Mutiny on the Bounty: California Newspaper Reaction to WPA Strikes in July 1939

Lawrence D. White

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Abstract

MUTINY ON THE BOUNTY:
California Newspaper Reaction
to WPA Strikes in July 1939
by Lawrence D. White

What would be the reaction of American citizens to welfare recipients striking against the government which aided them?

In July, 1939, over one hundred thousand Works Projects Administration (WPA) workers protested a change in working hours and salary by striking. WPA, created by President Franklin D. Roosevelt in 1935, was an attempt to aid the unemployed through work relief programs. Earlier New Deal efforts at work relief, the Federal Emergency Relief Administration (FERA) and Civil Works Administration (CWA), had not succeeded in meeting the demands of able-bodied, but idle workers.

WPA, however, faced a major problem that would recur throughout its existence: the rate of pay for the hired reliefer. Labor unions demanded that prevailing wages or union scale be paid to skilled WPA laborers. A complex, compromise solution in 1936 required the WPA employee to earn an established wage by working a limited number of hours based upon the union wage scale for his craft. (For example, a carpenter employed by WPA had to work 53 hours a month for his salary, a plumber 50 hours a month, and a bricklayer 48 1/2 hours per month.)

But a number of factors persuaded Congress to change the law by July, 1939, forcing skilled and unskilled WPA workers to labor 130 hours a month. Naturally, skilled WPA workers rebelled against this, and, led
by various labor organizations like the American Federation of Labor (AFL) and the Worker's Alliance, began a nation-wide series of strikes to persuade Congress to rescind its action.

Newspaper reaction, both through editorials and letters to the editor, can reflect and at the same time mold the reading public's views on various issues. Concerning the specific WPA strike of July, 1939, California newspaper reaction generally opposed the strike method of the WPA workers. Attacking WPA as too expensive, as a failure, or as a political tool of the Democrats, the press also portrayed striking WPA workers as lazy, unappreciative, or Communist-inspired. Organized labor also suffered criticism for advocating the strikes, abusing its power, and neglecting its responsibilities to the workers.

A minority of newspapers defended the WPA workers' right to strike by censuring FDR's apparent hypocritical stand by not obeying the Wagner Act. Other newspaper reaction maintained that poor working conditions and low pay justified the WPA workers' actions.

The WPA strike, however, ended in approximately two weeks. Public response, being completely adverse to the strikers' demands, forced the AFL to repudiate its leadership of the strikes, and had compelled President Roosevelt to declare that no one could strike against the government.
MUTINY ON THE BOUNTY:

California Newspaper Reaction to WPA Strikes in July 1939

by

Lawrence D. White

A Thesis in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree Master of Arts in the Field of History

June 1979
Each person whose signature appears below certifies that this thesis in his opinion is adequate, in scope and quality, as a thesis for the degree Master of Arts.

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Chapter 1

HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES OF WORK RELIEF
AND THE WORKS PROGRESS ADMINISTRATION

In 1939 the United States was in the later stages of the most severe economic depression in its history. President Franklin D. Roosevelt, in his New Deal program of relief, recovery, and reform, had taken many steps to combat the effects of the Depression. One way in which the Administration attempted to relieve the suffering of the unemployed in particular was the work relief program, with the Works Progress Administration (WPA) towering above every program of that nature.

Employing millions, the WPA experienced problems from its inception in 1935. Perhaps the largest single issue confronting it was the rate of pay that the government set for relievers. In July, 1939, when Congress ordered an increase in the working hours (in effect lowering the pay scale of skilled laborers), a series of strikes erupted throughout the nation as WPA workmen protested the schedule change.

How did the public react to these strikes? What would taxpayers think about the formerly unemployed, and now hired relief workers, striking against the government that provided them with jobs?

Newspaper editorials provide insight into the thought and reactions of one segment of society. Of course, limiting factors occur in studying newspaper editorials. They are inevitably biased. By the time of Roosevelt's second election approximately two out of every 1
three newspapers were opposed to his candidacy. Also, the influence of the average newspaper was falling, as witness the re-elections of FDR.¹

Yet newspapers can play a major role in shaping public opinion, and one issue this essay confronts is whether newspapers in California molded public opinion concerning this particular strike, or merely reflected an attitude already prevalent within the community.

For a start one must realize that neither depressions nor relief work were new to the America of the 1930's. For as early as the depression of 1857-1858 public works were instituted in Newton, Massachusetts, Philadelphia, and New York City.² New to the depression of the 1930's, however, was the severity of the economic slump and the extent to which relief and public works were used to help the unemployed.

