College. Brannin had edited a newspaper for the Dallas YMCA and the Cincinnati People's Church. Hulet Wells had edited the postal workers' *Bundy-Recorder* and the *Socialist Voice*. Together they put out the first issue of the *Vanguard* in January 1930, with the slogan, "For a better informed, more militant and more powerful workers and farmers movement in the Northwest."¹⁷

The *Vanguard* had a national and international outlook. It subscribed to the Federated Press, the labor-oriented agency to which Brannin had contributed stories of his travels in the mid-1920s. Based in New York, the Federated Press ran stories with by-lines such as Harvey O'Connor, a former Seattleite, and Scott Nearing, a well-known radical. The *Vanguard* ran numerous Federated Press stories, particularly in its first year.¹⁸

A California socialist, Upton Sinclair, contributed a series of articles entitled "Letters to Judd," explaining how the capitalist system benefited the rich at the expense of the poor. Sinclair had gained national fame as a muckraker when his expose of the Chicago stockyards, *The Jungle*, aided passage of the Pure Food and Drug Act of 1906.¹⁹

¹⁷ *Vanguard*, Jan. 1930, 1. The Labor College held a holiday bazaar on December 15, 1929, to raise funds for the newspaper.

¹⁸ Harvey O'Connor, "One Major Union Tackles Job Help Program," *Vanguard*, April 1930, 1. Jessie Lloyd O'Connor and Harvey O'Connor, *Harvey and Jessie, A Couple of Radicals* (1988), 49. According to Harvey O'Connor, "the Chicago-based Federated Press...had been organized in 1919 by Socialist, I.W.W., Farmer-Labor, cooperative, and farmers' papers." In the early 1930s O'Connor worked out of the New York bureau.

¹⁹ Upton Sinclair, "Letters to Judd," *Vanguard*, Feb. 1931, 2, and following issues. Sinclair had published *Letters to Judd, An American*

Former Seattleites continued to correspond with their friends in Seattle. John C. Kennedy, who had gone to New York to teach at Brookwood Labor College, wrote with warm enthusiasm about his new duties: "Most of the students, of course, are young, vigorous and progressive. They come from the mines, textile mills, clothing factories and other industries. They are preparing for active service in the labor movement." Kennedy also wrote about his visit to a collective farm in Russia. Anna Louise Strong, a leader in the Seattle general strike, had recently gone to Russia. She, too, continued to correspond with the Labor College; the *Vanguard* published her articles and excerpts from her letters.²⁰

In its first issue, coinciding with the beginning of the new year 1930, the *Vanguard* announced its intention "to give the facts about economic and political conditions," taking an approach that was "radical yet realistic." Wells in his column, "Looking Ahead," commented pessimistically on social change and the recent stock market crash. "Watch for a cumulative change in mass psychology," he said. "The way is cleared for something new."²¹

The four-page newspaper painted a grim picture for labor,

Workingman, circa 1925. His muckraking novel, *The Jungle*, had been published in serial form in the socialist newspaper, *The Appeal to Reason*, in 1905, before it came out in book form in 1906.

²⁰ "Kennedys Send News Letter" and "The Largest Farm in the World," *Vanguard*, Feb. 1930, 2-3. Anise (pen name of Anna Louise Strong), "Red Cotton City Strides Ahead," *Vanguard*, March 1930, 3. "Labor College Notes," *Vanguard*, April 1930, 4. "Flying High in Russia." *Vanguard*, May/June 1930, 3.

²¹ Hulet Wells, "Looking Ahead," *Vanguard*, Jan. 1930, 4. In Feb. 1930, 1, and subsequent issues, Wells entitled his column "The Railbird." He explained that a railbird is "a guy that perches on the rail to get the dope on the race." In his case, he intimated, the race he watched was not a horse race, but the human race.

with stories of layoffs, wage cuts, and an increasing amount of unemployment in the city. It reported that workers across the country faced unemployment, technological displacement, age discrimination, speed-ups, longer hours, wage cuts, and hazardous conditions. Union organizing efforts were frustrated by worker apathy, employer opposition, and violent confrontations.²² For the next year and a half, the *Vanguard* trumpeted the failings of capitalism, while constantly exhorting the workers, farmers, and unemployed workers to organize themselves.

In February the *Vanguard* reported that thousands of workers had flocked to the city seeking in vain for work. The state employment office in Seattle estimated "from 15,000 to 20,000 unemployed in Seattle," while the Associated Industries employment office estimated 35,000. Despite the differences in their estimates, both offices agreed that there were more unemployed than usual for that time of year.²³

In April the *Vanguard* remarked sarcastically, "In spite of Mr. Hoover's prosperity by pulmotor the millions of unemployed workers are still waiting for the jobs to open up."²⁴

In the summer of 1930 the *Vanguard* pessimistically predicted: "No Prospect for Good Times." Logging camps and mills were shutting down or operating at a fraction of their capacity. There was less construction work in the city than there had been the year before.²⁵

Hoover jokes were beginning to make the rounds. The

²² *Vanguard*, Jan. 1930, 1-4.

²³ "Thousands Seek Work Vainly in this City" and "What Can Be Done About Lack of Jobs?" *Vanguard*, Feb. 1930, 1-2. Several hundred unemployed carpenters gathered at their union hall to discuss possible solutions.

²⁴ "Prosperity by Pulmotor," *Vanguard*, April 1930, 4. A pulmotor was a mechanical apparatus used for artificial respiration.

²⁵ "No Prospect for Good Times," *Vanguard*, May/June 1930, 1.

Vanguard reported that a university student camping beside a rural highway counted "about one hundred men tramping the highway in an hour's time. 'Trying to catch up with Hoover's prosperity,' one of them put it."²⁶

As the depression deepened in 1930, the *Vanguard* continued to run stories on workers' grievances, strikes, wage cuts, and unemployment. At times it seemed to wallow in pessimism. How much worse would things need to get before workers would take charge of their own destiny?

Depression Remedies: Insurance, Public Works

What remedies could be applied to an economic illness? Early in 1930 Senator Robert Wagner of New York introduced a bill, as he had done two years earlier, to promote federal participation in gathering unemployment statistics, coordinating employment information at a nation-wide level, and stepping up public works projects at appropriate times. However, a political commentator held out little hope for legislative approval. "Congress will doubtless continue apathetic," he said, "unless it learns from its constituents that they are vitally interested in such proposed legislation."²⁷

The Wagner bill did not mention unemployment insurance. In fact, the subject of unemployment insurance was seldom broached in the early months of 1930. The concept was not unknown. During the winter of 1914-1915, the American Association for Labor Legislation had recommended an integrated program of public employment agencies, public

²⁶ "Signs of the Times," *Vanguard*, July/August 1930, 1.

²⁷ Merrylye Stanley Rukeyser, "Unemployed Carry Trade Slump burden," *Post-Intelligencer*, March 7, 1930, 23.

works, and unemployment insurance.²⁸ Several European nations had already adopted unemployment insurance programs.

England, for example, had initiated a government-sponsored unemployment insurance program in 1911. Unfortunately, Great Britain had been in the grip of depression throughout the decade of the 1920s; the insurance program that was designed for temporary periods of unemployment had become a form of long-term relief.²⁹

In the United States, a few employers and a few unions had set up private unemployment insurance programs. However, both employers and organized labor denounced government-sponsored insurance as "a dole." There was no federal mechanism to administer such a program. Employers did not want to be taxed or regulated to set up such a program. The American Federation of Labor opposed such a program on the grounds that the self-respecting American worker wanted work, not charity. Labor did not trust government. In the past, government had done little to safeguard workers' interests. Organized labor was committed to voluntary action or "self-help."³⁰

²⁸ John B. Andrews, *A Practical Program for the Prevention of Unemployment in America* (1915), 4-5. This 22-page pamphlet was published by the American Association for Labor Legislation and the American Section of the International Association on Unemployment.

²⁹ William H. Beveridge, *Unemployment, A Problem of Industry* (1909 and 1930), x, 289-294, 419. Beveridge, Director of Labour Exchanges, administered the British unemployment insurance program, 1911-1916. He stated, "unemployment remains, in 1930 as in 1909, a problem of industry, not an Act of God." J.A. Hobson, *The Economics of Unemployment* (1923), 6-9. Noting the importance of effective demand (purchasing power) in maintaining production, Hobson argued for a more equitable distribution of income by such means as public works and unemployment insurance. P.W. Martin, *Unemployment and Purchasing Power* (1929), 4-5. Martin argued that purchasing power was a critical issue; yet, he noted, "this question is rarely if ever discussed in any official document or investigation, and if mentioned at all is mentioned only to be dismissed."

³⁰ Daniel Nelson, *Unemployment Insurance, The American Experience 1915-1935* (1969), 22, 27, 66-67. Noting the decline of interest in the United

Organized labor had an additional reason to oppose a government-sponsored benefit program: it did not want the competition. By reducing a worker's dependence, a government program threatened to reduce rank-and-file loyalty to the union, while a union-sponsored program could help to secure and maintain such loyalty. The *Vanguard* informed its readers that a Chicago-based union, the Amalgamated Clothing Workers, had set up its own unemployment fund. A union representative explained: "The unemployed unionist, when he is hardest pressed, can turn to his union instead of to the pawnbroker or charity. That means that his loyalty to his union is immeasurably strengthened."³¹

In 1929 a group of dissatisfied unionists and labor college leaders formed the Conference for Progressive Labor Action (CPLA) to promote social insurance. As early as March 1930, the CPLA drafted a model bill to set up a federal-state partnership, but Congress was not ready to consider such a move. In June the CPLA launched a national unemployment insurance campaign. In November, the Seattle chapter of the CPLA launched a petition drive and prepared a bill to submit to the state legislature in January.³²

States during the 1920s, Nelson suggests, "Unlike Europe, where the war's destruction of life and property had generated a new demand for social welfare programs, ...the United States experienced prosperity and a political reaction following the war that halted virtually all progress in the direction of an adequate social insurance program." Albert Romasco, *The Poverty of Abundance* (1965), 129-132, 141.

³¹ Harvey O'Connor, "One Major Union Tackles Job Help Program," *Vanguard*, April 1930, 1. Nelson, *Unemployment Insurance*, 81-87. Union president Sidney Hillman and economist Leo Wolman were instrumental in setting up the plan in the mid-1920s. It lasted until the mid-1930s.

³² "For Out of Work Insurance," *Vanguard*, September/October 1930, 1. Chapter members included George Cronk of Carpenter's Local 131, chairman; Robert Roberts, Mrs. Rose Tomlinson, C.W. Gilbreath and O.T. Brackett. "Let's Insure Our Idle Workers," *Vanguard*, December 1930, 1. Nelson, *Unemployment Insurance*, 134, 155-156.

The proposed remedy which gained most attention in 1930 was public works. For some time, businessmen and economists had advocated the deliberate planning of public works to take up the slack in time of recession. Government spending, properly timed, could offset a decline of spending in the private sector. The idea, endorsed by the President's Unemployment Conference in 1921, had been popularized in the 1920s by William Trufant Foster and Waddill Catchings, among others. Although Herbert Hoover, a Republican, publicly advocated a program of planned public works, he expressed his political opposition to Senator Wagner, a Democrat, by opposing Wagner's bills. Hoover delayed passage of Wagner's public works proposal until February 1931 and then curtailed the agency which had been set up to administer it. In the first year of the depression, the idea of planned public works generated much political talk but little action.³³

One significant advance was in the gathering of statistics. In 1930 for the first time, the United States Census made a deliberate effort to document the amount of unemployment in the nation. In April 1930, the census found that seven per cent of the male workers across the nation were unemployed. The population of the city of Seattle was 365,583. Although the number of females by this time nearly equalled the number of males in the total population, males greatly outnumbered females in the workforce. The number of "gainful workers" was 175,583, three-fourths of whom were male. Out of the 130,000 male workers, nearly 13,000, or ten per cent, were unemployed. In January 1931, a special census found that the number of unemployed male workers in Seattle had risen to

³³ Nelson, *Unemployment Insurance*, 22, 38, 130-133. Nelson argues that, although Hoover's concern for a balanced budget was a factor, it was actually Hoover's "disdain" for Wagner that prompted him to repudiate Wagner's unemployment-prevention bills.

nearly 30,000, an unemployment rate of more than twenty-five per cent.³⁴

The census study had been prompted in part by an earlier Congressional investigation. By 1928, even before the great stock market crash, there were signs of a rising unemployment rate. A Congressional investigating committee in the winter of 1928-1929 found that elderly workers and seasonal workers had trouble finding work.³⁵

In Seattle, seasonal workers were among the first to feel the pinch of unemployment as fewer jobs opened up in the woods, fields, and fisheries. The job shortage took an early toll on older workers, also. Laundry drivers, for example, faced a high turnover due to increasing competition. Older drivers were forced out by younger, more aggressive ones. Many wage-workers found themselves cast out of the economic system at around the age of forty. They were involuntarily retired, but without any source of income with which to enjoy their leisure. The *Vanguard* blamed technological displacement:

The job seeker quickly finds that the large majority of employers are discriminating against workers over 40, perhaps due to the ever increasing number of job candidates, because of the introduction of the automatic machine in nearly every industry, as well as the 'speed up' or efficiency system becoming the vogue.³⁶

³⁴ Nelson, *Unemployment Insurance*, 133. Nelson says the special census was a result of a Wagner bill, implemented despite Hoover's objections. Bureau of the Census, *Fifteenth Census of the United States: 1930, Unemployment*, v.I, 1048. The city population included 179,500 females and 186,083 males. *Fifteenth Census of the United States: 1930, Unemployment*, v.II, 2, 217, 456. Males had a higher unemployment rate than females. It is likely that seasonal workers, wintering in the city, contributed to the large increase in unemployment in January 1931.

³⁵ Nelson, *Unemployment Insurance*, 130-131. Senator James Couzens, chair, Committee on Education and Labor, directed the investigation with the aid of Isadore Lubin of the Brookings Institution.

³⁶ "Laundry Drivers Need Help," "Sears & Roebuck Drive Workers at Fast

Regardless of the cause, unemployment not only persisted, but seemed to be growing. A few labor organizers began to turn their attention toward jobless workers. Could these disaffected workers be organized?

Some of the labor leaders turned to farmers as potential allies in the struggle for economic security. Farmers, who had had a rough time in the previous decade, faced an even rougher time as the depression deepened. William Bouck, former president of the Grange and now president of the Western Progressive Farmers, described the farmer's plight: "The farmer is being closed out on mortgages and other debts faster than ever before, and the percentage of rented land, farmed by tenants is ever growing by leaps and bounds." The *Vanguard* attempted to revive the Farmer-Labor Party, which had enjoyed a moment of glory in 1920 but had rapidly declined thereafter. Although Bouck wrote many articles for the *Vanguard*, revival attempts came to nought.³⁷

In the meantime, the Communist Party had seized upon the economic depression as a vulnerable point in the capitalist system. Communists were among the first to organize the unemployed, setting up Unemployed Councils to lead the workers' revolution. They demanded unemployment insurance, a shorter work-week, public works, and immediate cash relief for the unemployed.

On March 6 the Communist Party organized mass unemployment demonstrations across the United States and in Europe, under the slogan, "Work or Wages!" In Seattle, the morning newspaper warned the demonstrators that police were prepared "with sub-machine guns and tear gas bombs." When a few

Pace," and "Carpenters Grab Contract Job at Starvation Wage," *Vanguard*, Jan. 1930, 2-3.

³⁷ "What is the Matter with the Farmers," *Vanguard*, Jan. 1930, 4.

hundred persons gathered to hear street speakers, the police broke up the rally with clubs, injuring a woman and arresting more than a dozen participants. The *Vanguard* charged that the police had wantonly violated "Constitutional guarantees of free speech and free assembly."³⁸

On the first of May, International Labor Day, Communists in different cities again held unemployment rallies. In Seattle, a group of Communists attempted to hold an outdoor rally. Police clubbed several participants and arrested fifteen men and two women in the Communist group, but did not disrupt an IWW meeting nearby. The Labor College issued a resolution protesting the police action, stating, "It is not necessary for us to subscribe to the views of these people to demand that they be guaranteed the elementary right of free speech."³⁹

Charity

The *Times* in December 1930 carried many stories on charitable activities in the city. It urged citizens to be even more generous than usual because the need was greater this year. It strove to correct the stereotype of the unemployed as beggars and thieves, stating emphatically:

The great majority of those out of employment are honest people--people who, in the main, who would suffer anything rather than resort to crime.... It is a poor sort of generosity to give merely as an insurance against crime.

The *Times* urged its readers to give to those in need simply

³⁸ Anthony Bima, *The History of the American Working Class* (1937), 359-360. "Machine Guns Ready for Reds," *Post-Intelligencer*, March 6, 1930, 1. "World-Wide Red Plots Fail; Parade Broken Here," *Post-Intelligencer*, March 7, 1930, 1. "Unemployed Beaten by C. of C. Cossacks," *Vanguard*, March 1930, 1.

³⁹ "Workers Beaten But Released" and "Labor College Scores Brute Police Power," *Vanguard*, May/June 1930, 1.

because it was a decent thing to do, adding:

Ordinarily industrious men and women are dissatisfied when out of work, but they are not dishonest. They need consideration as reputable members of the community, and not as criminals.⁴⁰

The *Times* itself had instituted an annual Christmas fund drive to collect money, clothing, food, and other goods for people in need. At the conclusion of its fourth annual fund drive, the *Times* congratulated the people of Seattle for a generous response. "The campaign . . . was a 100% plus drive," the *Times* reported. "The original objective was 50 families and a fund of \$13,890. Eventually 72 families were cared for and \$20,535 was raised--a more than 50% over-subscription." The *Times* also reported the activities of private charitable enterprises. The Master Barbers' Association and the Journeyman Barbers' Union opened a free "Shaveteria" downtown, "offering free haircuts to the unemployed." They also let the unemployed men shave themselves without charge. The "Shaveteria" supplied the water, soap, shaving mug and brush, razor ("straight or safety"), towels and talcum powder. To be eligible, the men needed only "a ticket from any charity saying they are out of work."⁴¹

While the *Times* lauded charity, the *Vanguard* scorned it. In an editorial entitled, "A Banner Year for the Rich," the *Vanguard* scoffed, "Publicity seeking newspapers and philanthropists have wallowed in a surfeit of charity propaganda for the unemployed." It asserted, derisively, "The rich who like to pour balm upon their souls by doing good to the poor after they have first done them good as a class have had a bountiful and joyous season." It was not

⁴⁰ "Unemployment and Crime," *Seattle Times*, Dec.28, 1930, 6.

⁴¹ *Seattle Times*, Dec.28, 1930, 1, 5.

charity that the *Vanguard* and its supporters wanted. It was work or maintenance, as a matter of right. If there were not enough paying jobs to go around, then some means must be found to maintain workers' incomes, while at the same time enabling them to maintain their self-respect.⁴²

When the state legislature convened in January 1931, it had before it a bill to provide unemployment insurance. If passed, the bill would give unemployed workers up to \$10 a week if single or \$15 a week if married, with \$2.50 for each additional dependent. The cost would be borne by employers, through a fund to be administered by the State Department of Labor. The *Vanguard* supported the lobbying effort of the Seattle Unemployment Insurance League. Seattle unions supporting the League included painters, automobile mechanics, shipwrights, boilermakers, and carpenters.⁴³

Although Seattle unions supported state or federal unemployment insurance, they did not have the backing of their national organization. The American Federation of Labor under President William Green re-asserted its traditional opposition to government-sponsored insurance. The Washington state legislature adjourned in March, having taken no action on the issue.

The *Vanguard* argued that neither the Republicans nor the Democrats could remedy the depression, because both parties were committed to the present means of production. It asserted:

Only a party of the producing class standing squarely on the platform of social ownership and control with production for use and not for profit can lead the way out of the dismal swamp in which all the capitalist nations of the world are

⁴² "A Banner Year for the Rich," *Vanguard*, Jan. 1931, 4.

⁴³ *Vanguard*, Jan. 1931, 1.

plunged.⁴⁴

At the same time, the *Vanguard* decried the simplistic revolutionary rhetoric of many of the jobless workers:

A lot of such proletarians seem to think that all that is needed to make a Revolution is a lot of mad, hungry, jobless people. This aggregation might produce a riot but that's not a Revolution.⁴⁵

To bring about a socialist commonwealth, said the *Vanguard*, workers needed organization, discipline, and educational propaganda.

"Nouveau Poor" and "Old Poor"

By February 1931, it was not only the seasonal workers and low-paid manual workers who were affected by unemployment. Large numbers of middle-class workers were unwillingly joining their ranks. Federated Press correspondent Scott Nearing described these workers, experiencing sudden downward mobility perhaps for the first time. He wrote:

A newcomer has stepped upon the American stage: a well-dressed, nicely-spoken man, accustomed to steady work at anything from \$35 to \$75 a week. He has a comfortable home, a car, a radio set; his wife wears good-looking clothes, his children are in school, and he has no money! ...

The poor are accustomed to poverty, apathetic. The New Comer is accustomed to a high standard of living, to security, to comfort. Suddenly, he has been blown into the air by the economic cataclysm, and he has landed outside of the fence, on a job line that he never before heard about except through the newspapers....

What will the New Comer do?

Nearing hoped that the situation would raise the New Comer's class consciousness. He concluded that the New Comer "must realize more and more clearly that only through a

⁴⁴ *Vanguard*, Jan. 1931, 4.

⁴⁵ "No Short Cut," *Vanguard*, Jan. 1931, 4.

united struggle for a worker-controlled society can the old poor and the New Comers in the ranks of poverty hope for the betterment of their conditions."⁴⁶

The following year, Tom Jones Parry, a Seattle writer, described the "newcomer" who typified the rank-and-file member of the Unemployed Citizens' League. His representative worker, Fred Salo, had roots in the community. He had held down a steady job for the past eight years. He had a small but comfortable home, a car, a radio set, a wife who was skilled in the home-making arts, and children in school. His job required little training or education, but it did require traditional work-ethic virtues of punctuality and reliability. He was a timekeeper.

Although the family lived frugally, their lifestyle and their standing in the community depended on Fred's paycheck. They spent enough money on a regular basis to qualify as consumers. Their consuming-power, however modest, was important not only to themselves but to others in their community. Their landlady, a widow, depended on their rent payments for her own living expenses. Besides their monthly rent, the Salos paid for their utilities: electric lighting, water, and telephone. They bought meat and groceries. They bought school-clothes and shoes for the children. They had already paid for their old Chevrolet, but they still owed installment payments on a radio and a piano. They were paying a music teacher for their daughter's piano lessons.⁴⁷

In Seattle, the *nouveau* poor had homes, cars, and children

⁴⁶ Scott Nearing, "The New Comer," *Vanguard*, Feb. 1931, 3.