The difference between public works and relief works should be noted. Public works are needed public improvements used to give work in times of unemployment. Regardless of any depression, these improvements would have to be undertaken. Men employed on public works are not selected according to their financial need, but the skill of their work. Employment on a project is full-time, and prevailing wages are usually paid. Work relief, on the other hand, is undertaken solely to provide employment for those who require relief. The hours of work and


rate of pay are more or less arbitrarily fixed in relation to the relief needs of the worker. 3

The first extensive use of work relief occurred during the depression years of 1893-1897. Work relief or "made work" was regarded as, first, a test of the worthiness of relief recipients; second, a factor in detracting from the shame of charity; and third, a slight return on the investment of the government. Work relief could take the form of crushing stone, performing various jobs in parks, constructing sewers and roads, shoveling snow, cleaning streets, cutting wood, making clothes, or tearing down old buildings. 4

Naturally the relief worker desired the prevailing market wage. But the problem lay in finding a middle ground between low pay, which might lower the prevailing wage in industry, and the market wage that could prevent the worker from seeking private employment. Speaking before the National Conference of Charities and Correction in 1895, Philip W. Ayres stated,

The work given must be adequate in amount to prevent families from suffering either hunger or cold; but at the same time it must be really hard work in order to prevent dabbling, and it must be decidedly underpaid in order not to attract those who already have work at half-time, or who have otherwise disagreeable work. The whole must be so unattractive as to guarantee that, when other work can be had, the laborer will seek it. 5

3Feder, pp. 31, 32.


5Philip W. Ayres, "Is Emergency Relief by Work Wise?" in Proceedings of the National Conference of Charities and Correction, 1895, p. 100, cited by Feder, p. 179.
One compromise solution to the salary problem involved adjusting the working hours. Workers could still receive the standard or prevailing wage rate if working hours were reduced.6

Other controversial issues confronted those who dispensed work relief. Competition in wages and also in the job market itself occurred between work relief programs and private industry. Work relief jobs in many instances competed with regular business. Also, points of view varied as to whether private charities or the local government best handled work relief. Some criticized government involvement in work relief as socialistic, or self-serving in the sense that politicians could reward their supporters with work relief. Emphasis upon decentralization of relief activities continued until the Wilson Administration when vain attempts were made to provide a system of public works. Even the Secretary of Commerce under President Warren G. Harding, Herbert Hoover, favored a federal bill for public works. Though the amount of money expended for both public and private relief in general showed a steady increase from 1910 to 1929, a continued belief in the superiority of private relief prevailed.7

For the average American the decade of the 1920's marked a period of progressively good times. Production and employment were high and rising. Wages were not making extraordinary increases, but prices were stable. Because Americans had more money to spend, they sought to

6Feder, p. 180.

invest their money in the stock market. This speculative orgy con-
tinued as long as stock prices rose. But when the economy started to
slump, when the stock market finally reflected the fundamentally poor
economic situation in 1929, and when panic struck the stock market
investors, the Great Depression had begun. 8

Five basic weaknesses were inherent in the U.S. economy of 1929.
First, the economy depended upon a high level of investment and consumer
spending. Second, vast new holding companies and investment trusts
contributed to a bad corporate structure. Third, a poor banking struc-
ture with large numbers of independent units precipitated a chain
reaction of failing banks. Fourth, the uncertain balance of trade be-
tween the United States and foreign countries eventually led some
nations to default on their debts, causing a decline in American exports.
Fifth, adherence to a belief in a balanced budget precluded increases in
government spending to expand purchasing power. 9 Thus, the overexpand-
ing and unstable economy came to a devastating halt, for "[a] bubble
can easily be punctured. But to incise it with a needle so that it
subsides gradually is a task of no small delicacy." 10

Very quickly unemployment roles began to grow. From a figure of
2.86 million in the spring of 1929, over four million men were unem-
ployed by January, 1930, only two months after the Wall Street crash.

8John Kenneth Galbraith, The Great Crash (Boston: Houghton

9Galbraith, pp. 95, 183, 184, 185, 187, 189.

10Ibid., p. 30.
In September of 1930 five million were unemployed and by the end of that year seven million people were looking for work. That number rose to eight million in the spring of 1931. When Franklin D. Roosevelt assumed office in the spring of 1933, between thirteen and fifteen million unemployed workers stood idle.11

Both private charities and local governments assumed a heavy burden in aiding the unemployed. Complex problems confronted any relief agency. Differences in the kinds of people who needed relief, variations in the nature of the cause for relief, disparity in the duration of giving aid, the wide variety of administrative arrangements to carry out relief programs, and most importantly, the widespread, massive need for assistance all contributed to ineffective relief measures. A vicious cycle became established. Private citizens and corporations unable to pay their taxes, depleted city funds and curtailed budgets, increased unemployment and increased demands for relief prompted local governments to turn to the federal government for help.12

However, emergency activities of both permanent and temporary agencies are related to the social thought of their time, and the notion of the rugged individualist still predominated the early Depression years. If a man rose on his own merits, then he must certainly fall through his own failings. A legacy of our frontier heritage negated the...


seriousness of the situation: "People can find work if they want it;" "Relief pauperized those who receive it;" "But people aren't starving."