⁴⁷ Tom Jones Parry, "We Americans: I--Fred Salo, the Forgotten Man," *The Forum*, Dec. 1932, 330-335. Parry, who owned a Seattle advertising agency and lectured on psychology, later became vice-president of the *Vanguards*, an organization formed early in 1933 to aid the Unemployed Citizens' League. Ronald Leistra, "Seattle's Racial Press 1930-1934," master's thesis, U. of Washington, 1964, 23.

in school. When the breadwinner lost his job, what would the family do? As Scott Nearing pointed out, they had not developed the survival skills to exist without a regular source of monetary income. They were not used to standing in job-lines or bread-lines. The thought of receiving charity carried with it a sense of shame and humiliation.

The old-timers, the "old poor," for the most part were the seasonal workers and low-paid manual workers. Single men, mostly, they had adapted to a life with little money. Could their adaptations serve as a model for the *nouveau* poor?

Throughout the 1920s, the blanket stiff had been a familiar sight in Seattle. Seasonal workers from the fisheries, farms, and lumber camps used the city as their off-season headquarters. In the winter months the city, with a population of 365,000, usually hosted some five to seven thousand transients. As the city population increased in the 1920s, so did the numbers of these winter residents. A survey at a peak period in 1927 counted thirteen thousand. The visitors generally congregated in the area south of the business district, the skid road area. They filled up the flophouses, the missions, and the cheap rooms. They camped out under bridges or in make-shift shelters. Sometimes they did odd jobs to make a little spending money. When funds ran low and no jobs were to be had, they supported themselves generally by scavenging or rummaging through garbage cans for edible discards, sometimes begging, and occasionally stealing.⁴⁸

⁴⁸ Robert Wilson, *Community Planning for Homeless Men and Boys* (1931), 29-31. Henry George observed the ebb and flow of seasonal workers in the city of San Francisco in the 1870s. He observed that it was not the lack of jobs in the city, but the lack of jobs in the country that accounted for so many unemployed men in the city. "Clearly, here," said George, "it is because men cannot find employment in the country that there are so many unemployed in the city; for when the harvest opens they go trooping out, and when it is over they come trooping back to the

Their presence, although not welcomed by the more stable residents of the town, was tolerated, or at any rate, accepted as an unavoidable nuisance. Late in the fall, the men would start drifting into town. Every spring, when the sun came out, they would just as predictably disperse out into the surrounding countryside, heading for the farms or the lumber camps or the Alaskan canneries.

Early in the year 1928 the Seattle Community Fund did a survey of its participating agencies. It recorded some thirty thousand applications for assistance. Of this number it was estimated that about ten thousand were local permanent residents and twenty thousand were itinerant laborers. The agencies were seeing larger numbers of unemployed in January and February 1928 than they had during the corresponding months in 1927. The study reported, "This winter saw a larger number of these men, and many of them with less money than usual on account of the failure of the Alaska fish catch last summer." The principal charities serving the itinerant laborers were the missions, the Volunteers of America and the Salvation Army. They all reported an increase in clientele in the winter of 1927-28 over the previous winter. The report identified the seasonal nature of unemployment:

Unemployment in Seattle usually begins to decline about February 20. At that time repair work starts on the transcontinental railroads, and the lumber camps open up. A few weeks later the fishermen leave for Alaska.⁴⁹

Not only had more men than usual wintered over in the city, but when spring arrived, they did not start leaving as early as usual. The city's charities began to get concerned. The

city again." *Progress and Poverty* (1979), 273.

⁴⁹ Capitola Allen, "Seattle's Jobless, 1927-28," *The Survey*, vol.60 no.12, Sept.15, 1928, 593-594.

private charities in 1929 had accommodations for only 554 men, a total which included space for twenty men on the floor in the city jail. In the fall of 1929, men started coming into the city a month earlier than usual, in October instead of November. In the spring of 1930, once again the men did not disperse as early as usual.⁵⁰

During that winter, the Seattle Community Fund, in cooperation with the state and the University of Washington, commissioned a three-month study. To gain first-hand experience, the researcher, Allen Potter, spent a night on the floor with 200 men at the Volunteers of America. The "mattress" was a narrow board covered with newspapers. Men used their own overcoats for blankets or pillows.⁵¹

Drawing on Potter's study, Robert Wilson, a researcher for the Family Welfare Association of America, compared Seattle with other communities in its treatment of homeless men and boys. He credited Carleton Parker, a former University of Washington professor, with generating interest in seasonal workers through his reports from 1913 to 1915. Wilson looked at different rationales for providing for these men. Some communities cited humanitarian motivations. Many communities cited their self-interest in maintaining law and order. Wilson explained, "The food and shelter needs of such men, foot-loose and willing to take a chance, would be met in some way, with or without the consent and planning of the

⁵⁰ "Employment Conditions in N.W. Improved," *Post-Intelligencer*, March 10, 1930, 1. "Let's Make Good Times Better by Starting Projects NOW!" *Ibid.*, March 26, 1930, 6.

⁵¹ "Social Work Student Tells of Homeless," *Post-Intelligencer*, March 30, 1930, 16. Potter was a student in social work at the University of Washington when he made the study. Later he became executive secretary of the Central Registry for Homeless Men. Don Duncan, "Researcher Sees Homeless as Worse Off Now than in 1930," *Seattle Times/Post-Intelligencer*, Sept. 13, 1987, K-5.

community."⁵²

In Kansas City, Missouri, a city of similar size (nearly 400,000 residents), which served similarly as a winter resort for some 8,000-10,000 seasonal workers, there was an additional rationale. Kansas City had an institution called the Helping Hand, founded in 1894. Wilson reported:

The institution has developed its services to homeless men on the assumption that Kansas City had a real responsibility toward the workers making up the mobile labor supply essential for the regional industries.⁵³

As a consequence of this long-standing attitude, Kansas City had a well-developed system for providing aid with dignity, which could be expanded or contracted as the need arose. Seattle, on the other hand, had left the provision of charitable services up to the private sector, primarily the churches and missions. By 1930, thirteen major charities and several smaller ones provided various services to the homeless men.

To bring order out of confusion, the major service providers in Seattle set up a Central Registry, which opened on November 10, 1930. Although some of the private charities initially balked at giving up any of their autonomy, most of them joined the program within a short while, and a spirit of cooperation was established. The Central Registry screened applicants for aid, assigned work to those who were able-bodied, and gave each man a ticket which he could then take to a feeding station.

In December 1930 a student reporter for the *Seattle Star* observed the breadlines at the Volunteers of America, the Salvation Army, and the Millionair Club. "Seattle's standing

⁵² Wilson, *Community Planning for Homeless*, 29-31. Carleton Parker, *The Casual Laborer and Other Essays* (1920).

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 40.

army -- the army of the unemployed -- is passing on review today and every day," he reported. He described the ragged, pitiful condition of the long lines of men who waited patiently for a bowl of stew and a slice of bread. While the volunteers and the Salvation Army served soup or stew to all comers, the Millionair Club catered particularly to married men, giving away loaves of bread according to the number of people in the family. Alluding to the club's improbable name, the young journalist wrote of its clientele:

"Millionaires of misery, they are rich only in wretchedness."

He added:

The line is endless -- an army of dull-eyed, destitute men with families and no jobs, needing shoes and clothes, and food -- hunted by the three grim ghosts of Hunger, Cold and Unemployment.⁵⁴

A few days later, the *Star* set up a competing breadline called The Sunshine Club, at the National Guard Armory, dishing out stew to any who asked. No Central Registry tickets were required. A magazine writer who took advantage of the *Star's* hospitality in December 1930 described the stew, nicknamed "slum":

The mess was grayish-brown, of gravy-like consistency. In my plate I counted exactly seven brown beans, one slice of carrot, and a layer of onion. There was one piece of ham about the size of a marble. Occasionally I found soft lumps of something genuinely sickening when tasted. These seemed to be mushy remnants of overboiled potatoes that had begun to rot.

Along with the stew went a cup of black coffee and three slices of bread. Nevertheless, the breadline did a brisk business. Many of the regulars preferred it to the Salvation

⁵⁴ Leverett Richards, "Morning--Noon--and Night," *Seattle Star*, Dec. 6, 1930, 6. This particular issue of the *Star* was put out by journalism students at the University of Washington. "Millionair Club" is correctly spelled with no "e" in "Millionair." It was founded in 1921.

Army or the Volunteers of America, because there, one of the regulars told him, "you had to attend the preaching and hymn-singing before you could eat."⁵⁵

However, the popularity of this breadline proved its undoing. For a few months it served as many as 1,400 to 2,000 meals a day, and occasionally as many as 2,200. Overwhelmed by its own success, it shut down its operation on April 1, 1931. Meanwhile, the Central Registry also did a brisk business. In the seven-month period from its opening day on November 10, 1930 to June 30, 1931, it registered some 7,200 men -- an average of 1,000 per month, or more than thirty new customers a day. Its figures for the month of February 1931 showed a daily average of shelter accommodations for 827 men, and 1,882 meals served.⁵⁶

Many seasonal workers accepted soup lines and shelters as a way of life, particularly in the off-season. Yet the swelling clientele at the Central Registry suggests that perhaps some members of the *nouveau poor* were joining the ranks of those who were not too proud to accept charity.

Hooverville

Even among the most "down and out" of the "down-and-outers," there were differences in tastes and standards of living. There were some who built their own shelters because they could find no room anywhere else. There were others who built their own shelters because they preferred to keep a sense of independence. As one observer said:

⁵⁵ Garland Ethel, "Soup Line in Seattle," *Nation*, Feb.25, 1931, 208-210. "1200 Dine as City Joins Star Club," *Seattle Star*, Dec.10, 1930, 1. "Sunshine Club Solves Hunger Problem on Christmas Eve," *Star*, Dec.24, 1930, 1. "Tramp, Tramp, Tramp the Boys Are Marching!" and "Sunshine Club Shows Little Increase in Line," *Star*, Jan.1, 1931, 1.

⁵⁶ Wilson, *Community Planning for Homeless*, 32, 35.

They contrast the free and easy shanty life, with plenty of tinkering to keep occupied, with the stiff regimentation of the transient shelter at night and idleness on the sidewalks in the daytime.⁵⁷

On the campaign trail in 1928, Herbert Hoover had credited "the American system of rugged individualism" for a rising standard of living.⁵⁸ After the rising standard began to fall, observers started to apply the phrase, "rugged individualists," not to intrepid pioneers or enterprising businessmen, but to the survivors of the economic break-down, the ones who had been marginal to the system all along: former blanket stiffs, down-and-outers, the builders and residents of Hooverville.

Seattle's Hooverville had its beginnings in the 1920s on the site of the old Skinner and Eddy shipyard, which had been dismantled after the war. This was the same site used by the pre-war generation of blanket stiffs, which Dr. Hermon Titus had described in 1908 (see chapter II). Whenever the city's cheap lodgings, the "floor flops," and the city jail were filled to capacity, enterprising men constructed their own housing out of scrap materials.

In December 1930, the Seattle police became concerned about the rapid growth of the "hobo city" on the tidelands near the railroad tracks. Favored building materials consisted of "flattened tin cans, old packing cases and odds and ends of junk." The chief of police warned the unwelcome residents that their patchwork shacks would be torn down. "The police do not intend to stand for an organized community of tramps," he declared, adding:

⁵⁷ Daniel Roy, "Hooverville: A Study of a Community of Homeless Men in Seattle," master's thesis, University of Washington (1935), 36.

⁵⁸ Herbert Hoover, "Rugged Individualism" speech, New York, October 22, 1928. Reprinted in Richard Hofstadter, *Great Issues in American History* (1958...1982), 330-335.

We are trying our best to help the unfortunates who are unemployed...but we must also protect the good citizens from drifting criminals who flock to Seattle and commit crime in order to live.⁵⁹

Eventually the unofficial real estate development on the Seattle waterfront acquired the nickname, "Hooverville," as did its many counterparts in other cities across the nation. By the winter of 1931-32, Seattle's Hooverville had grown so visible that city officials and businessmen could not ignore it. Following a precedent set in 1908, the city board of health declared it a health hazard and burned it down. After the fire, many of the burned-out residents moved away, but some returned to build again.⁶⁰

In the fall of 1932 a university student, Selden Menefee, interviewed several residents of the reconstructed Hooverville for the *Vanguard*, which had just been renamed the *Unemployed Citizen*. He called his series, "Studies in Rugged Individualism." Menefee reported his conversation with one of the residents, "Mr. B.," who lived in a six- by eight-foot shack built of "scraps of boards and boxes, and a sign advertising a tent and awning company on one side." This middle-aged man, a former gold prospector, had spent many years in Alaska but had spent the past two years in Seattle. He had worked at a variety of trades, but he had found only a few odd jobs in recent months. He moved to Hooverville when he could no longer pay for even the least expensive lodgings in town. Menefee explained, "He considers this way of living far superior to living in charity flop houses and soup kitchens." Like many Hooverville residents, Mr. B. exhibited

⁵⁹ "Forbes Orders Hoboes to Evacuate Seattle 'Jungles'," *Seattle Star*, Dec.30, 1930, 2.

⁶⁰ Jesse Jackson, "The Story of Seattle's Hooverville," in Calvin Schmid, *Social Trends in Seattle* (1944), appx. A. Jackson was the unofficial "mayor" of Hooverville. Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., *The Crisis of the Old Order, 1919-1933*, (1956), 171.

an attitude of passive resignation. When Menefee asked him what he thought was wrong with the economic system, "Mr. B. frankly said he didn't know. He merely hopes for better times soon."⁶¹

In February and March 1934, another university student, Daniel Roy, lived in a shack in Hooverville while gathering data for the Washington Emergency Relief Association. By this time there were in the Seattle area not one but several Hoovervilles, of which the one at the former location of the Skinner and Eddy shipyard was the largest.⁶²

Roy found many of the same conditions noted by Carleton Parker in his study of migratory labor fifteen years before and by Selden Menefee in his study of this same Hooverville a year and a half earlier. Seattle's unofficial mayor told Roy that Hooverville was "the abode of the forgotten man."⁶³ Most of the residents were single, middle-aged males. Most of them were unemployed, unskilled workers, scavenging or relying on charity for their daily bread, resigned to hard times, and politically apathetic. Like Menefee, Roy saw individualistic qualities in Hooverville residents, whom he characterized as the "ragged epitomes of rugged individualism."⁶⁴

When Roy took a census, he counted 639 persons, of which 632 were male and only seven were female. Six of the seven women were living with their husbands. Ninety-eight per cent

⁶¹ Selden Menefee, "Studies in Rugged Individualism--I," *The Unemployed Citizen* [formerly *The Vanguard*], Dec. 2, 1932.

⁶² Daniel Roy, "Hooverville: A Study of a Community of Homeless Men in Seattle," master's thesis, University of Washington (1935), 95. See also p.56: When Roy made his study in 1934, he found one respondent who claimed to have lived there for six years, which would place the Hooverville beginnings at least as early as 1928.

⁶³ Jackson, "Seattle's Hooverville," in Schmid, *Social Trends*, appx. A.

⁶⁴ Roy, "Hooverville," 96.

of the population consisted of single males. One third of them were between eighteen and forty years old. Two thirds of them were over forty. Half of them were either in their forties or their fifties. A few were over sixty, with the oldest having reached seventy-three years of age. Only fifteen per cent of the men had ever been married, and many of these had not had any contact with their families for years. Fully half of the men lived alone. The others shared a shack with one or two, or occasionally three, companions. There was one group of five and one group of seven. There were no children. As the local 'mayor' explained to Roy: "Hooverville is no place for kids."⁶⁵

With regard to occupations, most of the men had done manual labor of the kind most frequently classified as "unskilled." Ninety per cent of them had no more than an eighth grade education. Roy stated:

Not only do the Hooverites look like 'shovel stiffs,' behave like 'shovel stiffs,' and possess the educational qualifications for pick and shovel work, but they also claim wide practical experience with various forms of manual labor.

Roy elaborated, "Where a few will state 'I've been a logger all my life,' others will boast 'I've worked at everything, logging, mining, fishing, construction work, and harvesting. I went wherever I could get a good job.'"⁶⁶

For the past few years, good jobs had been hard to find. Most of the men in Hooverville were past their prime for physical labor. A man over the age of forty could anticipate a high probability of age discrimination, and a man over fifty could be certain of it. More than once, Roy heard a Hooverite over fifty say, "I never expect to get work again

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 39, 72-75, 85, 89, 42.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 60.

anyhow. They all say I'm too old."⁶⁷

For their material needs on a day-to-day basis, Hooverites relied on a combination of charity and their own scavenging skills. Most Hooverville residents were unemployed. Out of the 632 men, only thirty-six had full-time or part-time jobs in the city, and another forty said they would get occasional odd jobs. Half of them were regular customers of charitable breadlines and feeding stations, but the daily ration of a single dish of soup or stew often left them wanting. They supplemented their meager diet by panhandling, by soliciting local merchants for leftovers, or by rummaging through garbage cans for edibles. Roy reported,

Markets seem to be generous in giving away scraps of meat, loaves of bread, potatoes, etc. ...Garbage cans of the larger stores offer one important source of nourishment; many Hooverites visit them at night with sacks and paper bags, picking up the choicer cuts of meat and the least spoiled vegetables.⁶⁸

As for shelter, many of the men had already tried Seattle's cheap lodging houses and charitable shelters, which had been full to overflowing for the past several winters. Yet, even had a room or a floor space been available, most of the Hooverville residents preferred their present quarters. Many of the Hooverites found small projects to do around their own shacks. They enjoyed tinkering with their living quarters, scavenging building materials, re-arranging the scraps of lumber that defined their habitation, constructing rough furniture, or perhaps adding a window or a door.

Said Roy:

It does sound logical that men should be more content in individual quarters with plenty to do at their own inclination, and no one to dictate their

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 93

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 81.

hours of repose--than they would be herded together in drab shelters during arbitrarily set sleeping periods, and forced to spend day after day on downtown streets with empty pockets."⁶⁹

Roy noted that the men of Hooverville were, in general, a sociable group. "The Hooverites like to talk," he said, "and they like to get drunk." He went on to describe a typical gathering:

An evening's discourse, begun on more or less an intellectual level may, with the oiling of larynxes with anti-freeze, develop into group singing or quarreling, distinguishable as such in the early stages.

The beverage of choice, said Roy, was "'Dehorn,' a form of denatured alcohol obtainable at 50 cents a quart." According to Hooverville etiquette, Dehorn was considered

locally proper for both meat and fish courses and as cocktails and after-dinner liqueur; its nauseating orchard-spray aroma seems to be in good taste at all Hooverville social gatherings, formal and informal.⁷⁰

Although Hooverville residents engaged in sociable exchanges, their sociability did not extend to political action. Like his fellow student Selden Menefee before him, Roy commented on the general apathy:

Another striking aspect of the Hooverville attitudinal pattern is a passivity in regard to the national politico-economic order. Although this submerged poverty group sees no light in the darkness of depression and unemployment, and is convinced that some form of socialism is both desirable and inevitable, it is not violently bitter about the present state of affairs, nor does it violently agitate for a new system.⁷¹

Roy, like Menefee, viewed Hooverville as the ultimate

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 36.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 90-91.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 93.

result of a system which glorified unfettered competition and profit-seeking individualism. He noted, drily:

The Hooverites may be described as ragged epitomes of rugged individualism in a world of "closed" economic resources--individualistic because they have no ties with industry, ragged because of this independence, and rugged because they have to be to survive.⁷²

By presenting the residents of Hooverville in this manner, Roy gave an ironic twist to the doctrine of rugged individualism. In advocating a free rein for individualism, economic philosophers from Adam Smith to Herbert Hoover had argued that profit-seeking self-interest promoted social well-being. "Political economy," said Adam Smith, "proposes two distinct objects; first, to provide a revenue or subsistence for the people, or more properly to enable them to provide such a revenue or subsistence for themselves; and second, to supply the state or commonwealth with a revenue sufficient for the publick (sic) services."⁷³ American individualism in the twentieth century, said Herbert Hoover, embraces "the necessity of a greater and broader sense of service and responsibility to others."⁷⁴ In practice, the cult of individualism had often lost its association with social responsibility. Yet, even aside from the destructive aspects of cut-throat competition, the economic system had changed so that responsible individual actions could still have negative consequences for the economy. Farmers had raised too many crops; producers had produced too many goods. As a government policy, *laissez faire* was bankrupt.⁷⁵

⁷² *Ibid.*, 96.

⁷³ Adam Smith, *The Wealth of Nations* (1776), 138.

⁷⁴ Herbert Hoover, *American Individualism* (1923), 11. Joan Hoff Wilson, *Herbert Hoover, Forgotten Progressive* (1975), 55-57. Wilson, p.56, calls Hoover's concept of American individualism "a pragmatic utopianism that defied standard economic and political classifications."

⁷⁵ Kenneth Lux, *Adam Smith's Mistake: How a Moral Philosopher Invented*

Roy attributed the poverty of the Hooverites not to individual character flaws but to the economic system:

Ruthlessly, albeit impersonally, rejected by the industrial chameleon that once wooed their services, these men have no way of obtaining money to pay their way in modern society. Not only has the tap been shut off, but the faucet has been disconnected and the pipes taken out.⁷⁶

He concluded on a further ironic note:

Thus has arisen Hooverville to glorify the hobo "jungle" and carry on to new frontiers the traditional American spirit of rugged individualism. And there remains Hooverville, scrap-heap of cast-off men, junk-yard for human junk, an interesting variation of the grimace of *laissez faire*.⁷⁷

The unemployed workers of Hooverville had little in common with the unemployed workers who became members of the Unemployed Citizens' League. They had different backgrounds, values and expectations. In general, Hooverville residents had few roots, no family ties, and no plans or goals beyond day-to-day survival. They had learned to live with a minimum of material goods and physical comforts. As for the future, they had low expectations.

While the Hooverville residents had developed survival skills commensurate with their economic situation, the Unemployed Citizens were for the most part "nouveau poor." Like Nearing's "New Comer" or Parry's "Fred Salo," they had roots in the community, family ties, and hopes for the future. They had acquired a modest collection of material goods and physical comforts. In a survey of jobless workers

Economics and Ended Morality (1990), 82-84, 96-98. Harold Faulkner, *The Decline of Laissez Faire* (1961), 375.

⁷⁶ Roy, "Hooverville," 96.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 97.

registering at the League commissaries in the winter of 1932, the following profile emerged:

A variety of skilled trades is represented. The mode for residence in King County is 20-29 years. They are citizens, mostly from 30-55 years of age, with dependents. The majority are eighth grade graduates, but there are many who attended or were graduated from high school, and a few from the University.⁷⁸

For these workers, their jobs had not only given them the means to acquire more material goods, but had also given them standing in the community and a sense of self-respect. They had made plans and commitments for the future, based on their accustomed earning capacity. When they lost their jobs, the sudden downward mobility not only deprived them of material goods, but also necessitated a profound psychological and social adjustment. They were used to being consumers in a consumer economy, with much to learn about survival on the edge.

What would these New Comers do?

* * * * *

Thus, the early period of the Great Depression allowed tests of several theories of social change. For the business community, it tested the theory of a self-correcting business cycle. Would supply create its own demand? Would money poured in at the top trickle down? Could the private sector, with but a little encouragement from government, accomplish a recovery?

For reformers, this period offered a test of Marxist theory. Did the stock market crash herald the predicted collapse of capitalism? Would the workers rise up and take

⁷⁸ Arthur Hillman, *Unemployed Citizens' League of Seattle* (1934), 193 and Appendix F.

control? Would the farmers, workers, and unemployed workers unite at last in their own interest?

For welfare workers, this period challenged theories which attributed poverty to individual failings. It tested their ability to distinguish between the "worthy" and "unworthy" poor. Could local government and private charities meet the demands for relief?

For observers with a sociological bent, the period offered an opportunity to study differences in people's reactions to poverty, depending upon their previous relationship to the economic system. Researchers who interviewed Hooverville residents reported that the "old poor" expressed resignation and apathy, even as they adapted creatively on the fringes of the economic system.

Meanwhile, despite official reassurances and optimistic predictions, the depression deepened. From the time of the stock market crash, a year and a half would elapse before the unemployed citizens of Seattle would get organized. It would be even longer before the state or federal government would step in with public works and unemployment insurance. While a few people waited and hoped for a revolution, most people simply waited and hoped for a speedy recovery.

Chapter VII

The Unemployed Citizens' League

The idea for an Unemployed Citizens' League had been incubating for at least a year and a half while Hulet Wells and Carl Brannin worked together on the *Vanguard*. To outward appearances, however, the League sprang up spontaneously, spreading of its own accord throughout the city and to other parts of the state and nation.

It started with a casual suggestion. One summer evening the two couples, Hulet and Nesta Wells and Carl and Laura Brannin, were socializing at the Brannin home. It was in July, 1931, a year and a half into the Great Depression. Business and government were stymied. The Communists were trying to recruit jobless workers, but with little success. The two men were bemoaning the fact that nobody had been able to organize the unemployed. "Well, then," said Nesta, who had heard that line of conversation often enough before, "why don't you organize them?" The men took up the challenge.¹ Wells and Brannin were competent labor leaders, but, if the previous year's fruitless efforts were any indication, they needed a "critical mass" of unemployed workers. Had that critical mass been reached yet?

Following familiar procedures in starting a new citizen-action group, the two men set a meeting time, prepared an agenda, and reserved the Olympic Heights Community Clubhouse. To publicize the meeting, they contacted their neighbors personally and posted notices in local grocery stores. On July 23, about fifty people gathered together in the clubhouse. As the first order of business, they elected officers: A. L. Ladely, chairman; and Mrs. Jennie Ritchie,

¹ Hulet Wells, "I Wanted to Work," 276-277.

secretary.²

From the beginning, the League was adamant about two things: it wanted work or maintenance payments for its members, and it did not want charity. In August 1931, the *Vanguard* urged "work at fair wages without the stigma of charity." In September it added an alternative, demanding "work at a reasonable wage or relief without the galling inquisition of organized charity." In October it asserted, "No charity, but justice, should be demanded." In December it proposed as a militant rallying cry, "Work or Adequate Relief." A contemporary observer remarked, "In fact, the expressed and implied opposition to charity, its methods and philosophy, was a basic concept in the entire history of the organization."³

In its affirmation of the work ethic and its abhorrence of charity, the Unemployed Citizens' League reflected mainstream American values. As the Reverend E. P. Roe had so clearly pointed out in his nineteenth-century novel, *Without a Home*, which Hulet Wells had surreptitiously read as a boy, even the most menial job entitled one to some measure of social status and self-respect. The price of accepting charity was a loss of status and a sense of personal failure.⁴ Charity was

² "Jobless Citizens Organize," *Vanguard*, August 1931, 1. In another story, "Dictatorship is Goal of Bennett-Johnson Gang," the *Vanguard* notes that George Ritchie was a recently-elected officer in the carpenters' union. The information about the Ritchies indicates that women and labor union members were involved in the League from the beginning.

³ *Vanguard*, August 1931, 1; September 1931, 1; October 1931, 4; December 1931, 4. The December editorial did not point out that the acronym spelled "WAR," but the capitalization of "Work or Adequate Relief" is suggestive. Arthur Hillman, *The Unemployed Citizens' League of Seattle* (1934), 186.

⁴ Rev. E.P. Roe, *Without a Home* (1881), 326. Hillman, *Unemployed Citizens' League*, 187. Hillman quoted an unidentified League leader who observed, "The unemployed shared the traditional American idea of individual responsibility in a time of unemployment."

reserved for those who were unable, for physical or mental reasons, to work--the old, the young, the disabled, the delinquent, and the insane. Neither the government nor the private sector was equipped to provide maintenance funds for able-bodied workers who were simply unable to find a paying job. In addition to generating the funds, society-at-large would need to find an ideological justification for distributing those funds in a manner which would enable such workers to maintain their self-respect. To that end, the Unemployed Citizens' League would exert a significant influence.

Political Action

Wells and Brannin had learned some strategies in their years of labor organizing. One of the weaknesses of the general strike twelve years earlier had been a lack of agreement on specific goals. When the two men called the first meeting of the unemployed, they prepared in advance a list of specific goals, along with a specific proposal for action. "Our primary object," Wells recalled, "was to get the city to start a public works project that could employ mainly unskilled labor. Knowing the advantage of a concrete proposal, I had one ready."⁵

The two men had also prepared a resolution to give to the City Council and County Commissioners, listing three reasons for the formation of the new organization:

...for the purpose (1) of making a survey of the extent of local unemployment, (2) to have a means of presenting our needs to the proper authorities, (3) to assist in working out some plan for unemployment relief for the coming winter.⁶

⁵ Anna Louise Strong, *I Change Worlds: The Remaking of an American* (1937), 83. Wells, "I Wanted to Work," 277.

⁶ "Jobless Unite for Relief from Hunger," *Vanguard*, August 1931, 2.

Incorporating Wells' proposal for a public works project, this resolution urged the city to appropriate one million dollars to complete the construction of a marine drive along the waterfront. The resolution specifically rejected the concept of charity. "Neither our self-respect nor the alarming extent of the crisis," it stated, "will permit us to tolerate the disgraceful method of palliating such a situation by the niggardly dole of charity." It pointed out that "many thousands of industrious citizens" faced economic hardship not through any fault of their own, but "as a result of being crowded out of industry."⁷

From a diverse assortment of individuals, that first meeting created a cohesive group to lobby city and county officials for public works, advocating political action at the local level. The newly formed League met a second time a week later on Friday, July 31. This time, the *Vanguard* reported, "the crowd had doubled, almost filling the hall, and there was great enthusiasm for spreading the League idea into other sections." The next group to organize was the Admiral Way group in the north end of West Seattle. Charles W. Gilbreath, who, like Wells and Brannin, was active in the Labor College, called his neighbors together the following week, Thursday, August 6, at St. John's Parish Hall. Wells spoke to the gathering, and Gilbreath was elected chairman. Like the first group, this group also decided to conduct a neighborhood unemployment survey and passed a resolution calling for a public works project. Wells helped a third group get organized at "The Junction," the main business district in West Seattle. Marion Zioncheck, an energetic young attorney, attended that meeting and volunteered his

⁷ *Ibid.*

services for the League.⁸

By September the grass-roots organization had sprouted eleven branches throughout the city. They met in churches, community centers, union halls, and fraternal halls. They were, said the *Vanguard*, "demanding work at a reasonable wage or relief without the galling inquisition of organized charity."⁹

Following a pattern set by the socialist and labor organizations familiar to many of the members, the branches formed a central federation. The central federation urged all levels of government--city, county, state, and federal--to provide public works programs and relief, but relief without the stigma of charity. It outlined a program for public works to employ the unemployed at a minimum scale of \$4.50 a day for common labor. It also sought free lunches for school children, and protection from eviction for failure to pay taxes or rent. Chairman John F. Cronin, an unemployed building contractor who had been active in progressive causes for many years, congratulated the unemployed workers for organizing on their own behalf, saying:

We are where we are in the mire of an unprecedented depression because we have paid no attention to our economic questions but have blindly followed the lead of politicians who in most cases have been the servants of the big industrial and financial interests.¹⁰

On Friday, September 25, the central federation sponsored a mass meeting at the Eagles auditorium. An overflow crowd

⁸ "Jobless Citizens Organize" and "Admiral Way Jobless Unite," *Vanguard*, August 1931, 1. Wells, "I Wanted to Work," 278.

⁹ "Unemployed League Growing," *Vanguard*, September 1931, 1, 3. The *Vanguard* said there were "nearly 20" branches. It listed 11 branches, scattered throughout the city. Also see "An organization formed by colored citizens has affiliated," *Vanguard*, October 1931, 1.

¹⁰ "Unemployed League Growing," *Vanguard*, September 1931, 1. Hillman, *Unemployed Citizens' League*, 186-189.

listened to speeches by James Duncan, a long-time labor leader, and John F. Dore, "insurgent attorney" and future mayor. Proposals to tax the rich drew enthusiastic cheers and clapping. Resolutions urged Congress and the state legislature to start public works programs and levy heavy income and inheritance taxes on the well-to-do.¹¹

By October, the central federation had doubled in size, growing from eleven to twenty-two branches in a matter of weeks.¹² Due to the Labor College's contacts with organized labor and nationwide reform movements, along with its history of involvement with unionism and socialism, a national communications network was already in place when the League emerged on the scene. Through the labor press, the socialist press, local and national conventions, and by word of mouth, other communities learned about the Seattle experiment and followed suit. The League actively sought and achieved national publicity for its local actions.

Through neighborhood surveys the unemployed citizens set out to find out for themselves the extent of the distress. A mayor's commission had estimated the number of unemployed workers in the city at 35,000, but League members did not trust official figures. Members of local branches volunteered to canvass their own neighborhoods. After several branches had completed their surveys, the *Vanguard* reported:

The percentage of the unemployed compared to the registered voting heads of families is as follows: Olympic Hts., 52%; Ballard, 34%; Georgetown, 75 to 80%; White Center, 83%. It is the general belief of League members that the 35,000 unemployed figure

¹¹ "Tax Rich to Pay Unemployed," *Vanguard*, October 1931, 1. Duncan had been the secretary (a top executive position) of the Seattle Central Labor Council when Wells was president (1915) and for several years thereafter, and had participated in the Seattle general strike in 1919.

¹² "Tax Rich," *Vanguard*, October 1931, 1.

taken by the Mayor's Unemployment Commission is low.¹³

By presenting the figures in terms of "voters" rather than "workers" or "residents," League leaders showed their determination to affect the political process in the city and county. Instead of presenting the unemployment rate as it is usually understood, as a proportion of the workforce out of work, they compared the number of unemployed to the number of "voting heads of families." Although the resulting figures could hardly be taken as a gauge of unemployment in the usual sense, they did indicate that a large number of voters were out of work. The political thrust was also evident in the name the League adopted for itself; *i.e.*, not Unemployed "Workers," but Unemployed "Citizens." These jobless people were not the transients and non-voters making up the population of Hooverville. They were citizens with political leverage and roots in the community. The term "citizens" was a subtle reminder to their elected representatives that, though jobless, they were still voters.

Self-Help

Through the unemployment survey and the weekly meetings, local Leagues brought neighbors together in a common cause. As they started to talk with each other, they discovered ways to help each other out. A new function emerged: a cooperative self-help program by which to exchange goods and services. It started informally in the south part of town. Fred Runce, a member of the Columbia City Local, and his two sons had been cutting firewood on vacant lots. At the next

¹³ "Unemployed Mobilize Power to Press Demand for Work," *Vanguard*, October 1931, 1. Compare with "Thousands Seek Work Vainly in This City," *Vanguard*, February 1930: "The City State Employment office figures that there are from 15,000 to 20,000 unemployed in Seattle. The Associated Industries Employment office estimates the number at 35,000."

meeting of their local, they recruited some unemployed neighbors to help. They then distributed the wood among their families. With winter coming on, other locals adopted the idea of cooperative woodyards.¹⁴

By October, League branches were soliciting clothing and food for cooperative distribution through their neighborhood commissaries. Unemployed workers themselves staffed the commissaries without pay. League members recruited assistance from local businesses as well as from individuals. They persuaded local merchants, fishermen, and farmers to donate unsalable food and other goods. The *Vanguard* reported:

The Rainier Valley branches have secured the loan of saws from City Light, trucks from the Eyres Transfer Co., free gas from the Standard Oil and are putting on a "Wood Week" on a truck turned over to them. They can keep all they can cut. West Seattle branches are planning to do the same.¹⁵

As self-help emerged, the city and the business community worked with the League. Mayor Robert Harlin appointed a Commission on Improved Employment. As chairman he selected I. F. Dix, vice-president of the American Telephone and Telegraph Company, who was also the president of the Seattle Chamber of Commerce and of the Seattle Community Fund. This commission was sometimes known as the Harlin-Dix Commission and sometimes simply as the Dix Commission.¹⁶

The Dix Commission at first had proposed to set up five of

¹⁴ John Hogan, "The Decline of Self-Help and Growth of Radicalism Among Seattle's Organized Unemployed," master's thesis, U. of Washington, 1934, 8. Hillman, *Unemployed Citizens' League*, 195-196. Fred Runce a little later became a district agent for the Unemployed Citizens' League in its cooperative venture with the Local District Relief Organization.

¹⁵ "Unemployed Mobilize Power," *Vanguard*, October 1931, 1.

¹⁶ Hillman, *Unemployed Citizens' League*, 188, 198, re Dix: "He has been described as a man 'of unusual ability, tolerance and foresight,'" and, "his methods were those of persuasion and not of exercising arbitrary power."

its own commissaries, but the Unemployed Citizens' League persuaded it to use the League's commissaries instead. The Dix Commission agreed to provide food, especially bread and other basic commodities, while the League provided volunteers. The League resisted the attempt of the city's Social Welfare League to run the commissaries, because it feared "the inquisitorial methods" of professional welfare workers. The League gained a political advantage in its control of the commissaries, while the additional food supplies also strengthened the economic position of the League membership.

By December the *Vanguard* was pointing with pride to the success of the self-help movement. The League by this time had eighteen commissaries. The workers, it said, had overcome the handicaps of "lack of resources and legal barriers of private property." They had taken control of their own destiny:

Students of cooperative working class movements see in the work of the League a demonstration of the latent ability of the workers to organize and run the machinery of production when the present owner-capitalist system has broken down.¹⁷

The lack of money, however, was a handicap. The *Vanguard* reported success in soliciting raw foodstuffs, but, despite the city's assistance, a shortage of refined or manufactured goods:

Through the work of its members the League has gotten fish, potatoes, cabbage, carrots, apples, pears, and other farm produce but has been short on bread, flour and manufactured produce since it had no money with which to purchase them.¹⁸

By December, the self-help feature of the League dominated the program. While League leadership was still fighting on

¹⁷ "Unemployed Citizens League Recognized," *Vanguard*, December 1931, 1.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

the political action front and lobbying for public works, the rank-and-file were joining up for food and fuel.¹⁹

During the autumn of 1931, the League's attempt at political action did not succeed as well as its self-help component. In August and September, League leaders took their resolution for public works to the city and the county. The King County Commissioners turned the League down. The chairman announced, as Wells recalled, "that he was opposed to using public funds for jobs for the unemployed." The City Council, on the other hand, appropriated a million dollars as requested, and, said Wells, "the unemployed had a short-lived thrill of hope and gratitude." However, the appropriation turned out to be an illusion. Wells explained:

But it was only a trick, of the kind that politicians think clever, but under the circumstances, heartlessly cruel. Instead of including the appropriation in the budget of one of the city departments, the Council passed it as an emergency measure, knowing that a state law limited emergency appropriations. The result was that the million dwindled to \$462,000.²⁰

In the final analysis, Wells reported, the city spent less than \$150,000 on work relief that winter. By the middle of January 1932, twelve thousand men had applied for work. Fewer than half of the applicants were hired, and then for only six to twelve days' work apiece.²¹

The League took consolation in the fact that it had prevented the city from reducing the wage scale to a "slave labor" standard. When wages were reduced, the League fought to get them back up to \$4.50 a day. The *Vanguard* used the struggle for the wage scale as evidence of its growing political power: "The League has developed strength through

¹⁹ Hillman, *Unemployed Citizens' League*, 189-192.

²⁰ Hulet Wells, "They Organize in Seattle," *Survey*, March 15, 1932, 666.

²¹ *Ibid.*

this fight and is spreading out to develop new branches."²²

Unemployment Insurance?

One of the most controversial issues in 1931 was the question of unemployment insurance. As the depression deepened and more workers lost their jobs, the question gained importance. Should workers get paid when they were not working? Why? How? Who would pay them? Would such payments be considered a charitable dole or an earned form of income?

The *Vanguard* consistently advocated government-sponsored unemployment insurance. It argued that workers were entitled to "maintenance, not charity." The *Seattle Star* also favored unemployment insurance. As early as December 1930, it editorialized:

If it is moral to insure against crop failures, hailstorms, fire, drouth, theft, sickness, accident and death--and of course it is--why should not men be insured against the miseries of joblessness?²³

However, a strong current of public opinion opposed unemployment insurance as a "dole," with opprobrious connotations. President Herbert Hoover opposed government-sponsored unemployment insurance on the grounds that unemployment benefits were a form of charity and should remain a responsibility of the private sector. Organized labor opposed government-sponsored unemployment insurance. A number of individual unions provided unemployment insurance for their own members with varying degrees of success, depending largely on the financial health of the particular union. The American Federation of Labor (A.F. of L.) encouraged its associated unions to provide such benefits,

²² "Unemployed Citizens League Recognized," *Vanguard*, December 1931, 1.

²³ "What's Indecent About It?" *Seattle Star*, Dec.12, 1930, 6.

while at the same time opposing efforts to obtain state or national legislation in that direction.²⁴

The *Vanguard* had been sniping at the A.F. of L. for months because of its exclusionary policies toward unskilled workers and its conservative approach toward management. The A.F. of L., with its crafts unions and its preference for negotiation rather than confrontation, represented "business" unionism, while the *Vanguard* advocated "militant" and "industrial" unionism. In October 1931, the *Vanguard* editorialized that the A.F. of L. was dragging its feet instead of taking the lead in promoting such benefits as unemployment insurance. William Green, president of the A.F. of L., had given a Labor Day speech in which he explained organized labor's official opposition to unemployment insurance on the grounds that it was the same as "charity" or "the dole." He stated, "American workers abhor the imposition of a dole. . . . They shrink from a consideration of its demoralizing and degrading influence."²⁵

The *Vanguard* argued that, on the contrary, unemployment insurance was not a dole, but "a matter of taxation and legislation similar to pensions for teachers, firemen and other public employees." It objected that the use of "weasel words regarding 'doles'" obscured the issue and did violence to logic. Such insurance was a social responsibility which society owed to its workers:

²⁴ Daniel Nelson, *Unemployment Insurance: The American Experience 1915-1935* (1969), 67-68, 71-78. John Garraty, *Unemployment in History* (1978), 150. Philip Taft, *The A.F. of L.: From the Death of Gompers to the Merger* (1959), 31-38. Udo Sautter, *Three Cheers for the Unemployed: Government and Unemployment Before the New Deal* (1991), 223-226.

²⁵ "Questions for the A.F. of L." and "Green and 'Doles'," *Vanguard*, October 1931, 4. Taft, *The A.F. of L.*, 37. Taft points out that Green "differentiated between the attitude to be taken toward a relief measure [which the A.F. of L. supported] and one toward compulsory unemployment insurance which he described...as 'a union-wrecking measure.'"

It is not something which the rich are asked to give but is a recognition of social responsibility for unemployment. This is quite different from charity.²⁶

In the next few months, the *Vanguard* used the general terms "maintenance" and "relief" less and less often. It shifted instead to the more specific designation, "unemployment insurance," with its connotations of respectability and its implicit reference to one's standing in the workforce. By differentiating them from the recipients of charity or the dole, the concept of insurance would enable jobless workers to keep their self-respect.

In November the *Vanguard* reported that the American Federation of Labor in its recent convention in Vancouver, B.C., had reaffirmed its traditional opposition to unemployment insurance, despite an impassioned plea by Seattle delegate James A. Duncan, the former secretary of the Seattle Central Labor Council who was now the business agent for the Auto Mechanics Union. The subject of unemployment occupied a great deal of time on the convention agenda. Two delegates from Great Britain spoke of their country's experience with unemployment insurance since 1911, defending it as a national responsibility and a worker's right. "Unemployment," said one of the speakers, "is a national and international problem . . . and unless the community so organizes its resources as to provide work for every willing worker, the unemployed as the reserves of industry are entitled to maintenance." Duncan submitted a resolution urging A.F. of L. support for unemployment insurance. Taking his cue from the British delegates, Duncan argued that the British program kept wages up by reducing the temptation for

²⁶ "Angus McInnes...Will Tell of Canada's Unemployment Program" and "Insurance Against Socialism," *Vanguard*, October 1931, 1, 4.

workers to underbid other workers:

Instead of degrading men it has given a man a chance to stand up and say, "No, I will not go in and work for less than my fellows get. I at least will not starve to death."²⁷

Although the A.F. of L. turned down Duncan's resolution and refrained from endorsing the concept of unemployment insurance, the resolutions, reports, speeches, and heated debates indicated that organized labor in America was giving serious consideration to the issue.