True, federal intervention had occurred on special occasions when problems were too big, or jobs too unprofitable for individuals to solve. The building of turnpikes and canals, imposing protective tariffs, the abolishing of slavery, curbing trusts, or prohibiting liquor were attained through the help of the federal government. Herbert Hoover, believed that the assumption of direct responsibility for the individual by any government would create passive alienated individuals, endanger the whole idea of personal responsibility, create a narrow, bureaucratic elite, and turn democracy into periodical plebiscites to elect demagogues.

Others opposed the federal government's involvement in direct relief because it would impair the credit of the United States, retard the restoration of normal business, raise various taxes, and violate states' rights. In an age of rugged individualism the federal government could not be seen as a beneficial friend or as an employer to serve.

President Hoover emphasized local resources and the importance of private agencies, such as the Community Chest and Red Cross, in producing relief. The President's Emergency Committee for Employment, conceived in October, 1930, and headed by Colonel Arthur Woods, aimed to

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15Brown, pp. 110, 111; Wecter, p. 81.
"[s]upplement and encourage the activities of state and local communities upon which was placed the primary responsibility for meeting the emergency."16

Even though the Committee recommended a larger federal public works program the Administration initially rejected such a plan on grounds that the normal process of recovery was sufficient. Yet, two months later President Roosevelt approved a $150 million appropriation to provide employment in various federal departments that already had works authorized by Congress.17

In 1932 the Reconstruction Finance Corporation (RFC) was created to lend money, not to individuals, but to banks, railroads, and other institutions threatened with dissolution. Senator Robert La Follette, Jr., questioned whether the federal government, in aiding business with $2.16 billion, could not also relieve the suffering of the unemployed. In response to such inquiries Congress approved the Wagner-Rainey Bill providing money for public works and authorizing the RFC to make loans and advances to the states for unemployment relief. On July 11, 1932, however, President Hoover vetoed the measure, objecting that public works would employ too few people. Congress repassed the bill on July 16 and Hoover, under political pressure, approved the loan program.18

Ironically, in the Presidential campaign of 1932 the Democrats attacked Hoover not because he had done too little in combating the

16Brown, pp. 68, 69.
17Ibid., pp. 70, 71.
18Ibid., pp. 115, 116, 124, 125; Leuchtenburg, p. 71.
Depression, but because he had done too much. Whatever the charges, the idea that the federal government should not take an active, direct interest in the individual's plight was repudiated; Roosevelt triumphed overwhelmingly, with Hoover failing to convince the public that he cared deeply or shared the sorrows and dimmed prospects that the Depression had brought. As FDR assumed office in March, 1933, approximately eighteen million persons, nearly one family out of every six, depended in some way upon relief from public funds. Eighty percent of this money came from federal loans to the states, and very soon the states would not be able to afford to borrow.19

Franklin D. Roosevelt succeeded where Hoover failed. That is, he inspired the American people with a trust, a loyalty, a psychological stimulation that provided time for the President to get his New Deal program functioning. Historians and economists will continue to debate the effectiveness of the New Deal.20 Whatever failings the program entailed, it must be acknowledged that the Roosevelt Administration in 1933 brought new meaning to the role of the federal government. Human

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19Leuchtenburg, pp. 3, 13; Brown, pp. 145, 146.

20For instance, Paul Conkin (pp. 14, 15, 106) declares the New Deal a short-run failure for it did not contribute to economic growth. He believes FDR's inability to fashion a consistent and operative political and economic philosophy left the President helpless and confused. Richard Hofstadter in The Age of Reform (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1966), p. 305, argues that the New Deal was a chaos of experimentation. Barton Bernstein in Towards a New Past: Dissenting Essays in American History (New York: Vintage Books, 1969), pp. 264, 281, 282, sees the New Deal seldom antagonizing established interests in the pursuit of protecting the institutions of private property and corporate capitalism. To him, more elements of continuity than change are present in the New Deal.
needs were placed ahead of inherited notions and inhibitions. The government now assumed the responsibility for guaranteeing every American a minimum standard of subsistence.21 In essence, the federal government became "an institution that was directly experienced."22

Roosevelt, having instituted the first state relief administration in the country in 1931 (the Temporary Emergency Relief Administration or TERA), appreciated the functions thrust on government in this economic emergency. In New York the TERA, under Harry Hopkins, established many precedents, principles, and lessons for the future Federal Emergency Relief Administration (FERA).23

In fact, the New Dealers had many precedents before them. Populist ideals provided new ways for regulating agriculture. Central direction of the economy originated in World War I mobilization. Jane Addams' ideas inspired urban social reform. Thus, the First New Deal, lasting until 1935, manifested the desire to see the union of business, labor, and government in the process of solving problems through affirmative national planning. New Dealers denied that depressions were inevitable events to be stoically endured. The "safety valve" of Frederick Jackson Turner's theory--nature or the frontier--was to be replaced by government.24

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22 Leuchtenburg, p. 331.