By December 1931, a few people were beginning to argue that unemployment insurance would help to restore consumer purchasing power. The president of the People's Lobby, John Dewey of Columbia University, had recently organized a coalition, including the Conference for Progressive Labor Action (CPLA), whose news items often appeared in the *Vanguard*. The new coalition, which called itself "The Joint Committee on Unemployment," urged government support for "guaranteed employment and an annual income sufficient for maintenance upon a normal level of life." Noting that the current trend of cutting back on wages and hours had only deepened the depression by reducing consuming power, the committee stated:

The problem of America today is under-consumption.... What the present industrial world needs is an increase in consumptive power through the economic security of every wage-earner.²⁸

The Joint Committee argued that a rise in consumer spending would "make it possible to dispose of the accumulated goods

²⁷ "Duncan Favors Jobless Paym't by Government" and "Open Forum," *Vanguard*, November 1931, 3, 4. American Federation of Labor, *Report of Proceedings of the Fifty-first Annual Convention* (1931), 241-249, 371-374. The convention was held October 5-15, 1931.

²⁸ "Jobless Insurance is Demanded," *Vanguard*, December 1931, 1. Nelson, *Unemployment Insurance*, 151. Sautter, *Three Cheers*, 226-227. The CPLA had been formed by A.J. Muste in 1929.

in our warehouses and shops and to open the factories for further production." It recommended unemployment insurance, not just to relieve individual distress, but to shore up the economic system.²⁹

Wisconsin was the first and only state to enact statewide unemployment insurance during the Hoover Years. Its rationale, expressed in the legislative act, included the impact of wage-earners' incomes on the economy at large:

The decreased and irregular purchasing power of wage earners in turn vitally affects the livelihood of farmers, merchants and manufacturers, results in a decreased demand for their products, and thus tends partially to paralyze the economic life of the entire state.³⁰

The tactic of tying the economic straits of the poor to the economic survival of the rich came into use more frequently, as the simple appeal to human compassion failed to move the authorities to create the needed jobs and relief measures. At the federal level, Senator Robert La Follette introduced a bill for a massive public works program, arguing that the proposed expenditures would not only benefit individual workers, but would aid the economic recovery of the country. By this time, banks, insurance companies, and railroads were feeling the effects of the depression. La Follette pointed out that it was in their interest to do something about unemployment. "Drastic measures are necessary to prevent national paralysis," he declared. "At least 7,000,000 men and women are out of work. The solvency of large numbers of surviving banks, insurance companies and railroads is threatened."³¹

²⁹ "Jobless Insurance is Demanded," *Vanguard*, December 1931, 1.

³⁰ Wisconsin Unemployment Compensation Act of 1932, 108:01, reprinted in Nelson, *Unemployment Insurance*, 225-226.

³¹ La Follette quoted in article, "Make Jobs-End Panic," *Vanguard*, January 1932, 1. Sautter, *Three Cheers*, 306.

Meanwhile, the Unemployed Citizens' League was giving a practical demonstration of what could and could not be done when large numbers of people had no money to spend. By December the League was growing in political and economic strength, while city and county officials could do little more than express sympathy and urge patience.

Year-End Reports, 1931

As the year 1931 drew to a close, both the *Vanguard* and the city's mainstream newspapers reported on the events of the previous year and looked ahead to 1932.

The *Vanguard* focused on the achievements of the Unemployed Citizens' League. The League's self-help programs were in full swing, as members chopped wood and gathered produce from adjacent farms. Each local had a commissary with, as the *Vanguard* reported, "a complete system of records to eliminate would-be spongers and to systematize distribution." A local office supply company had donated record-keeping books so that the commissaries could keep track of supplies and volunteer hours.³²

The *Vanguard* noted that, in addition to putting food on the table and fuel in the fireplaces, the League was serving an educational function, helping to radicalize workers through experience, not just theory:

League members take a pardonable pride in the work of the organization and believe that theirs would have been a sadder plight without their joint effort. They are learning to depend upon cooperative effort rather than the individualistic gifts of charity committees of the rich and the bally-hoo of Big Business boosters.³³

³² "County Agrees to Give Relief," *Vanguard*, January 1932, 4. Hillman, *Unemployed Citizens' League*, 190-191.

³³ "County Agrees to Give Relief," *Vanguard*, January 1932, 4.

The *Vanguard* pessimistically predicted a worsening of the depression. It stated,

They [the unemployed] are convinced that the present condition of "hard times" will be with us for a long period and that something more is needed than a mere week to week existence,³⁴

It warned that more workers, even those who were lucky enough to hang onto their jobs, would soon be affected by the spreading depression: "There will be attempted wage cuts for teachers and other groups of workers."³⁵

Politically, the *Vanguard* continued to rail against the system which treated unemployed workers as charity cases. It continued to urge workers to get together to change the system. A brief editorial in the November 1931 issue stated its message succinctly:

Men and women without money even for food who have to apply to charitable agencies for help are naturally resentful at the often insulting questions asked and the officious red tape to be unrolled.

But after all let's get this straight. Organized charity is the perfect flower of capitalist civilization with its mania for profits. Instead of getting all het up over the crime of charity let's organize to do away with the system which requires it.³⁶

By combining political action with self-help efforts, the League hoped to bring about a change in the system.

While the *Vanguard* expressed pessimism, the three mainstream newspapers promoted a spirit of optimism. They advocated faith and courage to overcome obstacles while looking toward a better year ahead.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ "To Issue *Vanguard* Weekly," *Vanguard*, January 1932, 1.

³⁶ "Social Justice is Answer to Crime of Charity," *Vanguard*, November 1931, 4. The slang phrase "het up" meant "agitated," or "heated up."

Throughout the year 1931, the *Seattle Star* had exhibited sympathy for the workingman, and particularly for the unemployed. It had urged the state legislature to consider such proposals as public works and unemployment insurance. It had run stories on unemployment and the hardships it caused. It had publicized the efforts of private citizens and organizations, including the Unemployed Citizens' League, to provide relief for the unemployed, and had sponsored a feeding station, the Sunshine Club, for the needy. As the year drew to a close, the *Star* urged its readers to look on the bright side. It pointed out that prices of many goods and services had gone down. It exhorted its readers: "Cheer Up! This Old Year of 1931 Was Gala Season." The *Star* opened its New Year edition with a front page editorial, "Storms Never Last."³⁷ While acknowledging that the year 1931 had been a rough one, the *Star* assured its readers that 1932 would be better.

With the coming of Christmas and the New Year, the *Post-Intelligencer* counted Seattle's blessings. Thanking its readers for their participation in the fund drive, whether as donors or receivers, it pointed out that the receivers "in receiving have afforded double joy to the givers." It observed, "It is a merry Christmas because of obedience to the happiest of human impulses--the impulse to make others happy."³⁸

With regard to the economic situation, the *Post-Intelligencer* asserted that "business could have been much worse." It reported that, despite the depression, Seattle business in 1931 had exceeded that of 1921, many enterprises

³⁷ "Living Cheaper This Leap Year" and "Cheer Up! This Old Year of 1931 Was Gala Season," *Seattle Star*, Dec.30, 1931, 1. "Storms Never Last," *Star*, Jan.1, 1932, 1.

³⁸ "A Merry Christmas," *Post-Intelligencer*, Dec.25, 1931, editorial.

had expanded, and the majority of the population was still engaged in normal employment. The Boeing Airplane company had increased its workforce from 800 to 1,200. There had been eleven new industrial developments and thirty sizable plant extensions. The *Post-Intelligencer* added:

Seattle also has thousands and thousands employed in regular occupations, earning money, spending money, saving money, and generally carrying on the good old traditions of our economy.

Seattle is going ahead, basically, a fact which ought to be remembered as we stand at the threshold of a new year.³⁹

Publisher William Randolph Hearst, who had added the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* to his nationwide chain of newspapers in the 1920s, was concerned about unemployment and its ramifications, not only for the businessman but for the workingman as well. His editorials often appeared on the front page. In a New Year's exhortation, the *Post-Intelligencer* showed an illustration of Uncle Sam marching out of the shadows of 1931 into the sunshine of 1932, with the heading, "Straight Ahead, Without Fear." The accompanying article (not credited, but probably written by Hearst) noted, "A bad year is behind us, one of our WORST. All the more reason for attacking energetically, without paralyzing fear, the new year about to begin." Times were tough, the writer said, but people with courage, sobriety, and a willingness to work would overcome obstacles. He concluded:

The sun of 1932 is rising. Do your part to make prosperity rise with it.

There is a force in courage that exceeds all other power. Nothing can resist in the long run the combination of which success is born, ENERGY,

³⁹ "Seattle Is Going Ahead!" *Post-Intelligencer*, Dec.25, 1931, editorial.

DETERMINATION, SELF-CONTROL.⁴⁰

The *Seattle Times*, which in 1929 had described itself on its editorial pages as "Absolutely Independent in Business and Religion and Independent Republican in Politics," by 1931 had dropped the "Republican" and described itself simply as "An Independent Newspaper." The paper's editorial policy showed strong support for Republicans, President Herbert Hoover, the capitalist system, the work ethic, and business enterprise in general.

As the year 1931 drew to a close, the *Times* acknowledged that the year had been generally dismal for business, but it still supported the Administration policies. In the fall of 1931, Hoover had taken steps to set up a Reconstruction Finance Corporation (RFC) to loan money to banks, railroads, and insurance companies. By December, opponents in Congress were complaining that the proposed RFC would not directly aid the unemployed. Defending the RFC, the *Times* explained the Administration's position that aid to business, by spurring economic recovery, would put people back to work:

The commonest criticism of President Hoover's more recent messages and public activities is that he neither proposes nor does anything for the direct benefit of the people in this country who need, or who think they need, to be helped....

The vital error here is in the failure to recognize the fact that the President is not dealing and cannot deal with any great number of personal cases, but is going directly to the roots of everybody's case....

The President of the United States cannot hand out jobs to everybody. He can try, and he is most sincerely trying, to bring about a rearrangement of basic conditions so that everybody will have a job.⁴¹

⁴⁰ "Straight Ahead, Without Fear," *Post-Intelligencer*, Dec.27, 1931, March of Events section, 1.

⁴¹ "Thoughtless Critics," *Seattle Times*, Dec.23, 1931, 6. Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., *The Crisis of the Old Order 1919-1933* (1956), 236-238.

In its year-end summation of economic conditions, the *Times* took a positive stance, stating, "The belief is general that 1932 will be a good year for the American people." Showing its faith in the self-regulating mechanism of the market and evidently confusing "need" or "desire" with demand (that is, monetary demand), the *Times* asserted:

Already there are convincing proofs that production is increasing to meet the demands of our own consumers. Industrial activity will steadily expand, until prosperity returns almost before we realize it....

Affirming its faith in the system and its leaders, the *Times* continued:

The institutions of the government rest upon solid foundations and we shall undertake no dangerous experiments.... The people feel that the man now at the head of the government is courageous and capable, and has the added merit of fine, common sense.⁴²

The year-end *Times* of 1931 was more subdued than in 1929 or 1930. It no longer featured the multi-page year-end spreads boasting of new buildings and business activity, but instead carried articles and editorials like the one above, urging a calm faith in eventual recovery.

City Elections

At the beginning of the year 1932, the League had been in existence for five months. Its leaders were working on the political level to get local governments to set up public works programs and relief funds, while the rank-and-file were developing mutual self-help programs to secure food and fuel. In the spring of 1932, the League reached its peak both in

The RFC started its operation in February 1932.

⁴² "The New Year," *Seattle Times*, Dec. 31, 1931, 6.

political influence and in self-help programs. As it grew stronger and more visible, it attracted attacks from within and without.

Early in 1932, the City and County met with the Unemployed Citizens' League to organize the Local District Relief Organization (LDRO). It was set up to provide direct relief, relying mainly on funding from the county, using League volunteers to administer the program. In January and February, the County allocated \$125,000 to relief. In March, it increased the allocation to \$185,000.⁴³

In the meantime, League members harbored resentment over the failure of the city public works program. The program had been marred, first by funding difficulties and then by wage disputes. By January the City claimed it had run out of money. It asked the County to take over the task of providing unemployment relief. Whether the works program had been sabotaged deliberately or simply by bureaucratic bungling, the League blamed the city council. City elections would be held in February and March; the League determined to show its strength at the polling booths.

Primary elections were held on February 23. Stung by the actions of two councilmen in particular who had voted for a reduced pay scale on the city public works program, the League mobilized its members to defeat them and elect two new candidates, Frank Fitts and Roy Misener. The mayor's race resulted in a run-off between the incumbent Robert Harlin and the challenger, John Dore, the attorney who had spoken to the League's mass meeting at the Eagles auditorium in September and who had campaigned assiduously among the unemployed. Dore placed highest in the primary, with Harlin coming in second. Political newcomers Fitts and Misener also did well

⁴³ Hillman, *Unemployed Citizens' League*, 192, 195-196.

in the primary. They credited the League with some twenty thousand of the votes that were cast for them. The *Vanguard* reported the results of the primary election as an encouraging sign of "the power which the workers possess when mobilized for a common end." It repeated its call for an independent political party encompassing "both employed and unemployed workers and the poor farmers."⁴⁴

The final election for city offices took place March 8. With the support of the League, John Dore won the mayorship, while Fitts and Misener won their respective city council races. The *Vanguard* reported that the League's "solidarity at the polls" had made the difference for Fitts and Misener and had been helpful for Dore. It is likely that Dore would have won in the final election even without the League's support, since he received nearly twice as many votes as his opponent. Just how much influence the League actually wielded was a matter of speculation. John Hogan, an observer from the University of Washington, reported that in March there were 30,000 people on the commissary rolls, but many of them took no interest in politics. He said, "Outsiders tended to exaggerate their voting unity." Arthur Hillman, a sociologist, stated, "It is difficult to estimate true strength, but it is significant that the belief in the power of the unemployed to elect their own men was established."⁴⁵

Even though the newly elected candidates would not take office until June, the Unemployed Citizens' League was jubilant about its emerging political strength.

⁴⁴ Hillman, *Unemployed Citizens' League*, 207-208. "Workers and Farmers Organize Your Power" and "Fitts and Misener Thank League," *Vanguard*, March 1932, 3-4.

⁴⁵ "Tasks for Organized Unemployed," *Vanguard*, April 1932, 1. Hogan, "Decline of Self-Help and Growth of Radicalism," 22-23. Hillman, *Unemployed Citizens' League*, 208-209.

"Buy--With What?"

In the spring of 1932, depression remedies proliferated. While the federal government launched the Reconstruction Finance Corporation (RFC) to loan money, the business sector engaged in a national advertising campaign to persuade people to spend money. The automobile industry urged people to buy new automobiles. An article in the *Vanguard* expressed skepticism. It pointed out that the problem was not a lack of desire for automobiles, but a lack of money with which to buy them:

With a depression in full swing, with about ten million unemployed, with wheat and cotton near the lowest prices of history, with bonds being defaulted and taxes being raised, it is difficult to see how enough people are going to have the money to spend for new cars....

But where is the market for these goods? That is the puzzle. Some economists believe that such a market cannot be created until the farmers and wage earners have more purchasing power than at present.⁴⁶

For the producers of consumer goods and services, the big question was not how to produce more, but how to restore money to workers and their families so they could consume more. The dilemma was not immediately evident to all members of the local business community, because for many businesses, the purchaser of the firm's product or service was not an individual human being but another business. Through channels of trade, products made their way into national and international markets. They might pass through any number of corporate hands before reaching their ultimate destination.

Even when production and marketing took place within a local region, many business transactions could take place without involving individuals as consumers. During World War

⁴⁶ "Ballyhoo Instead of Bread," *Vanguard*, March 1932, 4.

I, for example, an unusual local demand for lumber had developed quite suddenly due to government contracts for shipbuilding. Pacific Northwestern timber companies sold logs to Everett lumber mills, who sold lumber to Seattle shipyards, who sold ships to the United States government. In that economic loop, the function of the men who worked as loggers, sawyers, and carpenters was simply to produce logs or lumber or ships, not to consume (*i.e.*, purchase or buy) any part of the product. It was an influx of money from the federal government, far more than the influx of workers, that fueled Seattle prosperity and enriched the business community in 1917 and 1918. It was the withdrawal of federal money in 1919 that precipitated the post-war slump. During the 1920s, Seattle had numerous small manufacturing concerns, many of whom sold their products to other companies, either locally or in other states or overseas. The buyers and sellers who were most visible to the members of the chamber of commerce or the Rainier Club (the businessmen's club) were not wage-workers or hired hands, but other businessmen.⁴⁷

And yet, in the 1920s, the wage-workers and hired hands had become increasingly important as consumers. Business revival was fueled by the production and sale of consumer goods. The advent of the automobile had spawned a whole host of auxiliary products and services, many of which were oriented toward individual consumers. By 1930, many Seattle businesses, from the large Bon Marche department store to the

⁴⁷ For a brief and informative description of the beginnings of the Weyerhaeuser interests in Washington, see Robert Ficken, "Weyerhaeuser and the Pacific Northwest Timber Industry, 1899-1903," in G. Thomas Edwards and Carlos Schwantes, *Experiences in a Promised Land* (1986), 139-152. Noting the tremendous growth of the lumber industry between 1880 and 1905, Ficken states, p.140: "Much of this expansion resulted from the completion of the Northern Pacific and Great Northern railroads, making it possible to ship lumber to the East." This statement suggests the importance of out-of-state buyers.

small corner gas station, depended directly on local consumption. With the rise of mass marketing and consumer credit, retail stores and service industries had expanded dramatically. For urban dwellers, many items which were previously considered luxuries, such as "store-bought" clothing, furniture, and perhaps even a radio or a piano, became necessities. Reciprocally, as more wage-workers became consumers, more businesses came to rely on consumer income.⁴⁸

As consumers, the seasonal workers--the blanket stiff--with few possessions and little cash had made little difference to the local economy, whether they were employed or not. But when large numbers of steady wage-workers lost their jobs and thus their consumer-power, local businesses began suffer. The first to notice, perhaps, were the producers and sellers of everyday goods, such as food. People did not stop eating, but they bought fewer items, shifted to the cheaper commodities, and made do with less.

Without a paying job, how was a self-respecting worker to get money to buy the necessities of life? The worker's problem quickly became the businessman's problem. Farmers gave away their un-saleable produce, taking a loss on their investment, and grocers watched in dismay as their former paying customers passed by their doors on their way to the free League commissaries. The problem within the economic system was not the availability or the distribution of goods, but the distribution of income. Unemployment insurance might have represented one way to get cash into the hands of cash-

⁴⁸ For an excellent, in-depth study of the creation of "consumer capitalism," see William Leach, *Land of Desire: Merchants, Power, and the Rise of a New American Culture* (1993). Leach deals with the period 1880-1930, exploring, as he says, pp.8-9, "why and how the culture of consumer capitalism emerged in the way it did: the development of a new commercial aesthetic, the collaboration among economic and noneconomic institutions, and the growth of a new class of brokers."

less consumers, but in early 1932, it was still a controversial concept.

The self-help activities of the Unemployed Citizens' League were centered around getting basic necessities to consumers who lacked money to buy them. In so doing, the League in effect was setting up an alternative economic system. But at the same time, the League was lobbying hard for assistance from existing political and economic institutions. With the start of the new year, the *Vanguard* placed unemployment insurance as a top priority for legislative action. Since the state legislature met every other year to consider new legislative proposals and since the next bi-annual session would not occur until January 1933, the Unemployed Citizens' League launched an initiative campaign (part of a nation-wide movement) to put unemployment insurance on the fall ballot. The Labor College's Sunday program, "Open Forum," featured a speaker from New York, Dr. Harry Laidler, director of the League for Industrial Democracy. Dr. Laidler spoke on "Unemployment Insurance--A Constructive Step Forward." Despite the League's efforts, the initiative petition failed to get the 50,000 signatures needed to qualify for the fall ballot.⁴⁹

While the League directed much of its energy toward political action, it continued to build up the mutual self-help program. Volunteers sought donations of food and other goods, staffed the commissaries, and contributed time and labor in other ways. The idea continued to spread. In addition to Yakima, other leagues were formed in Tacoma, Bellingham, Kent, Auburn, Renton, and Des Moines. By May the *Vanguard* was taking an increasingly militant tone. Stating

⁴⁹ "Unemployment Insurance Is Proposed," *Vanguard*, January 1932, 1. "Bring In All Petitions," *Vanguard*, June, 1932, 4. Hillman, *Unemployed Citizens' League*, 214.

that the "exploited workers and impoverished farmers" had been "baffled and beaten for years by the capitalistic interests who own the idle machinery of production and dictate the price of farm products," it lauded workers and farmers for "organizing to supply their own needs on a cooperative self-help basis and to secure work and redress of wrongs through governmental agencies and legislation."⁵⁰

The Seattle League was instrumental in organizing a state-wide convention in Tacoma on May 29-30, 1932. Hulet Wells chaired the two-day meeting, attended by 400 delegates from 112 locals. The new federation took the name, United Producers of Washington, with the object of building "a system of industry in which service and not profit will be the key note." An alliance between unemployed workers and impoverished farmers took shape, as Yakima delegates told some Seattle delegates that farmers in their area would gladly exchange potatoes and apples for "clothing and other commodities from the city." The convention elected Wells and his fellow Seattle league organizer C. W. Gilbreath to the new state executive committee, along with other representatives from King, Pierce, Whatcom, and Yakima counties. Carl Brannin took on the duties of state publicity chairman, in addition to his duties as director of the Seattle Labor College and editor of the *Vanguard*.⁵¹

National Publicity

With veteran publicizers Brannin and Wells in charge of promotional efforts, the self-help program attracted national attention. They had already initiated a number of stories

⁵⁰ "Unemployed of State Organize," *Vanguard*, May 1932, 1.

⁵¹ Hillman, Unemployed Citizens' League, 230-231. "Appropos Control of Government," *Vanguard*, June 1932, 1. "Political Power is Strongest Weapon," *Vanguard*, July 1932 (special edition), 2.

and features about the League. Wells had written an article that was published in *Survey*, a magazine of social service, in March. Brannin had written one for *Labor Age* which appeared in June.⁵²

National magazines and newspapers published stories about the novel way in which Seattle's unemployed citizens were helping each other survive the Depression. Joanna Colcord, director of the Charity Organization Department of the Russell Sage Foundation in New York, visited Seattle and wrote a number of articles as part of her nation-wide research into relief methods and alternatives. Throughout 1932 and into 1933, articles mentioning the League appeared in such magazines as *Labor Age*, *Business Week*, *Survey Graphic*, *New Republic*, *Nation*, *Fortune*, *Atlantic*, *Reader's Digest*, *New Outlook*, *Forum*, *Colliers*, *Labor Action*, and *Monthly Labor Review*.⁵³

League leaders solicited publicity, not because they wanted to organize the rest of the country, but because they wanted to inspire other unemployed citizens to follow their example and organize themselves. The League attracted national attention in large part because its leaders were already connected to national networks through the American Federation of Labor, the Federated Press (a national labor news service), and various socialist organizations. They also had personal connections like Harvey O'Connor, who had participated in the Seattle general strike and was now a reporter for the Federated Press. By the summer of 1932,

⁵² Wells, "They Organize in Seattle," *Survey*, March 15, 1932, 666. Carl Brannin, "Northwest Unemployed Organize," *Labor Age*, June 1932, 4-6.

⁵³ *Labor Age* April, June, August 1932; *Business Week* May 4, July 27, 1932; *Survey Graphic* June 1, 1932; *New Republic* June 8, 1932, *Nation* June 29, 1932; *Fortune* September 1932; *Atlantic* October 1932; *Reader's Digest* December 1932; *New Outlook* December 1932; *Forum* December 1932; *Colliers* December 31, 1932; *Labor Action* January 21, 1933; and *Monthly Labor Review* May 1933. Hillman, *Unemployed Citizens' League*, 262-264.

League efforts at a national outreach were bearing fruit. The *Vanguard* reported: "Thousands of people all over the country are watching Seattle and Washington. They believe that we are carrying out a unique experiment in unemployment relief which is worth trying elsewhere."⁵⁴

While the League promoted the merits of self-help, it also cautioned the larger community about the limitations. The *Vanguard* pointed out that self-help was not "the key to a new utopia," but was strictly a temporary and inadequate solution to the problem of unemployment. The unemployed could help each other in some ways, but they still needed access to economic resources. Many of their self-help activities required "financial assistance, either from public sources or from private individuals." Referring to the scant benefits gained through self-help, the *Vanguard* asserted:

The intelligent unemployed are not interested in employing themselves indefinitely on a basis of peonage for the bare necessities of life. They are willing to help themselves as a temporary relief measure, but they look to Federal, State, County and City governments to make adequate appropriations for work or direct food relief.⁵⁵

Although the city had set up a relief fund for food for the unemployed, the League argued that the allocation was too meager to sustain a minimum standard of living. A few months previously the League and the Mayor's Commission had calculated that it would take \$6 a week to feed a family of four with "the schedule of food rations . . . necessary for bodily health." The League complained, "The unemployed have never received this much. It has averaged less than \$2.50 per week and for the week ending June 25th was about \$1.60." It promised to "make an aggressive fight" to get more food

⁵⁴ "Washington Movement Attracts Nation-Wide Attention," *Vanguard*, July 1932, 2. Harvey O'Connor, *Revolution in Seattle* (1964), 219-222.

⁵⁵ "Political Power is Strongest Weapon," *Vanguard*, June/July 1932, 2.

money from the city and, in addition, "to secure adequate appropriations for clothing, shoes and housing."⁵⁶

* * * * *

Thus, in its first year, the League had seen its influence grow rapidly. At first glance, it seemed to have been a product of spontaneous combustion; it had started out of nowhere and spread almost instantaneously across the state and nation. Yet, pre-existing conditions had much to do with the rise and spread of the League. The first pre-existing condition was one of place: the locale was Seattle, with its radical heritage. The second pre-existing condition was one of leadership: the founders of the League were experienced labor leaders; at least one of them had been very much involved in Seattle's radical community in the formative decades of the twentieth century. The third pre-existing condition was that of a network already in place: the Seattle labor community was connected to national socialist and labor organizations through such means as personal contact, conferences, publications, and news services. The Seattle Labor College had given the League a home; the *Vanguard* had given it a voice.

The League's first political effort, the campaign for public works, had met with scant success; the city and county both claimed a lack of funds. In the spring of 1932, the League had exerted its political muscle with greater effect. A number of political aspirants saw a potential constituency in the growing ranks of the unemployed, and the League in turn threw its support to candidates who promised reform. Two League-backed candidates defeated incumbents for positions on the city council, and a League-backed attorney

⁵⁶ "League Will Fight for More Food," *Vanguard*, June/July 1932, 1.

gained a large number of votes to win the mayor's race.

By the summer of 1932, the League could look back on a year of accomplishment. It had organized branches and set up commissaries throughout the city. It had recruited some 40,000-50,000 members. It had developed procedures for soliciting donations and utilizing volunteer help. It had shown its political strength. It had inspired similar efforts in other communities and had joined state-wide and national organizing efforts. It had attracted national attention, appealing to the American belief in the work ethic and self-help while calling for "work or maintenance payments, not charity."

The League operated from a position of strength in the spring and early summer of 1932. Yet, even as it grew, its very strength would generate internal and external tensions.

Chapter VIII Militants on the March, 1932

As the League grew stronger, it attracted dissent from within and attacks from without. In the summer of the year 1932, as the League reached its first anniversary, militants vied with each other over mass action techniques, moderates pursued conciliation, and the rank-and-file were pre-occupied with daily tasks of obtaining food and fuel. Meanwhile, politicians and businessmen, disturbed by the League's growing militancy, eventually coopted League programs.

The League's successful excursion into city politics soon turned to disappointment. As the new mayor solicited the cooperation of the business community, he slashed the city budget. The resulting wage reductions and layoffs added more than a hundred people to the ranks of the unemployed.

City Lay-Offs

Although the city election finals had been held in March, the new mayor and city councilmen were not inaugurated until June. For two months, mayor-elect John Dore outlined his policies and prepared his new programs. He gained the favor of the *Times*, the *Post-Intelligencer*, and the Chamber of Commerce, to the dismay of the *Star* and the *Vanguard*. As inauguration day approached, the *Star* reported, city employees were in a state of "near panic," due to his promises to make drastic cuts in both manpower and pay. "The one promise feared more than anything else," said the *Star*, "was Dore's promise to keep his promises."¹

One of Dore's first actions was to re-organize the police

¹ "City Hall in Panic," *Seattle Star*, June 4, 1932, 1,

department and to set forth strict guidelines for police conduct, targeting graft, extortion, and the use of unnecessary force. At the same time, he went after gambling resorts and houses of prostitution, giving the proprietors of such places forty-eight hours to leave town. Meanwhile, he got into a name-calling dispute with six of the nine city council members over his appointments for city engineer and other offices. He called these six council members "public enemies." He had been in office less than a week when the *Star*, which had supported him during his campaign, ran a front-page headline, "Why Did We Vote for Dore?" Said the *Star*: "Never in the history of Seattle politics has there been such a sudden and fierce separation of former political allies. Seldom has a mayor made such a display of rashness."²

By the end of June, Dore had also alienated organized labor. After the Seattle Central Labor Council passed resolutions denouncing his proposed wage cuts for city employees, Dore called the Council "inconsistent." He argued that the Council had agreed to a twenty per cent wage cut in the building trades and a big cut for taxi drivers. "What's the difference between private industry and public industry?" asked Dore. The Council, for its part, denounced Dore for "violating his oft-repeated promises" not to cut salaries of less than \$200 a month. Most city employees were paid less than that amount. Salaries of most laborers and clerk-typists, for example, ranged from \$120 to \$150 a month.³

² "Opening Address of Seattle's New Mayor," *Seattle Star*, June 6, 1932, 5. "Dore Threatens Resorts With Shotgun Squad," *Star*, June 7, 1932, 1. "Why Did We Vote for Dore?" *Star*, June 9, 1932, 1.

³ *Seattle Star*, June 23, 1932, 1-3. Starting June 23, p.2, the *Star* intermittently ran payroll lists for various jobs in various city departments. The payroll for the street and sewer department showed the superintendent at \$416 and the assistant superintendent at \$400 a month. The next highest salaries were for a stationary engineer at \$335, a stationary maintenance engineer at \$300, a chief clerk at \$280, and a general shop foreman at \$270. A gas shovel operator made \$250. A

Although some people pointed out that cutting the wages of city employees would reduce the buying power of the community, Dore countered that such would not be the case, because city employees were paid by city taxpayers. "You do not improve conditions by taking \$100 from John Jones, the bricklayer, and giving it to Bill Smith, the city bookkeeper," he reasoned. The same amount of money would circulate in the community, regardless. He proposed to reduce the homeowner's taxes, then raise money through bond issues for public works to employ the unemployed workers. Public employment would then stimulate private employment, which would create taxable wealth. "Therefore," Dore asserted, "the two great necessities at the present time are the reduction of excessive taxation and huge public works thru bond issues."⁴

A city employee took issue with Dore's proposed pay cuts, pointing out that such cuts would affect the tax base of the community, as well as the amount of money in circulation. "Eighty-five per cent of city employees are taxpayers," she said, "and with this slash moderately paid employees will lose their homes, including myself."⁵

The dispute over the Seattle city budget was symptomatic of a growing crisis in municipal government across the state.

junior maintenance engineer and an assistant stationary engineer each made \$235. The chief street inspector made \$220, a foreman of construction made \$215, as did a foreman of auto repair and a general foreman of equipment and stores, while a foreman of paving made \$210. A junior accountant made \$205, while a foreman blacksmith and three district foremen made \$200 each. By far the greater number of employees made from \$120 to \$190 a month. For wage-workers contracted on a daily basis, the range was from \$5.25 (common laborers) to \$9 (carpenters and linemen) per day.

⁴ John Dore, "Mayor Dore Issues Statement on Waste," *Seattle Star*, June 29, 1932, 7.

⁵ "Readers Give Views," *Seattle Star*, July 5, 1932, 5.

When cities and counties were laying off their own workers, how could they aid the unemployed?

"On to Olympia," July Fourth

By the spring of 1932, many cities and counties had exhausted their resources for relief. They turned to the state for aid, but the state had no formal authorization, no legal machinery, and no institutional process or agency to address local unemployment problems. As the Fourth of July approached, the United Producers of Washington organized a statewide march on Olympia to demand a special session of the state legislature to create the necessary legal machinery.

Independently, the mayors of forty Washington cities met in Seattle in June to petition for a special session. The question of taxes and public funding occupied high priority in the discussion. Advocates of state action pointed out that local relief funds came from property taxes that could no longer be increased, but the state had access to gasoline tax revenues that could be diverted for emergency purposes. Yet the mayors were not unanimous. The mayor of the little town of Sunnyside defended the present system of local relief only, stating: "The charity problem is one for each community to work out for itself with the aid of the county charity commissioner." The *Seattle Star*, too, opposed calling a special session of "our tax-slinging legislature," on the grounds that the special session would be costly in itself and state-sponsored relief would, if passed, mean higher taxes.⁶

Governor Roland Hartley, a conservative Republican, offered

⁶ "Jobless May Stage Parade," *Seattle Star*, June 23, 1932, 1. "East Side Fights Dore Plan: Believe Local Relief Better," *Star*, June 27, 1932, 2. "Under This Flag," *Star*, July 1, 1932. The mayors met in Seattle on Saturday, June 18.

no sympathy to the unemployed. He prided himself in being a self-made man. The son-in-law of Everett lumber baron David Clough, he owned a lumber mill and other companies in Everett, where he had served as mayor from 1909 to 1911. He consistently opposed taxes, unions, and most proposals for progressive reform. As one of Everett's wealthiest men, he had supported other mill owners and the sheriff in their opposition to the IWW organizers in 1916, although he had apparently been out of town on the day of the Everett massacre. He had been elected governor in 1924 and re-elected in 1928. He had no use for Wobblies, communists, socialists, or labor organizers. When Carl Brannin on behalf of the Unemployed Citizens' League wrote to him to request an audience, Hartley made no reply. The League, together with the United Producers of Washington, then started to plan a mass action.⁷

At the same time, the mayors of forty Washington towns and cities also sought an audience with the governor. When the mayors held a conference on June 18, Seattle's new mayor, John Dore, urged a special session of the legislature. The following week, Dore wrote to Governor Hartley, asking him to meet with a committee of mayors from Yakima, Bellingham, Ellensburg, and Montesano, besides Seattle.⁸ Hartley declined, stating: "Interviews are not very satisfactory.... It is much better to carry on negotiations in writing." Mayor Dore replied, in writing: "Your refusal was a considerable surprise, because it is probably the first time in the history of the United States that a governor has refused a conference with the mayors of his state." He added

⁷ Norman Clark, *Mill Town: A Social History of Everett* (1970), 60-64, 114-115, 119, 202-203. "Jobless May Stage Parade," *Seattle Star*, June 23, 1932, 1.

⁸ "Hartley Won't Hear Mayors' Jobless Plea; Unemployed Plan March to Olympia," *Post-Intelligencer*, July 1, 1932, 7.

a plea for state action:

The state of Washington has done nothing whatsoever to relieve unemployment. The situation is out of the hands of the cities. Seattle cannot cope with this problem. Neither can Tacoma, Everett or the cities of Eastern Washington.⁹

Tacoma Mayor M. G. Tennant identified the crux of the problem:

The governor admits that the state has no legal machinery with which to deal with local unemployment problems. Our plan is to provide that machinery through a special session of the legislature.¹⁰

John F. Cronin, president of the Seattle Unemployed Citizens' League, then announced that the League would lead a march to Olympia on Monday, the Fourth of July. M. M. London of Bellingham, executive secretary of the United Producers of Washington, announced that several thousand Whatcom County residents would participate, along with delegations from Spokane, Yakima, Snohomish, Grays Harbor and Skagit counties. Many participants would drive to Olympia in trucks or automobiles, while others would walk and still others, in hobo fashion, would "ride the rods." Subtly poking a bit of fun at Seattle's rival city to the south, the *Post-Intelligencer* in mock seriousness reported, "The Tacoma unemployed were attempting to arrange yesterday for a special train of box cars to carry their delegation to Olympia."¹¹

Carl Brannin and Hulet Wells published a special edition of

⁹ "Scavotto Plans To Demand Quiz of Councilmen," "Hartley Won't Hear Mayors' Jobless Plea," "Text of Gov. Hartley's Letter Refusing Audience to Mayors," and "Dore's Reply Saying Action Insults City," *Post-Intelligencer*, July 1, 1932, 1, 7.

¹⁰ "Hartley Won't Hear Mayors' Jobless Plea; Unemployed Plan March to Olympia," *Post-Intelligencer*, July 1, 1932, 7.

¹¹ "Thousands Will March On Olympia In Jobless Protest," *Post-Intelligencer*, July 2, 1932, 1, 15. "Thousands Set for Olympia Relief March, Say Leaders," *Seattle Times*, July 2, 1932, 1.

the *Vanguard*, urging their readers, "On to Olympia!" They described the state of emergency:

Upwards of one-third of the workers in the cities and towns are without employment and have no means of sustaining life except through charity or public aid. Thousands of others as a last resort have turned to the land, and, on meager patches of poor soil, and without proper equipment or training, will face acute distress during the coming winter. The normal farming population itself is not far from bankruptcy....

This is the urgent and primary problem demanding for its solution the full power and attention of the government of the state.¹²

By the summer of 1932, as local leagues across the state prepared for the march on Olympia, their success had attracted the attention of the Communists and their much-smaller organizations, the Unemployed Citizens' Councils. There was open hostility as the two groups vied with each other for the loyalties of jobless workers. Speaking for the United Producers of Washington, London had publicly disavowed any connection with Communists, declaring "that the alleged Communist committee was not connected with and had no right to speak for the main unemployed organizations." Nevertheless, on Sunday, July 3, a large delegation from the Communist-led organization, the National Council for the Unemployed, reached Olympia.¹³

Later that afternoon, two hundred League members in trucks and automobiles arrived at the Olympia city limits. Police and highway patrol officers refused to let them enter the city, but escorted them to Priest Point Park, about two miles north of the capitol building. The mayor of Olympia, concerned about food and housing for the expected thousands,

¹² "On To Olympia--July Fourth!" *Vanguard*, v.III no.7-A [June 1932], 1.

¹³ "State Jobless To March On Olympia Today," *Post-Intelligencer*, July 3, 1932, 6.

explained apologetically that the city, with its population of only ten thousand, was "not prepared to care for an influx of dependent people." The chief of police, the county sheriff, and the chief of the state highway patrol all declared that they "did not intend to use any show of force."¹⁴

In Olympia on Monday, the Fourth of July, officials took a watchful stance. Olympia's chief of police, Frank Cushman expressed his concern:

The unemployed are orderly and we anticipate no trouble from them, but a lot of dangerous characters are drifting into town under their guise.¹⁵

Governor Hartley had discretely left the capital to spend the holiday weekend at his home in Everett. The National Guard staged its annual Fourth of July parade through the business district in the morning, then retired to the Armory. City police kept a low profile, with no uniformed officers but a number of plainclothesmen circulating inconspicuously among the crowd. In the afternoon a large crowd gathered on the capitol grounds. Chief Cushman estimated there were fewer than one thousand actual participants. They were outnumbered by an audience of perhaps fifteen hundred state employees and local residents. The participants broke into two factions, with the unemployed leagues and United Producers' League on one side and the Communist-led National Council for the Unemployed on the other.¹⁶

League members formed into columns to march to the capitol

¹⁴ "200 Jobless, Cold, Hungry Reach Olympia." *Post-Intelligencer*, July 4, 1932, 1. "Jobless Caravan Has Citizens of Olympia Worried," *Seattle Times*, July 3, 1932, 3.

¹⁵ "Jobless Win Battle With Reds" and "Unemployed League Battles Communists At Olympia," *Post-Intelligencer*, July 5, 1932, 1, 3.

¹⁶ "Jobless Win Battle With Reds" and "Unemployed League Battles Communists At Olympia," *Post-Intelligencer*, July 5, 1932, 1, 3.

building. A *Post-Intelligencer* reporter, Lester Hunt, took notes as a band of Communists, uninvited, stepped to the front of one of the columns to lead the march, "with an array of flaming placards carrying characteristic slogans." The marchers whose column had been usurped fell back and regrouped behind the Seattle League's banner. When they reached the capitol steps, Hunt reported, "The Reds camped on one side of the steps and the unemployed hoisted their banner on the other."

When M. M. London and Carl Brannin approached the speaker's rostrum on the capitol steps to open the program, some fifteen or twenty Communists leaped up the steps. Waving red flags, they tried to seize the rostrum.¹⁷ Hunt described the ensuing altercation:

A general fist fight followed and a dozen men were hurled six feet to the stone steps during the melee....

The unemployed retained control of the pedestal [the rostrum] and a stormy meeting ensued, with Communists heckling the speakers and creating a general disturbance.

M.M. London...destroyed several Communist banners during and following the fight. Several attempts were made by the Communists to haul him down, but without success, due to his swinging fists.¹⁸

There were many cuts and bruises, and a Seattle man suffered a broken ankle. At length the marchers returned to their cars and trucks. Many of them accepted the city's offer of free gasoline to get out of town. From forty to one hundred others encamped for the night at Priest Point Park on

¹⁷ "Hartley Not In His Office," *Seattle Times*, July 5, 1932, 5.

¹⁸ Lester Hunt, "Jobless Win Battle With Reds," *Post-Intelligencer*, July 5, 1932, 1. The *Post-Intelligencer* had sent its own staff reporter, Lester M. Hunt, to Olympia to cover the story.

the outskirts of town.¹⁹

A delegation was selected to wait for Governor Hartley to return to Olympia. Besides Hulet Wells and C. W. Gilbreath of Seattle and M. M. London of Bellingham, the committee included G. E. Bradley of Bellingham, A. Chisholm of Tacoma, and Harry Wood of Des Moines. They drew up a resolution listing five demands:

1. Adequate food, clothing and shelter for unemployed workers and destitute farmers throughout the state.
2. Diversion of gasoline tax collections from the highway fund into a special emergency relief fund.
3. A moratorium on mortgages of destitute farmers and unemployed home owners in the city.
4. Repeal of the law requiring foreclosure on two delinquent assessments.
5. That relief work should be provided at the legal scale of pay on public projects such as farm to market roads and rehabilitation of the homes of the destitute.

To provide legitimate justification for government intervention, London asserted that the state was facing "a major crisis comparable to war and far exceeding any natural calamity that this country has ever experienced."²⁰

On Tuesday, July 5, a detachment of fifty to one hundred unemployed citizens remained in Olympia, having camped overnight at Priest Point Park.²¹ The *Times* reported that two

¹⁹ "Communists, Jobless Fight; One Hurt in Olympia Demonstration; Wait to See Governor," *Seattle Star*, July 5, 1932, 1, 3. "Many Jobless Leave Olympia," *Star*, July 6, 1932, 10. The injured man was identified as J.C. Fletcher of Seattle's Georgetown area. "Hartley Not In His Office When Jobless Call," *Seattle Times*, July 5, 1932, 5. On July 6 the *Star* said 100 unemployed remained in Olympia, but the *Times* placed the number at only 40.

²⁰ "Jobless Win Battle With Reds On Steps Of Capitol" and "Unemployed League Battles Communists At Olympia," *Post-Intelligencer*, July 5, 1932, 1, 3.

²¹ "Hartley Not In His Office When Jobless Call," *Seattle Times*, July 5,

factions attempted to see the governor, but he was out. The Communists left a statement for the governor. Later that evening, after most of the marchers had left, the *Times* reported, some of the remaining unemployed citizens met in the Olympia Labor Temple. About a dozen men, "again described by police as Communists," broke in the door of the Temple, disrupting the meeting. The intruders were dispersed by the police. Communist demands, rejected by the unemployed leagues as too extreme, included "a dole of \$15 a week for each unemployed person, with \$3 additional for each dependent."²²

Vowing to remain in the vicinity until Governor Hartley would meet with them, the unemployed citizens sent for reinforcements. Some of their number returned to their homes to bring back food, tents and blankets, along with more recruits for an extended stay. The *Times* reported:

Citizens here, alarmed over the new call for unemployed, have urged state officials to induce the governor to hear their demands immediately.²³

On Wednesday, July 6, Governor Hartley gave in and met with the unemployed delegation, which included J. F. Cronin, London, Brannin, Wells, and several others, saying he was "still ready to take any steps open to him to help the unemployed." However, he deferred making any decision on whether to call a special session of the legislature, saying "The question is too vital, too important to the state to be solved by hasty action."²⁴

1932, 5.

²² "Hartley Not In His Office When Jobless Call," *Seattle Times*, July 5, 1932, 5.

²³ "Olympia Refuses To Provide Food In Jobless Siege; Leaders of Capital March Send Out Call for More Recruits," *Seattle Times*, July 6, 1932, 4.

²⁴ "Many Jobless Leave Olympia," *Seattle Star*, July 6, 1932, 10.

"Hartley Meets Jobless, Delays Session Ruling," *Seattle Times*, July 7,

Upon returning home, Cronin told the *Seattle Star* that the governor had been cordial but unmoved. In Hartley's opinion, the destitute had only themselves to blame "because of their extravagance during the period of good times." Reflecting on his own experience as a self-made man, he claimed that he "could go out without a dollar and make his way in the country." He recommended that unemployed workers should go back to the country and take up farming. To the *Star*, Cronin gave his own opinion of Hartley's *laissez-faire* arguments: "He seemed to forget that men with families and homes in cities . . . cannot be expected to move away and abandon their possessions." Hartley had grown up on a farm but had left it at the age of thirteen. "Why did he leave it?" asked Cronin, rhetorically. "For the same reason I left it--the conditions were too hard. Producing merely to preserve life without any thought of enjoying a taste of the better things I knew to be available under other conditions drove me away as it probably drove him."²⁵

The altercation at the state capital on the Fourth of July did nothing to endear the Communists to the leaders of the Unemployed Citizens' League. On Wednesday, July 13, the League's central federation ejected the officers of the Ballard local for alleged communistic tendencies. The central federation then directed that the Ballard local's food supplies be delivered to central federation headquarters, the Northwest depot, 5419 Ballard Avenue, which was located across the street from the Ballard local's commissary at 5410 Ballard Avenue. The following Monday, July 18, a dispute broke out over milk and bread deliveries.

1932, 13.

²⁵ "Cronin Gives Star Statement on Conference," *Seattle Star*, July 8, 1932, 3.

When a milk truck drove up to the Northwest depot, the ejected Ballard officers commandeered it and unloaded the milk in their own commissary across the street, next to the police precinct station. While the Ballard commissary members unloaded the milk truck, the police called headquarters for more men in case of trouble. A little later, a bread truck drove up. Police stood by and took no action while it was commandeered in like manner. Shortly afterwards, Mayor Dore arrived on the scene.²⁶

After talking to the commissary workers and the police, Dore addressed the crowd, threatening jail to trouble-makers but promising aid to the deserving. He assured his audience:

We will have no bloodshed if I can possibly prevent it. Everything possible to provide food and shelter for the unemployed is being done and will continue to be done. No one will go hungry and no families will be without shelter while I am mayor.²⁷

Later, Dore met with leaders of the Unemployed Citizens' League in an attempt to mediate the dispute.²⁸

Summer of '32, Bonus Army

The summer of 1932 was a restless one, not only in Seattle, but across the country. As joblessness grew, so did homelessness. Men, boys, and even women took to the rails, criss-crossing the country aimlessly, travelling in box-cars by day and sleeping in hobo jungles at night. Any destination would do. For some of the unemployed citizens on the road, the nation's capital became a logical destination.

²⁶ "Rebels Seize Jobless' Food," *Seattle Star*, July 18, 1932, 1-2.

²⁷ "Dore Personally Breaks Up Near-Riot At Ballard Depot; Transfer of Food Halted by Jobless," *Post-Intelligencer*, July 19, 1932, 3.

²⁸ "Dore Personally Breaks Up Near-Riot At Ballard Depot; Transfer of Food Halted by Jobless," *Post-Intelligencer*, July 19, 1932, 3.

In March, a Catholic priest, the Rev. James R. Cox of Pittsburgh, led a march of fifteen thousand men to the nation's capital. By July, Father Cox was running for President under the "Jobless-Liberty Party" banner. Such events were reported in the newspapers and had an impact in the Pacific Northwest.²⁹

Many of the unemployed men had served in the First World War. Congress had awarded them a bonus, but it was not due to be paid until 1945. Representative C. Wright Patman of Texas had introduced a bill to pay the veterans early, but in May the House Ways and Means Committee shelved it. Veterans in the Pacific Northwest took action. To persuade Congress to revive the Patman bill, Walter W. Waters, an unemployed veteran in Oregon, recruited three hundred of his fellow veterans to march to the capital. As former members of the American Expeditionary Force (A.E.F.), the marchers called themselves the Bonus Expeditionary Force (B.E.F.). Washington state also mounted a contingent. In Seattle W. H. Murray, an IWW leader and war veteran, commanded the King County division. Marching, hitch-hiking, or riding the rails in a manner reminiscent of Coxey's Army, the Bonus Army converged on the nation's capital.³⁰

"This was truly another Coxey's Army," said a contemporary

²⁹ "Famous 'Marches' to Washington," *Post-Intelligencer*, July 29, 1932, editorial page. "Vets Ought To Stay, Says Cox," *P-I*, July 31, 1932, 2. The B.E.F. attracted nationwide attention. It was covered by many news-gathering organizations, including the Associated Press (AP), Universal Service, and United Press.

³⁰ "300 King County Veterans Will Reinforce Defeated Bonus Army," *Post-Intelligencer*, July 31, 1932, 2. In August Murray became president of the Unemployed Citizens' League. Seattle newspapers may be taken to indicate how the citizens of Seattle experienced the march. For historical perspectives, see Roger Daniels, *The Bonus March: An Episode of the Great Depression* (1971) or Franklin Folsom, *Impatient Armies of the Poor* (1991). For a first-hand account by the instigator of the march, see W. W. Waters and William C. White. *B.E.F.: The Whole Story of the Bonus Army* (1933).

observer. "These men came to Washington because they had nowhere else to go, nothing else to do, and were as willing to starve on the road as in the streets of the cities they once called home."³¹

Throughout June and July, Seattle's mainstream newspapers watched the bonus army's progress. On Thursday afternoon, July 28, the newspapers reported that the B.E.F. and the Washington, D.C. police had clashed at the site of some half-demolished buildings on Pennsylvania Avenue. As the drama unfolded, President Hoover called out the United States Army to disperse the stragglers of the B.E.F. One veteran lay dead. More than sixty people were wounded. The next day all three Seattle newspapers covered the "Battle of Anacostia Flats" with graphic descriptions of the ragged veterans in retreat. They quoted President Hoover's and General MacArthur's official statements defending the use of prompt military action to protect the institutions of American government.

The city's three newspapers differed from each other in their editorial comments. The *Star* blamed the government for using excessive force and the *Post-Intelligencer* called the situation "tragic from every point of view," while the *Times* defended the government's actions as justified and restrained. The *Star* condemned the Hoover administration with an editorial, "Shame!"

The deliberate shooting down of war veterans is a blot on the national honor, a disgrace for those responsible, a sad commentary on the callousness of politicians concerning those who saved the nation fourteen years ago.³²

The *Post-Intelligencer* called the administration's action

³¹ "Bullets for the B.E.F.: Hoover Relief, New Style," *New Republic*, Aug. 10, 1932, 328.

³² "Shame!" *Seattle Star*, July 29, 1932, 4.

"Sheer Stupidity." It stated, "The whole situation could have been avoided in the first place if the government had paid the veterans their bonus."³³

The *Times* defended the administration, stating that most of the legitimate veterans had already left the city and "Those who took their places were not veterans--they were drifters, unemployed or Communist agitators." It explained:

Congress did not pay the bonus for the simple reason that it couldn't without bringing the Treasury within the shadow of bankruptcy and deferring indefinitely a return to prosperity.³⁴

Regardless of which paper one read, the indisputable point was that the United States Army had been called out to disperse a group of United States veterans. Far from showing its strength, the government's use of armed force was in itself an admission of impotence. If the United States government could not help its own veterans in their hour of need, what were the alternatives? The *Post-Intelligencer* observed:

Calling out the army to burn the camps of the "bonus army" and drive the veterans out with cavalry, machine guns, infantry, tanks and gas attacks will supply what is called "extreme radicalism" with texts for many a day.³⁵

In Seattle, the bonus army fiasco heightened the tension of a restless summer. The Unemployed Citizens' League held a mass meeting that Saturday night. Veterans wore black crepe in their buttonholes. The entire audience stood, hats off, for a moment of silence to honor the slain bonus army veteran. Homer T. Bone, candidate for United States senator, lambasted the "Hoover vacuum cleaner" for its treatment of

³³ "Hoover's Army Use," *Post-Intelligencer*, July 30, 1932, 1, 2. "Give Veterans Jobs If They Must Wait For Bonus," *P-I*, July 31, 1932, 2.

³⁴ "Right Now!" *Seattle Times*, July 29, 1932, 1.

³⁵ Arthur Brisbane, "Today," *Post-Intelligencer*, July 30, 1932, 1.

the bonus army. W. H. Murray, commander of the King County division of the B.E.F., announced plans to return to Washington, D.C., and called for three hundred veterans to join him.³⁶

At the time the B.E.F. was evacuated from Washington, D.C., the Seattle Unemployed Citizens' League was engaged on two political fronts: 1., with the state, attempting to persuade the governor to call a special session of the legislature; and 2., with the county, attempting to prevent the county commissioners from taking control of the League commissaries.

As of Friday, July 29, efforts to obtain a special session of the state legislature appeared doomed to failure. Since Governor Hartley had left Olympia to go to Eastern Washington for a week, the Unemployed Citizens' League cancelled its plan to send a delegation to Olympia. It continued to hope that Hartley might yet be persuaded to ask for federal aid for unemployment relief and public works. Meantime, at its regular weekly meeting on Thursday night, July 28, the members voted to have the executive committee meet with the county commissioners to try to keep the League commissaries under League control.³⁷

On Tuesday, August 2, some 10,000 people crowded into the Civic Auditorium to hear Homer T. Bone speak, as well as John Stevenson, candidate for county commissioner. J. F. Cronin, chairman of the central committee of the Unemployed Citizens' League, chaired the Civic Auditorium meeting. Radio stations in Seattle and Tacoma broadcast the speeches.³⁸

³⁶ "300 King County Veterans Will Reinforce Defeated Bonus Army; Mass Meeting Flays 'Abuse' Of Ex-Soldiers," *Post-Intelligencer*, July 31, 1932, 2.

³⁷ "Special Session Hopes Fade As Hartley Departs," *Seattle Times*, July 29, 1932, 9. "Unemployed Protest Plan for Overseers," *Times*, July 31, 1932, 11.

³⁸ "10,000 Attend Bone Meeting In Auditorium," *Seattle Star*, August 3,

The political season, which would extend through the fall until the November election, was under way.

The Forgotten Man

On Tuesday, September 20, the eighth day of a twenty-one day tour of the West, Democratic presidential candidate Franklin D. Roosevelt arrived in Seattle. Thousands of people lined the streets, cheering as his motorcade slowly made its way from the King Street railroad station to the Olympic Hotel. That evening he spoke to an overflow crowd at the Civic Auditorium. Inadvertently, one of his high-ranking supporters reminded Seattleites about the "forgotten man." Roosevelt had remembered that forgotten man in a radio address last April, when he had urged government action to help "the forgotten man at the bottom of the economic pyramid." Washington's Senator Clarence C. Dill, in his laudatory speech, recalled the phrase, apparently unaware that Roosevelt's political advisors had advised him to forget the forgotten man. Roosevelt in his speech denounced the Republican tariff, but made no mention of any forgotten man.³⁹

The *Vanguard*, however, had not forgotten, and neither had a Seattle writer, Tom Jones Parry. The *Vanguard* columnist, under the pen name, "Dynamo," reported: "Senator Dill . . . said the phrase is bound to become historic." Dynamo commented drily: "Governor Roosevelt, who discovered the forgotten man, seems to be sincere. Possibly he really intends, if elected, to remember the forgotten man." In a cynical vein, Dynamo continued: "He is a much 'remembered'

1932, 1-2.

³⁹ "Complete Text," *Seattle Times*, Sept. 21, 1932, 11. "Roosevelt Fails Jobless" and "The Live Wire," *Vanguard*, Sept. 23, 1932, 1, 4. Robert McElvaine, *The Great Depression* (1984), 116, 125, 131.

man in September and October of every election year, then promptly forgotten on the first Tuesday after the first Monday in November."⁴⁰ By implication, Seattle's unemployed citizens could expect to be forgotten after the election, unless they devised a way to make themselves remembered.

This forgotten man had been described by William Graham Sumner, well-known advocate of *laissez-faire*, fifty years earlier. Sumner said:

He is the simple, honest laborer, ready to earn his living by productive work.... He is the clean, quiet, virtuous, domestic citizen, who pays his debts and his taxes and is never heard of out of his little circle.... He works, he votes, generally he prays--but he always pays--yes, above all, he pays.⁴¹

Sumner had used the forgotten man to argue against well-meaning but ill-advised attempts to intervene in the economic system. "It is the Forgotten Man who is threatened by every extension of the paternal theory of government," he had said in 1883. "It is he who must work and pay."⁴²

Roosevelt's "forgotten man," like Sumner's, was a "simple, honest laborer . . . who pays his debts and his taxes and is never heard of out of his little circle." Now, however, in an ironic twist of history and due to no fault of his own, he was no longer able either to labor or to pay. Taking the cue, Tom Jones Parry drew a composite picture of Seattle's "forgotten man," a typical worker, head of a family, who was suddenly deprived of his steady job.

Fred Salo had a wife, Gracie; a son, Elmer; and a daughter, Maudie. He had been a timekeeper at the Seattle Iron Works

⁴⁰ "The Live Wire," *Vanguard*, Sept. 23, 1932, 4.

⁴¹ William Graham Sumner, *The Forgotten Man--Rediscovered After Fifty Years* (1933), 12, 16, 27.

⁴² Sumner, *What Social Classes Owe to Each Other* (1883), 130.

for eight years. In October 1930 he was abruptly laid off. At first he was confident of finding another job. As the days and then the weeks went by, he went through periods of despondency. He tried selling razor blade sharpeners on commission with no success. He used up his savings. At length he swallowed his pride and went to a food commissary run by the Unemployed Citizens' League. Later he went to a League meeting with a friend who was a Communist. They listened to a speaker, Hulet Wells, who explained socialist principles and urged workers to seek "progress through the ballot box." After the speech, Salo's friend exclaimed, "We need bullets instead of ballots!" By July, the Salos could no longer pay their electric bill, but a League member who was an electrician by-passed the meter so the Salos could still use their lights. Some Communists convinced Salo that violence was the only answer. They almost persuaded him to join them in the struggle to overthrow capitalism. In September, their widowed landlady told them she could no longer hold out for their late rent. Just in time, Salo's old boss arrived to offer him his old job back. With the prospect of steady work again, the Salos figured they could get out of debt in a few years. Gone was any thought of socialism or communism. The story ended with Fred Salo telling his wife, "I tell you, Gracie, I think conditions are going to be O.K. now."⁴³

The message was that the rank and file were a long way from being revolutionary. Like Fred Salo, the "forgotten man," most of the workers only wanted their old jobs back. As soon as they got their own livelihoods back again, they lost all interest in broader social issues.

⁴³ Tom Jones Parry, "Fred Salo, the Forgotten Man," *The Forum*, December 1932, 330-335.

Internal Pressures: Communists and Wobblies

As the League grew stronger and more successful, it attracted attacks from within and without. In the fall of the year 1932, internal dissension continued to plague the organization, while external pressures increased. As the League entered its second year of existence, weakened by factionalism, it became more susceptible to the efforts of the city and county to take control of one of its main attractions, its relief function. For many of the rank-and-file, matters of ideology or social vision held little interest. The commissaries were the chief draw. As student-observer John Hogan said:

To the unemployed individual, immediate needs were primary--one more dime in his pocket to buy cigarettes--one more nickel for coffee.⁴⁴

The growing militancy of the leadership strengthened the League in some ways, but weakened it in others. It strengthened it by promoting unified action. It weakened it by reducing its appeal to the non-militant rank-and-file and by reducing its ability to negotiate with outside parties, such as city and county officials. As League leaders became less amenable to compromise, city and county officials sought to take over the League functions of providing relief. The superior economic power of the established government, with its broad base of public support, eventually won out.

Sociologist Arthur Hillman suggested,

It may be argued that the protest tactics of the Unemployed Citizens' League were both a cause and an effect of the county control of relief. On the one hand, the change in leadership of the unemployed, even before it was officially recognized in the elections, meant less cooperation

⁴⁴ John Hogan, "The Decline of Self-Help and Growth of Radicalism Among Seattle's Organized Unemployed," unpublished master's thesis, U. of Washington (1934), 59.

with the responsible officials and less mutual confidence. On the other hand, the new county policy fanned the protest spirit.⁴⁵

Although always in a minority, members of the Communist Party were active in unemployed movements across the country, as well as in Washington state. By 1932, conditions seemed ripe to fulfill Marx's prediction about the collapse of capitalism. Imbued with the spirit of true believers, Communists diligently recruited converts to the revolution of the proletariat, and the ranks of the unemployed seemed a field ripe for picking.⁴⁶

The International Communist Party saw an opportunity to gain converts among the disaffected. The Party had recently launched a policy of "boring from within," a strategy used also by the Industrial Workers of the World. In addition to running their own locals, which could usually be identified by the term "council," the Communists pursued a policy of joining non-communist citizens' leagues, rising to positions of leadership and taking control, often in opposition to other locals and the central federation.⁴⁷

Arthur Hillman, a University of Washington sociologist, noted the rise of Communist influence. The Communist Party particularly objected to the self-help functions of the league, since the amelioration of economic conditions would tend to reduce worker militancy. While the League denounced "charity," the Communist Councils denounced "self-help." Herbert Benjamin, national organizer of the American Communist Party, described "self-help" as a self-defeating strategy:

That is, instead of struggle to force the bosses and government, who control the wealth, to provide

⁴⁵ Arthur Hillman, *Unemployed Citizens' League of Seattle* (1934), 217.

⁴⁶ Harvey Klehr, *The Heyday of American Communism* (1984), 49-51, 64.

⁴⁷ Hogan, "The Decline of Self-Help and Growth of Radicalism," 23.

adequate relief and unemployment insurance, they advocate that we, workers, shall help each other by sharing our poverty.⁴⁸

The *Vanguard* sympathized with Communist ideals, but it disapproved of the Party's methods, particularly when those methods were used against the League. As early as January 1932, the *Vanguard* noted the appearance of disruptive tactics in some of the locals. Members of the *Unemployed Council*, an openly Communist organization, were handing out to *League* members a news sheet, *The Unemployed Worker*, which sought to turn *League* rank and file against their leaders by charging that *League* officials were being paid by the city. They were, said the *Vanguard*, "seeking to poison the minds of the jobless with lies. . . . They are too cowardly to make these false statements in open meetings of the unemployed." The *Vanguard* added,

The *League*...has no prejudice against Communists as such but it will not permit any individual or group of individuals to remain in the organization when their purpose is to destroy its usefulness.⁴⁹

"By the end of June," Arthur Hillman reported, "the South Ballard and Columbia City locals had been taken over by this [Communist] faction." The July 6 meeting of the central federation witnessed a heated floor fight over the Columbia City local, because of its Communist leadership. The central executive board moved to deny recognition to the Columbia City delegation. Hillman reported, "Mr. Brannin, as executive secretary, emphasized that the objection to the delegates in question was not on political grounds, but because they refused to cooperate." Following a bitter

⁴⁸ Hillman, *Unemployed Citizens' League*, 204. Hillman on p.22 cites "How to Organize and Conduct United Action for the Right to Live," pamphlet by National Committee, *Unemployed Councils*. See note in Appendix A, p.258, *Unemployed Councils*.

⁴⁹ "Communist Disrupters Not Wanted," *Vanguard*, January 1932, 2.

debate, the motion carried and the Columbia City delegation was unseated. The following week the South Ballard delegation was similarly unseated.⁵⁰

In addition to the Communist influence, the League was susceptible to disruption from the Industrial Workers of the World. The ranks of the IWW had been severely depleted by the wartime repressive measures, but a few remaining members kept the Wobbly spirit alive. Some of these Wobblies lived in the central district of Seattle, notably on Capitol Hill. Hillman explained:

The leaders of the Capitol Hill gang were said to be former members of the Industrial Workers of the World who were trying to revive lost power of syndicalism in the Northwest. Their philosophy favored non-parliamentary mass action which was in line with the protest tactics of the communists.⁵¹

Internal stress was exacerbated by changes in leadership, both within the League and in its chief outside contacts, in July and August 1932. Since its inception late in 1931, one of its chief contacts, the Mayor's Commission for Improved Employment, had been headed by I.F. Dix, vice president of the Pacific Telephone and Telegraph Company and an activist in both the Chamber of Commerce and the Community Fund. Dix also served as chairman of the citizens' advisory committee, working with the League and the central federation. Early in May he resigned that chairmanship. In July, he also resigned as president of the Community Fund and recommended that the Fund withdraw its support for the commissaries.

Also in July, Carl Brannin resigned as executive secretary of the central federation, although he continued to edit the *Vanguard*. Two of the other founders of the Seattle League, Cronin and Gilbreath, also resigned early in August. Cronin

⁵⁰ Hillman, *Unemployed Citizens' League*, 204-205.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 205.

was vice president of the central federation; he resigned for health reasons and was replaced by C. J. Boardway of Capitol Hill. Gilbreath had been central relief contact man, serving as liaison between the Unemployed Citizens and the city and county authorities, for nearly a year. The *Vanguard* on August 12 lamented, "While the capitalists calling themselves 'Vigilantes' are organizing to establish a dictatorship, the so-called 'Radicals' are divided into groups and are getting nowhere."⁵²

The central federation elected new officers at the end of August, confirming Boardway as vice president and electing another member of "The Capitol Hill gang," W. H. Murray, president. Murray, war veteran and IWW member, had commanded a division of the Bonus Expeditionary Force earlier in the summer.⁵³

The *Vanguard* reported almost nothing about the League's internal dissension and changes. Instead, it continued to plead for "unity" among the unemployed. The *Vanguard* policy was to encourage a variety of opinion in its columns; the idea was to create room for diversity but not to encourage divisiveness. Thus, when the Fremont local started its own paper, *The Rapier*, the *Vanguard* of August 12, 1932 gave it a congratulatory announcement: "The *Rapier*, as its name would indicate, has a clean, sharp thrust. Fakers keep away or you will get stuck." A month later, however, the *Vanguard* sounded a note of disillusionment. It reported:

The *Rapier*...started out to pierce the sham of capitalist superiority. From a reading of the attack on the central federation of the U.C.L. in the September 22nd issue it looks as if someone is using it to stab the whole organization in the

⁵² *Ibid.*, 205-206. *Vanguard*, Aug.12, 1932, 1.

⁵³ Hillman, *Unemployed Citizens' League*, 217.

back.⁵⁴

Following the election of new officers in August, the League underwent a reorganization. Its new executive secretary, Fred Hassall, played a major part in drafting a new constitution, which was discussed extensively at meetings in September and October. Hillman, the sociologist studying the League, described Hassall:

He was almost unknown in the organization and in the city before his election to office. He was well read in philosophy and social theory, and had a command of words that was both extensive and discriminate. Both his speech and his suave, portly appearance suggested that he might have played the part of an English gentleman. In short, he was not the least colorful of the men who held leadership in the Unemployed Citizens' League.⁵⁵

The League's new constitution had a decidedly Marxist flavor, advocating class consciousness and the ultimate demise of the capitalist system. The preamble asserted, "This intolerable exploitation of the millions of workers will never cease until private ownership . . . is replaced by complete public ownership." It stated its ultimate goal was "to put an end . . . to these very evils . . . which inhere in the capitalistic system." It declared an intention to use "peaceful persuasion" and promised to negotiate with local authorities. However, it demanded "complete control of our commissaries," while expressing "our uncompromising hostility to all forms of professional philanthropy." It ended with a vague threat of impending violence. If the authorities were unable "to supply our class with honorable conditions of labor and life," it said, "we declare the law of survival is supreme, and we shall hold those duly constituted authorities

⁵⁴ "U.C.L. News Reel," *Vanguard*, Aug.12, 1932, 2. "A Stab in the Back," *Vanguard*, Sept.30, 1932, 4.

⁵⁵ Hillman, *Unemployed Citizens' League*, 225.

to be responsible for the consequences."⁵⁶

Hassall's election and the adoption of the new constitution showed a hardening of attitudes of militancy within the League.

External Pressures: The Commissary Fight

Despite their ambivalence toward "self-help"--which had become suspiciously similar to "relief"--the more moderate members of the League recognized that the distribution of food, fuel, clothing, and other goods and services constituted a potent source of political power. It attracted members. It generated a sense of community, as well as common interest, among the widely disparate individuals and families who found themselves suffering from unemployment. It relieved distress and fostered loyalty. More than the political program, the economic self-help system had brought a measure of fame to Seattle. It was, in short, good public relations.

It was small wonder, then, that the League fought against relinquishing control of the commissaries to the county. The question is, why did the county want to take over? For the first two years of the depression, the county had fought against giving aid to the unemployed, had claimed it had no funds to give. The City had only reluctantly extended aid to the unemployed in the fall of 1931, capitulating to League lobbying and political pressure. It had run out of funds and handed the task of finding financial resources to the county, which grudgingly accepted the obligation early in 1932.

Sociologist Hillman listed five main reasons for the county take-over:

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 226.

(1) the changes in the internal organization of the Unemployed Citizens' League;

(2) the charges of graft and waste in relief distribution;

(3) the fear of the "political machine" being created by the Unemployed Citizens' League and the nearness of the fall elections, when two of the [county] commissioners were to be candidates for re-election;

(4) the relief set-up had been created with the thought that only a temporary emergency was to be provided for, whereas the need for relief was increasing rather than diminishing;

(5) other considerations, such as...the criticism of commissary relief from the retail grocers, and so forth.⁵⁷

The county take-over started in July 1932 and was completed by mid-October. Although the League resisted the process, county aid actually strengthened the commissary system. In July the county purchasing agent started buying supplies for the commissaries. The county started hiring social workers to supervise the handling and distribution of goods. The "Local District Relief Organization" became the "King County Emergency Relief" and moved into an office in the county-city building downtown.⁵⁸

The first commissary adopted by the county was the South Ballard local, which had been unseated from the central federaton on July 13 and whose members had commandeered the bread and milk trucks a week later. After that episode, the county re-instated the Ballard commissary, but it appointed one of its own representatives, Col. W. C. Bickford, to manage it.⁵⁹

Col. Bickford's responsibilities were soon extended, as he was named general manager of commissaries and work relief.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 217.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 216.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 216. *Seattle Star*, July 18, 1932.

One by one, the county took over each of the unemployed citizens' commissaries. On September 7, the Georgetown commissary refused to "surrender" to the county, and, said Hillman, "a military scene was enacted." The unemployed protested "that they had all worked without pay; why should paid managers suddenly be installed?" They also argued "that the salaries paid the county employees would reduce the amount available for food." At its regular meeting that evening, the central federation, under the new president, W. H. Murray of the "Capitol Hill gang," declared its strong support for the Georgetown local in its battle against the county. However, the county won out. One observer commented, "It was a bitter blow to the morale of the unemployed as well as to their organization to have the central force in their cooperative life, the commissary, taken away from them."⁶⁰

Other issues of contention that summer and fall included meat, milk, and children's clothing. In early September, twelve locals rejected the bacon the county had provided, claiming that it was "inferior in quality and produced under unfair labor conditions," i.e., by a non-union shop. Some locals also threatened a "milk strike" if they couldn't get all the milk they wanted. These two issues were resolved by conferences between the leaders of the unemployed and the county commissioners.

Meanwhile, the Unemployed Councils attempted to mobilize the unemployed workers for a "school strike," to force the county to provide "\$400,000 for shoes and clothing for school

⁶⁰ Hillman, *Unemployed Citizens' League*, 220. Hogan, "Decline of Self-Help and Growth of Radicalism," 35. Neither Hogan nor Hillman mentioned the possibility of hiring the league volunteers and paying them to stay on after the transition. Apparently this option was dismissed as unfeasible, if it had been considered at all. The county procedure, evidently, was to replace the volunteer workers with other, county-screened workers.

children." The Unemployed Citizens' League officially supported this action. The strike was called for Monday, September 19. Although the strike organizers hoped that thousands of children would stay home from school in a massive show of solidarity, evidently only three children actually did so. The split in the ranks of the unemployed became evident, as some members openly condemned the tactic of using the children as pawns in the political struggle, or hiding "behind the skirts of our children."⁶¹

The membership declined during this period, and the amount of volunteer work also declined. Hillman reported, "There was difficulty experienced in getting sufficient volunteer help, especially for fuel operations. The hours of self-help work decreased fifty per cent between August and December."⁶²

There were also charges of graft and corruption. Some of these charges were brought by outsiders, but some were brought by members themselves. Evidently some of the commissary managers were appropriating donations for their own use or for sale, instead of distributing the goods fairly among the membership. As one member put it, "The self-help movement turned into a help-yourself movement."⁶³

Such disputes made the League vulnerable to pressures from both within and without. Sociologist Hillman observed:

This period of the Unemployed Citizens' League history was characterized by its change from policies of cooperation to those of conflict. Work in return for relief was opposed as "forced labor." The feeling that the Unemployed Citizens' League was being destroyed and that the desires of the unemployed were being thwarted might have had more

⁶¹ Hillman, *Unemployed Citizens' League*, 221. *Seattle Times*, Aug. 31, Sept. 2, 8, 1932. *Vanguard*, Sept. 2, 1932.

⁶² Hillman, *Unemployed Citizens' League*, 227.

⁶³ Hogan, "Decline of Self-Help and Growth of Radicalism," 46. Hogan quotes an interview with a Mr. Burke of the Pike Street commissary.

serious consequences if they had not found in the elections hope for a new deal.⁶⁴

Two of the county commissioners, Don Evans and John Earley, both Republicans, were campaigning for re-election that fall. These two commissioners had both expressed concern over the mis-management of League commissaries and had pushed for greater county involvement. Between the primary election on September 13 and the general election on November 8, Hillman reported, "There were shifting alignments, charges and counter-charges, and rumors of all kinds."⁶⁵

Evans and Earley were challenged by two Democratic candidates endorsed by the unemployed, "Radio-speaker" John C. Stevenson and Louis Nash. Mayor John Dore, who had been elected that spring with the help of the unemployed, had since turned his back on them, thereby earning the nickname, "Revolving Dore." He supported the incumbent county commissioners, Evans and Earley, giving nightly radio broadcasts on their behalf. Nash was well-known in labor and progressive circles, but Stevenson, a newcomer, was somewhat evasive about his past.

A young Seattle attorney, Marion Zioncheck, who had donated many hours of his professional services to the Unemployed Citizens' League since December 1931, was running for Congress. The campaign was heated, featuring charges and counter-charges of malfeasance on all sides. Mayor Dore branded the challengers as "radicals" and warned the voters against turning over control of the commissaries "to agitators, to anarchists and Russian agents." On its part, the Unemployed Citizens' League in October branded Mayor Dore a "public enemy." The election took place on November 8. As part of the Democratic sweep which put Franklin D. Roosevelt

⁶⁴ Hillman, *Unemployed Citizens' League*, 222.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 212.

into the presidency, League-endorsed candidates Nash and Stevenson won seats on the county board of commissioners and Marion Zioncheck was elected to Congress.⁶⁶

On November 2, just a few days before the general election, the central federation of the Unemployed Citizens' League held an election to select new officers following adoption of a new constitution. Fred Hassall, whom Hillman described as "well read in philosophy and social theory," continued in the position as executive secretary which he had held since August. Phil Pearl was elected president; Murray stepped down. Hillman described Pearl as follows:

Pearl was a former labor leader and a past member of the State Legislature. He was interested in politics and a shrewd organizer and parliamentarian. He was local secretary of the League for Independent Political Action before being elected to office in the Unemployed Citizens' League.⁶⁷

As a member of the Barber's Union, Pearl had also participated in the Seattle general strike of 1919.

Despite the decline in membership, there was still considerable interest in the Unemployed Citizens' League. The reorganization meeting not only included Seattle locals, but also several locals from unincorporated county areas.⁶⁸

December 1932: Assessment

By December 1932, the League had survived a year and a half, but it had lost control of its commissaries and had gone through severe internal power struggles. The new leadership sought to take the League in a militant direction,

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 211, 223. Hogan, "Decline of Self-Help and Growth of Radicalism," 70. *Seattle Times*, Oct.10, 1932, *Seattle Star*, Oct.18-19, 1932.

⁶⁷ Hillman, *Unemployed Citizens' League*, 226.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 227.

oriented toward mass action. The executive secretary of four months, Frederick Hassall, although radical and Marxist in his personal views, decried the in-fighting and re-issued the perpetual call for unity. In a year-end essay for the *Vanguard*, Hassall summed up the accomplishments and weaknesses of the League.

Hassall began by placing the Unemployed Citizens' League squarely in the camp of "the great struggle for human justice." He pointed out that the League had in fact organized the workers--at least, the unemployed workers. The leadership had not at first envisioned getting into the business of providing direct relief. However, as appeals to the city, the county, the state and the federal governments for paying work projects one by one fell through, the unemployed were thrown back onto their own meager resources. Mutual self-help offered a pragmatic, if temporary, solution. "It must be admitted," said Hassall, "that the economics of the scheme are absurd . . . operating as we do, on a handicraft basis in the midst of a machine civilization." Hassall defended the self-help concept because it did in fact relieve human misery, and it provided a powerful organizing tool. He cautioned, however, against expecting too much. "Self-help is no panacea, as the unemployed are beginning to learn."⁶⁹

Hassall said that the main problem facing the League in 1932 had been internal disunity. Arguing and in-fighting had sabotaged earlier organizing efforts. When the Communists (many of them from "Unemployed Councils") first tried to take over and then tried to discredit the League, they played right into the hands of the established politicians, he said. At the same time, the Industrial Workers of the World

⁶⁹ Fred Hassall, "A Retrospect," *Vanguard (Unemployed Citizen)*, Dec.30, 1932, 2.

("wolves") tried to gain control of at least one of the locals. As Hassall described it, "The 'wolves' of the industrial group contended with the 'coyotes' of the Unemployed Council." He described the contenders as "fools who suffer from a paranoical complex for rebellion against every idea which does not originate within themselves." He recommended a renewed effort to build unity through cooperation, while recognizing diversity of opinion. He assessed the lessons of the year: "The net result of a year's work has pretty well demonstrated what can be done by healthy organization and what can be undone by the fanaticisms of fools."⁷⁰

Largely as a result of the in-fighting, the League lost control of its food commissaries. The county took them over, putting in its own paid staff and professional social workers, along with rigid (and, the League contended, demeaning) eligibility screening procedures. The League considered the county takeover a defeat. Hassall observed pessimistically, "The partial confiscation by the county authorities seriously crippled those operations and it will require considerable effort to restore the former enthusiasm of the unemployed."⁷¹

The goal of educating the workers continued to hold a high priority for the League. Hassall saw education as a necessary prerequisite for reducing factionalism. Although the Seattle Labor College had offered lectures and classes for nearly a decade, the internal strife of 1932 convinced at least some of the leaders to renew their commitment to worker education. Hassall commented, "Our educational department is getting started and ere long these factionalisms may be

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

considerably reduced, and a better understanding of our problems result."⁷²

The League agenda had narrowed in focus since the *Vanguard's* premier issue in January 1930. Internationalism had practically dropped out of consideration and the Russian Revolution was all but forgotten. Rather than trying to solve the problems of the workers of the world, the League was focusing on its own. It did take pride, however, in the national and international publicity it had received. Hassall noted, "We are . . . the subjects, strangely, of both secret and public report. Our organization has been the theme of hundreds of newspaper editorials; syndicated articles have appeared in numerous periodicals by writers of national repute."⁷³

One of the goals of the leadership in 1930 had been to develop a political party composed of workers and farmers. Although the League had not created such a party, it had had an impact on the electoral process. In the spring of 1932, the League had helped remove several city officials, replacing them with candidates who promised to aid the unemployed. Although the new mayor, John Dore, proved a grave disappointment, the League had achieved respect as a political force. In the fall elections, the League had contributed to the Democratic landslide.

Hassall expressed pessimism with regard to the political process. The League had helped defeat one governor, Roland Hartley, "for his callous indifference to our problems," said Hassall, but he thought the new governor would be only a slight improvement. As for the politicians who had tried to exploit the votes of the unemployed and had later reneged on

⁷² *Ibid.*

⁷³ *Ibid.*

their promises, Hassall said, "They were good humoredly tolerated while they peddled their empty platitudes on our platform. . . . Those who tried to hook us got pretty well hooked for their pains." The League had shown that it had a negative kind of political power, the power to defeat. It had not yet developed the ability to put forth candidates who were both committed to League ideals and competent in the political arena.⁷⁴

Hassall's vision extended beyond the day-to-day concerns of commissaries and political campaigns. With his Marxist orientation, he observed, "We feel some compensation in watching an intolerable system of human exploitation in a major breakdown which will most probably result in the passing of the profit system." While predicting better times to come, he urged a stoic endurance of the present turmoil: "The birth pangs of a new social order and the death struggle of the old involve a tragic, yet an inevitable period of human suffering; and I regret to say, there seems no way to prevent it."⁷⁵

* * * * *

Thus, in the summer of '32, local mass action tactics reflected a national malaise. Although Hulet Wells and Carl Brannin continued to organize meetings and put out the *Vanguard*, their individual roles receded as the League expanded and new actors took center stage. The rank-and-file did not want a revolution; they just wanted their old jobs back. Internal dissension resulted in loss of membership but a more unified, militant stance among those who remained. The county take-over of the commissaries deprived the League

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

of one of its main functions. As self-help declined, radicalism increased. By December, the League had come full-circle from cooperative self-help to confrontational militancy.

The new year would bring a New Deal, but the Unemployed Citizens' League, with its increasingly militant outlook, would not wait quietly for the changeover from one capitalist political party to another one.

Chapter IX

Muddy Deal to New Deal, 1933

The November elections, which resulted in a Democratic landslide, gave the militants a sense of urgency. Franklin D. Roosevelt would be inaugurated on March 4, 1933. If the militants were to seize the initiative, they would need to act before a new administration seduced their followers with a promise of reform instead of revolution. Many moderates also favored militant action. The election was over, but Seattle's unemployed citizens did not intend to become "forgotten men."

When the state legislature convened in Olympia in January, the question of unemployment relief was high on its agenda. Governor Clarence D. Martin had campaigned on a platform of state aid to meet the economic emergency. One of the new legislators, Donald McDonald, had been appointed chairman of the Pre-Legislative Committee on State Unemployment Relief. After reviewing studies from the University of Washington and Washington State College with regard to unemployment, the pre-legislative committee drafted a bill to create the Washington State Emergency Relief Administration, with authority to establish welfare boards in each county. As a result of this preliminary preparation, the McDonald Bill was introduced early in the session.¹

The Unemployed Citizens' League objected strongly to the McDonald Bill. They objected to having a professional social

¹ J.F. Steiner, chairman, "Report of the University of Washington Committee on State Unemployment Relief," typescript report to legislature (1932). E.F. Dummeier, chairman, "Unemployment Relief: Recommendations Relative to Unemployment and Rehabilitation.," typescript report to legislature (1933). The Steiner report presents a comprehensive survey of existing programs, including a brief on self-help and cooperative programs by Arthur Hillman. The Dummeier report adds supplemental information and recommendations.

worker direct the administration of relief. They objected to professional social workers' investigative procedures. They objected to work relief at a pauper's pay. But most of all, they objected to having the commissaries, which had proven their value as an organizing tool, taken out of their hands. "The new state relief plan is designed to nullify the political power of the organized unemployed," the *Vanguard* complained indignantly. "The relief problem requires constructive militancy now as never before, else the jobless will be completely pauperized and enslaved."²

On a statewide basis, unemployed citizens' leagues and sympathetic labor organizations had formed a coalition, the United Front Unemployed. The coalition sponsored a march to Olympia to protest the McDonald Bill. Approximately one thousand men and women converged on the capitol on January 17, 1933. Calling themselves "hunger marchers," they spent several days in Olympia, talking to the governor and their elected representatives. Evidently they were received courteously; there were no reports of confrontations. The *Vanguard* noted:

It was an impressive demonstration of organized action on the part of the penniless producers when such a large number of people would travel for miles in cold weather in trucks, old cars and make-shift equipment to present their demands.³

Although the lobbying effort at Olympia was carried out peaceably, things were not so peaceful in Seattle. The League, which had been reorganized in November, went through another reorganization. In mid-January, an audit suggested

² "Ernst Appointment Protested" and "A 'New Deal' (Pretty Raw) for the Jobless," *Vanguard (Unemployed Citizen)*, Jan.27, 1933, 1, 4. John Hogan, "Decline of Self-Help and Growth of Radicalism Among Seattle's Organized Unemployed," master's thesis (1934), 77.

³ "Hunger Marchers Mass 1000 at Olympia," *Vanguard (Unemployed Citizen)*, Jan.20, 1933, 2.

that certain funds had been misused. At the regular Wednesday evening meeting on January 18, Phil Pearl and Fred Hassall accused each other of acting in bad faith. The next day, a special judiciary committee met and suspended Pearl and J. J. Rohan, a member of the executive committee. On January 25, Hulet Wells presided over a "stormy session" that lasted well into the night. Following heated recriminations, Pearl was reinstated with a narrow vote of confidence (49 to 47). Hassall was also given a vote of confidence, but he soon dropped out of sight. Pearl resigned shortly afterwards, because he did not want to lead a divided organization and he did not approve of the mass protests and demonstrations which were favored by the majority. In summing up the meeting and its repercussions as "a fiasco," Hulet Wells later told Arthur Hillman:

It's an old trick to unite the left and the right against the middle. The Communists and the Capitol Hill bunch united to get control in the summer and they've done it again.⁴

During the struggle over leadership in the League, the mood of militancy escalated. Spurred on by its more radical leaders, the United Front coalition organized a mass parade and demonstration in Seattle to protest the McDonald Bill. The participants included representatives from all branches of the Unemployed Citizens' League, the United Producers of King County, Unemployed Councils, labor unions, and other sympathizers. On Tuesday, February 14, five thousand men and women paraded through downtown streets to the County-City Building, a multi-story structure which housed the city hall, the county courthouse, administrative offices, and the jail. They marched up to the county commissioners' chambers, where

⁴ Wells was quoted in Arthur Hillman, *Unemployed Citizens' League of Seattle* (1934), 228-229. See also "Pearl Exonerated," *Vanguard (Unemployed Citizen)*, Jan. 27, 1933, 4.

they stayed for the next sixty hours. Meanwhile, reinforcements arrived from other cities and towns to join the occupation forces. While demonstrators packed the rooms and corridors inside the building, thousands of onlookers gathered outside. The *Vanguard* described the scene:

The demonstration...was marked by perfect order and discipline. While people were coming and going all the time, there was always a throng to "hold the fort." During the late hours of the night many slept on the floor or in such chairs as were available.⁵

On the afternoon of the third day, authorities decided to clear the building in the interests of health. Demonstrators adopted a policy of non-violent resistance as police and deputy sheriffs pushed them or carried them out. The three-day sit-in was over.⁶

"On to Olympia," March 1, 1933

The Seattle parade and sit-in served as a dress rehearsal and recruiting device for another statewide hunger march. "It is agreed," said the *Vanguard*, "that the march on Olympia, which is being planned for March 1, has been given great impetus by the events in Seattle." After the sit-in, the United Front Unemployed confirmed that it would lead the march to Olympia. Mayor Dore, angered by the sit-in, warned League leaders that he would prohibit the unemployed from convening in Seattle for any such purpose. "The Unemployed Citizens' League's sole purpose now," he said, "is creating

⁵ "Shannon Plans \$1 to \$4 Week for Dole," "Courthouse Campers Spurn Slave Program," and "Dore and Stevenson Evict Demonstrators," *Vanguard (Unemployed Citizen)*, Feb. 17, 1933, 1. The phrase, "hold the fort," had a special resonance as the theme and chorus of an old IWW protest song, one which the Wobblies aboard the *Verona* had been singing on the day of the Everett massacre in 1916.

⁶ Hogan, "Decline of Self-Help and Growth of Radicalism," 77-80.

disorder in this city."⁷

Public authorities in Olympia, fearing the invasion of an unruly mob and mindful of the Bonus Army fiasco in the nation's capital a few months earlier, urged the United Front to call off the march. While city residents expected trouble from the marchers, the marchers expected trouble from the authorities and from self-appointed vigilantes. As the day of the march drew near, the *Tacoma Times* described the growing tension:

Citizens were secretly arming, stores were preparing to close and police were mobilizing in preparation for the March 1 "hunger march" of 5,000 Washington unemployed....

Officials are fearful of serious outbreaks. They were compelled to refuse further housing and food for the unemployed who have twice previously stormed the capitol with demands for relief.

Organizations of vigilantes have been forming. Members have been asked to arm themselves in preparation for serious outbreaks.⁸

Early on Wednesday morning, March 1, delegates from the northern counties convened in Seattle. Over Mayor Dore's ineffective objections, two hundred cars and trucks formed a cavalcade and headed south. As they proceeded down the highway, delegations from other counties joined the cavalcade. By the time they reached Olympia, the throng of hunger marchers had swelled to some three thousand. By far the greater number of participants were male, but three hundred women and fifteen children also made the trip.⁹

⁷ "Dore and Stevenson Evict Demonstrators," *Vanguard (Unemployed Citizen)*, Feb.17, 1933, 1. "Dore Blusters," *Vanguard*, Feb.24, 1933, 3. With the issue of February 24, the newspaper dropped the name *Unemployed Citizens* and resumed its old name, *The Vanguard*.

⁸ "Capital Fears Riots; Citizens Arming Selves," *Tacoma Times*, Feb.28, 1933, 1.

⁹ Hogan, "Decline of Self-Help and Growth of Radicalism," 83-84.

"Martin Baits Jobless and Flouts Demands," *Vanguard*, March 3, 1933, 1.

As the protesters drove up to the Olympia city limits, they found their way blocked by the county sheriff and his deputies, backed by one hundred fifty armed men calling themselves the American Vigilantes.¹⁰ While the sheriff was talking to the demonstrators, the chief of police drove up with an official ultimatum from Governor Martin: "Get out in 30 minutes or be thrown out!" When the demonstrators refused to turn back, the deputies herded them into Priest Point Park, the same park where some of their number, including Carl Brannin and Hulet Wells, had encamped the previous summer during the Fourth of July march. There the demonstrators made camp, although it had been raining for three days and the ground was, in the *Vanguard's* description, "a morass of mud and water."

Outside the park entrance, teams of Vigilantes parked and waited in their automobiles. Inside the park, the demonstrators huddled around their campfires, made coffee, and sang protest songs. A cold, drizzling rain kept up all night. These miserable conditions reminded some of the older men of their wartime service in France. The nation had worshipped them as heroes fifteen years ago. Now, what was their reward? The *Vanguard* noted bitterly, "World War veterans compared their 'patriotic services for democracy in the mud of Flanders Field' with the muddy deal they are getting now."¹¹

The next day, Thursday, the marchers broke camp and returned to their homes. Although they had not seen the Governor, they had made their point to the press and public and, most of all, to themselves. They were no longer merely

¹⁰ The *Vanguard* had carried an article about the vigilantes earlier. See "Vigilantes Lift Serpent's Head," *Vanguard (Unemployed Citizen)*, Jan. 27, 1933, 1.

¹¹ "Martin Bait's Jobless," *Vanguard*, March 3, 1933, 1, 4.

victims of misfortune, but martyrs in the cause of economic justice. Two days later, on Saturday, March 4, still smarting from the memory of their muddy deal, they turned on their radios to hear the newly inaugurated President, Franklin D. Roosevelt, promise them a New Deal.

In the state of Washington, the McDonald relief plan went into effect. Governor Martin appointed Charles Ernst, who had worked with the Seattle-King County relief agency, to head the new agency, the Washington State Emergency Relief Administration. After Roosevelt's inauguration, the state-sponsored relief system became part of the Federal Emergency Relief Administration. The commissaries were disbanded, and the unemployed workers were issued food vouchers to exchange for groceries at their neighborhood market. The grocer would then turn in the vouchers for reimbursement by the state. In a tone of wistful resignation, Wells described the demise of the commissaries and, along with them, the League as he and Brannin had known it:

The unemployed, after being screened by charity workers, received cards good for certain foods at the groceries. The welfare workers had their jobs, the grocers had their profits, and the Unemployed Citizens' League passed into history.¹²

As the League slowly disintegrated, some former League members went on to create other organizations. J. F. Cronin, for example, helped organize the Washington Commonwealth Federation, a cooperative venture modeled after the Oregon Commonwealth Federation.¹³ Several League leaders joined New Deal programs in elected and appointed positions. The reform impetus continued, but it took new forms and directions.

¹² Hulet Wells, "I Wanted to Work" (1955), 287.

¹³ Albert Acena, "The Washington Commonwealth Federation: Reform Politics and the Popular Front," Ph.D. dissertation, U. of Washington (1975), 5-6.

The hunger march achieved no tangible result. Yet, it may have aided the process of getting the state involved in relief after all. After the legislature voted for a bond issue of ten million dollars to fund relief programs, the amount was challenged in the State Supreme Court on the grounds that it exceeded the debt limitation clause of the state constitution. It was not legal, opponents argued, for the state to authorize a bond issue of more than \$400,000, "except to repel invasion, suppress insurrection, or defend the state in war." The hunger march, although nonviolent, had served notice that there was indeed a possibility of insurrection. The threat of violence had been close to the surface on both sides. State officials did not want a repetition of the Bonus Army fiasco, which had so embarrassed the national government the previous summer. The Court ruled in April that the bond issue was constitutional, because it was necessary "to suppress an incipient insurrection arising out of widespread unemployment."¹⁴

* * * * *

Thus, in the fourth winter of the depression, the Washington state legislature finally responded to the the crisis of unemployment. It did so not because the unemployed were human beings (that, after all, was the province of charity, not government); not because they were producers (after all, they were not producing now and it was clear that the economy did not need any more producers); not because

¹⁴ William Mullins, *The Depression and the Urban West Coast 1929-1933* (1991), 119. "10,000,000 State Relief Bond Issue Upheld By Court," *Post-Intelligencer*, April 8, 1933, 1. Edgar Stewart, *Washington, Northwest Frontier*, vol. II (1957), 299. Stewart said the vote of the Court was five to three, "the majority holding that it was far better to cure insurrection or incipient insurrection by promoting prosperity than by use of bullets."

they were citizens (after all, as voters they were still outnumbered); but because they had been consumers. The loss of their consumer-power was hurting business. It had become glaringly apparent that the workers' incomes were not only essential to the workers and their families, but to the whole economic system. The legislature attempted to restore their lost consumer-power by devising a way to get them out of the free commissary-system and back into the money-system. By issuing food vouchers, the state would help both its jobless workers and the business community.

The League had objected to the state relief plan because it would debilitate the League. This did indeed happen. By taking away the commissaries, the state removed one of the main incentives for jobless workers to join the League. Yet, although the self-help component of the League was greatly reduced, the political action component continued to operate. Through mass action techniques, jobless workers continued to make their presence known. They made sure that, after the election, they would not become "forgotten men."

Epilogue: The New Deal

Because the march on Olympia brought no immediate result, it was counted a failure by many at the time. Membership in the Unemployed Citizens' League continued to decline. The masses did not want revolution; they just wanted their old jobs back--or, as student-observer John Hogan had said, "one more dime for cigarettes, one more nickel for coffee."¹⁵ Many of those who did remain with the League became even more militant and more united in their commitment to mass action. The Communist contingent soon renounced the *Vanguard* and started publishing their own weekly newspaper, the *Voice of*

¹⁵ Hogan, "Decline of Self-Help and Growth of Radicalism," 59.

Action.¹⁶

Shortly after returning from the march, Hulet Wells made what was, for him, a supreme sacrifice. He went on relief. He spent the month of April on the county work-relief roll, doing manual labor in the public parks in return for a ration of groceries. "The spirit of my pioneer ancestors balked at the imputation of charity," he recalled. But he swallowed his pride so his eighteen-year-old son Vernon would be eligible for the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC), one of the first New Deal programs.¹⁷

Two weeks after the march to Olympia, Carl Brannin was called back to his home state of Texas to care for his ailing father. He and Laura remained in Dallas the rest of their lives, where they built homes for low-income families and continued to agitate for social causes.¹⁸

After the Brannins left, Wells became editor of the *Vanguard*. Through thick and thin, he continued to write his Railbird column. In one of his columns, he recalled his odyssey as an idealist and a labor organizer. As a young idealist, he had pinned his hopes on the working class. In three decades of labor organizing, he had become quite thoroughly disillusioned:

For the workingclass, it must be confessed, is a sorry figure to play a hero's role. It is not brave nor noble nor lovable. It is stupid, cruel and suspicious. It punishes its friends and rewards its enemies, and tears itself to pieces in factional fury.

¹⁶ Ronald Leistra, "Seattle's Radical Press 1930-1934," master's thesis, U. of Washington (1964), 50-53.

¹⁷ Wells, "I Wanted to Work," 287. The CCC was designed to put young men to work in healthful outdoor surroundings.

¹⁸ "Au Revoir, Carl and Laura Brannin," *Vanguard*, March 17, 1933, 4. Miriam deFord, *On Being Concerned: The Vanguard Years of Carl and Laura Brannin* (1969), 29-35.

Wells, who prided himself in his rationalism, nonetheless concluded with a reaffirmation of faith:

NEVERTHELESS, if there is any certainty, if there is any sanity, if there is any hope of ordered peace--hold fast, my brother, to that slogan, "ALL POWER TO THE WORKERS." It is the only anchor in a turbulent sea.¹⁹

Wells and a few loyal supporters kept the paper alive a few more months, publishing their last issue on November 24, 1933.²⁰

While editing the paper, Wells had been searching in vain for a steady job. "In the fifth year of the depression," he recalled, "I was still in the army of forgotten men. The I.W.W. used to have a song that described my situation:

Oh, why don't you work
Like the other men do?
How the hell can I work
When there's no work to do?²¹

After Roosevelt showed his support for unions and started to issue pardons to political prisoners, Wells applied for a pardon and re-instatement in the post office. Both of his applications were granted. In October, 1934, twenty-five years after being fired for insubordination, Wells was re-instated. He reminisced:

I will never forget the thrill of that first night when I went back to the work that I liked best of all that I had ever done.... The work was for public service instead of private profit--and I was a part of it again, back in the workaday world to stay.²²

In 1935 he took a year's leave to work for Congressman

¹⁹ Wells, "The Railbird," *Vanguard*, June 23, 1933, 1.

²⁰ Hulet Wells, "I Wanted to Work," 287.

²¹ Wells, "I Wanted to Work," 292. The verse is from "Hallelujah, I'm a Bum," as mentioned earlier in Chapter III of this dissertation.

²² Wells, "I Wanted to Work," 294-295.

Marion Zioncheck, former League attorney, who had just been elected to a second term in the House of Representatives. The assignment in the nation's capital gave him a railbird's-eye view of the New Deal in action. He watched with great interest as the National Labor Relations Act was passed to protect union organizing and collective bargaining, the Social Security Act was passed to provide old age pensions and unemployment insurance, and the Works Projects Administration (WPA) was set up with federal funds to employ jobless workers.²³

Looking back on that period, he commented approvingly:

Among the many notable things for which Franklin D. Roosevelt will be remembered there is nothing more significant than the precedent he set by acknowledging government responsibility for THE RIGHT TO WORK.²⁴

After Zioncheck died in August, 1936,²⁵ Wells returned to the postal service, obtaining a position in the Washington, D.C., post office. Nesta joined him, and they remained in the capital until the end of the Second World War. In 1945 they returned to Seattle. They moved back into the house they had built so many years before, where they lived in quiet retirement for the next quarter-century. Nesta died in December 1969. Hulet Wells passed away less than two months later, on February 4, 1970, at the age of 91 years. Neither of the two mainstream newspapers (the *Seattle Times*, the *Post-Intelligencer*) made any mention of his passing. However, the *Local 28 News*, United Federation of Postal

²³ *Ibid.*, 297-304.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 304.

²⁵ Evidently Zioncheck became mentally unbalanced during his second term in office. Following several months of uncharacteristic behavior, he committed suicide by leaping out of a fifth-story window in the Arctic Building in Seattle, August 7, 1936. Junius Rochester, "The Rise and Fall of Marion Zioncheck," *The Weekly* (Seattle), April 13-19, 1983, 31. Murray Morgan, *Skid Road* (1951, 1971), 234-237.

Clerks, ran a lengthy tribute, praising his "leadership and sacrifice." Among his fellow union workers, he was not a forgotten man.²⁶

Observations on Ideology, Economics, and Politics

In this study of unemployment and activism in Seattle, the emphasis has been on finding the facts and re-constructing the historical record. Having done so, it may be appropriate to offer some observations and possible interpretations with respect to that historical record.

The Unemployed Citizens' League, when it arrived on the scene in 1931, represented the continuation of a long struggle to improve workers' economic security. The potential role of government in providing such measures as public works and unemployment insurance had been a matter of public discussion for several decades with little effect. In both humanitarian and democratic terms, ideological arguments for government action had been advanced for at least thirty years, but a political structure to implement economic security measures for workers had not yet been developed. Why not?

The dilemma for society in the 1930s was how to create a political answer to an economic problem without changing a basic ideology. The ideological obstacle was the work ethic. Among middle class and working class people, there was a strong belief that consumer income ought to be based on work. The traditional American work ethic decreed, "no work, no eat." In other words, if Tom did not work, Tom could not

²⁶ Wells, "I Wanted to Work," 310-311. "All Federal Employees Should Commemorate Hulet M. Wells" (obituary), *Local 28 News*, United Federation of Postal Clerks, March 1970.

eat. In a frontier economy where a living could be obtained directly from the land, the maxim seemed reasonable enough. In the beginning phases of an industrial economy, the maxim operated to the advantage of men with capital who wanted a large supply of cheap labor. With the development of mass marketing, however, the maxim could almost be turned around to state, "no eat, no work." In other words, if Tom did not eat (and spend money in order to do so), then Dick and Harry would have no work to do. Consumption, with money as an intermediary, stimulated production, which in turn created jobs; these jobs distributed income to renew the cycle of production, distribution, and consumption.

In the late 1920s, astute observers like Foster and Catchings recognized the relationship between consumption and production, but the general public still adhered to the frontier maxim, "no work, no eat." Quite aside from any interests of employers, the general public had an interest in preserving the long-standing prejudice against charity. According to conventional wisdom, charity existed not for the able-bodied, but only for the disabled. To accept charity was to be classed with dependents, defectives, and deviants. To extend charity was to reduce the motivation to work. To breach the work ethic in that manner was not politically feasible.

The 1930s provided an economic imperative for political action. The work ethic was breached, after all, but subtly. Over a period of time and under economic duress, the social definition of "a worker" underwent two slight but significant changes:

- 1) What is a worker? At the turn of the century, the worker was for the most part a disposable commodity, a "wage-slave"--essential as a class but easily replaceable as an individual. Over the next thirty years, reformers attempted

to change the image by portraying the worker as a human being, a producer, a citizen, and ultimately, a consumer.

2) When is a person a worker? At the turn of the century, a worker was only a worker as long as he was getting paid for doing a specific job. Between jobs, he was a vagrant, a tramp, or perhaps a beggar or a bum. Neither business nor government took any responsibility for his fate. For the next thirty years, the general thrust of reform rhetoric was to portray the worker as a worker not only when he was doing a particular job, but as long as he was available for work. When he grew too old to work, reformers argued, he was still entitled to maintenance, because he had paid his dues. Once a worker, always a worker. As long as society needed workers, it had an obligation to maintain its workers even when they were not actually working.

A major thesis of this paper is that ideology and economic necessity interacted together in the rise and decline of the Unemployed Citizens' League in Seattle, 1931 to 1933. It was a political ideology, the ideology of *laissez faire*, not faulty motivation or lack of good will, which prevented an adequate political response by government at any level--local, state, or federal--at the beginning of the depression. For the first year of the economic downturn, efforts to galvanize the workers and unemployed workers into organizing themselves failed to generate much interest. Even as the depression deepened, most people simply waited for the system to right itself. From Seattle warehouses to the Washington, D.C., White House, the political ideology of *laissez faire*, with its economic theory of self-correcting business cycles, reaffirmed the wisdom of waiting.

The League arose as a political response to an untenable economic situation. As a by-product of its political activism, the League also developed an economic response; it

created an alternative economic system, known loosely as "mutual self-help." The mainstream economic community at first welcomed the League's enterprising attempt to alleviate distress, but soon came to see it as a nuisance and, ultimately, an economic threat. Local businesses which depended on local consumers resented the competition from the *ad hoc* barter system of the non-paying unemployed citizens. In its widely publicized activities, the League in Seattle, along with its sister leagues across the nation, created a political necessity for government to provide an economic response. This political necessity eventually caused a shift in economic ideology, as the nation sought a "New Deal" with the election of Franklin D. Roosevelt in November, 1932.

In its affinity for the work ethic and its abhorrence of charity, the Unemployed Citizens' League itself reflected mainstream American values. It accepted an ideology of monetary compensation which was interwoven with an ideological commitment to the work ethic. To work at a paying job for a living was considered good, but to accept charity for a living was considered bad. Work conferred self-respect and status; charity denoted dependency, idleness, and failure. How, then, could a person who was not working accept money without incurring the stigma of charity? Here was a dilemma for the individual, as well as for a society that professed a concern for the well-being of its members.

From the beginning, the League had been adamant about two things: it wanted work or maintenance payments for its members, and it did not want charity. In the following months and years, the general terms "relief" and "maintenance" gradually disappeared from the unemployed workers' lexicon, to be replaced by the more specific term, "unemployment insurance." This term clearly differentiated

jobless workers from the recipients of charity or "the dole." By redefining the situation in this manner, the unemployed were able to keep both their own self-respect and their commitment to the work ethic. This represented a shift--a very slight shift, but a shift nonetheless--in economic ideology.

Looking at the situation from the perspective of economic necessity, the spur to government action was in small part due to the fear of radicalism or revolution, but even more importantly, it was the need to restore the money-flow between consumers and producers. If private enterprise could not provide enough paying jobs, and if charity was not an acceptable answer for an able-bodied worker, how could the political-economic system survive? Advocates for worker security had pressed their arguments throughout the first three decades of the twentieth century, but the government did not step in until the loss of workers' buying power made itself felt throughout the nation.

In the 1920s the worker had become important not only as a producer, but as a consumer. When, in the early 1930s, workers began to lose their jobs in alarming numbers, the loss of consumer power had a devastating effect not only on individual families, but on local businesses in cities and towns across the nation. The business community, in Seattle and nationwide, quickly recognized the need for consumption to stem the downward cycle of depression. "Buy now," urged chambers of commerce in 1930. "Buy American," urged the daily newspapers in 1933, operating on the theory that consumer buying would stimulate retailers to order more goods from the wholesalers, who in turn would order more goods from the factories, thereby stimulating production and getting money back into circulation again. The catch: business contraction had meant more layoffs; more layoffs meant fewer

consumers and less consumption. Local charities might ladle out soup and offer a place to sleep, but they did not put consuming power (*i.e.*, m-o-n-e-y) into the hands of individuals and families.

The rhetoric of reform did not change very much in thirty years. The need to improve wage-worker's income and economic security to prevent poverty had been recognized in the late nineteenth century and was adopted as a cause by the Socialist Party at the turn of the century. However, along with employer hostility, popular ideology proved a major obstacle to government action. As economic conditions changed, reformers sought ways to promote economic security, but it wasn't until the worker became a full-fledged consumer that businessmen and politicians took seriously the need to protect worker income.

Businessmen and politicians had more leverage than the workers in shaping social and economic policies, but the workers were not without the means to influence the process, provided they could learn to organize on their own behalf. They needed to develop both skills and motivation. It was a slow process of education and experience, combined with rising expectations. With advances in technology and mass production in the 1920s, more workers obtained steady jobs at above-subsistence wages. By the summer of 1931 a critical mass of workers, having lost their steady jobs and incomes, became aroused enough to organize. The Unemployed Citizens League of Seattle, 1931 to 1933, was one example of local grass-roots organizing, replicated in cities and towns around the nation, in which workers pressured their government to provide a measure of economic security.

Notes on Sources

The best starting-point for the study of Seattle's jobless workers is a monograph by Arthur Hillman, *The Unemployed Citizens' League of Seattle* (1934). Hillman, a sociologist from the University of Washington, personally observed the League in action from June 1932 to February 1933. He chronicles the League's period of cooperation with city and county relief efforts, the tension over social work methods, and the growth and decline of self-help. He traces the League's political activity, noting the advent of Communist activity, internal dissent, external pressures, and leadership changes. He comments on public opinion and the League's impact in the community.

Another important contemporary study is John Arthur Hogan's master's thesis, "The Decline of Self-Help and Growth of Radicalism Among Seattle's Organized Unemployed" (University of Washington, 1934). Hogan, like Hillman, personally observed the League in action. Hogan studied the League a year longer than Hillman, taking the story to March 1934. Hogan is particularly interested in the rise of Communism. He explores self-help, politics, internal dissension, external pressures, and mass action. He advances the thesis that the failure of the cooperative self-help movement made possible the rise of the radical movement.

With the background provided by Hillman and Hogan, the researcher will reap great rewards from reading the League's own chronicle of its activities, *The Vanguard*. A four-page newspaper, it was published monthly at first, and weekly later on. It was frankly biased, as both Hillman and Hogan noted, but there is no better source for the League's own perspective on unfolding events. Much of the rhetoric reflects the socialist and labor-union orientation of the

League leadership.

To better understand the background of the leadership, the researcher may wish to investigate the Hulet Wells Papers in the Manuscript Division of the University of Washington Libraries. One slim box contains an assortment of newspaper clippings and an account of Wells' trip to Russia. The other box contains Wells' unpublished autobiography, "I Wanted to Work."

To compare the Seattle League with similar self-help enterprises around the nation, perhaps the most comprehensive source is the four-volume doctoral dissertation by Clark Kerr, "Productive Enterprises of the Unemployed, 1931-1938" (University of California, 1939). Kerr served as an economic advisor in the California State Relief Administration, 1934-1935. His sources on Seattle included Hillman's monograph and various magazine articles. Volume 4 contains a survey of Washington enterprises, pp.1188-1245, with a section on the Seattle League, pp.1192-1214.

More recently, a comparative approach has been taken by William Henry Mullins. Beginning with his doctoral dissertation at the University of Washington in 1975, he has studied the League in the context of a city's response to the Depression. In his recent book, *The Depression and the Urban West Coast, 1929-1933: Los Angeles, San Francisco, Seattle, and Portland* (1991), he explores the limitations of public reliance on cooperative individualism.

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