23 Brown, p. 91.

In a letter to Colonel E. M. House on April 5, 1933, Roosevelt wrote that the government should inflate the currency in order to make recovery possible. Four interlocking processes had to emerge, then, for prosperity to return. After manipulating the currency, the government also had to bolster the farmer's income by raising market prices through crops restriction or direct payments. Next, a system of codes for industry would increase employment and wage rates. Last, creation of government-financed work would relieve unemployment rolls.25

On May 12, 1933, the FERA emerged with an initial appropriation of $500 million to aid the states in relief activities. (A bill similar to the final relief act had been introduced four months earlier. However, Congress delayed the bill's passage for it did not want FERA established in Hoover's Administration.) The FERA, meant to be only a temporary expedient to help the unemployed, was not a great social work organization. Faced with deficient legislation, dwindling tax revenues, and exhausted credit, the cities and states turned to Washington for the money to develop relief-work programs. The federal government either granted the money outright to the state, or matched a dollar in federal aid for every three dollars the state had spent in relief in the preceding three months.26

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25Leuchtenburg, p. 48; Wecter, pp. 69, 70.

26Brown, pp. 137, 141, 142, 146, 301; Major John P. Hallihan, "Utilizing the Nation's Labor Force," American City, April, 1942, pp. 41, 42; Editorial, "The Scandalous WPA," New Republic, February 26,
Directed by Harry Hopkins, the FERA brought changes in federal assistance. Hopkins discarded the equation of relief with charity. Programs of relief were extended to include food, clothing, shelter, and medical care. Though the FERA Act gave no preference to work relief over direct relief, payment to relief citizens occurred in cash, not grocery slips. FDR told a conference in June, 1933, that the government did not intend to use works funds to build useless projects disguised as relief. The function of public works in an emergency was to provide a bridge by which people could pass from relief to self-support. However, many FERA undertakings were a continuation of old RFC-funded projects which chiefly employed the unskilled.  

FERA spent over three billion dollars between May of 1933 and June 30, 1936. Yet on the eve of FDR's inauguration at least as much popular demand existed for economizing as for mammoth government spending. Only through the pressure of Senators Robert La Follette, Jr., of Wisconsin and Edward Castigan of Colorado, Secretary of Labor Frances Perkins, and trusted friend and advisor Harry Hopkins was FDR persuaded to spend money for massive work relief and public works projects. Roosevelt desired a balanced budget, and as late as 1940 he feared public

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1936, p. 62. General relief standards in many cities five or six years later were ""... an experiment in malnutrition."" Relief functioned indeterminately, and to such an extent that thirty-one states reported granting more money in old-age assistance than to relief families. In New Jersey a relief director boasted that he had secured local funds for relief ""... only by demonstrating that it would cost less to give people relief orders than to bury them,"" Donald S. Howard wrote in an article, ""But People Must Eat,"" Atlantic Monthly, February, 1940, p. 194, 195, 197.

works would threaten the treasury. But he later became convinced that the budget could be balanced out of subsequent surpluses from other New Deal reforms.²⁸

Besides the FERA, more employment relief measures were approved. The National Industrial Recovery Act of June 16, 1933, authorized the establishment of the Public Works Administration (PWA). With an initial appropriation of $3.3 billion, PWA was under the direction of Harold L. Ickes, Secretary of the Interior. The purpose of PWA was to stimulate heavy industry by fostering public works requiring huge quantities of material. Private construction firms received government contracts, thus assuring the union or prevailing wage. By 1934, PWA was employing about half a million workers.²⁹

Other federal agencies like the Department of Agriculture, the War Department, and the Resettlement Administration also had work projects for the unemployed. The Civil Works Administration (CWA) was launched with $400 million on November 9, 1933, to remedy the problems of FERA, meet the critical unemployment needs of the 1933–1934 winter, and promote recovery through the rapid injection of purchasing power into the economic system. Harry Hopkins also had the responsibility of heading CWA, a completely federal operation (unlike the FERA and state emergency relief programs). Half the agency's workers came from relief rolls and were paid prevailing wages. In addition, CWA had different

²⁸Brown, p. 148; Leuchtenburg, pp. 36, 52, 85; Bernstein, p. 272; Conkin, p. 20.

work schedules depending upon the job classification. Clerical and professional workers were employed thirty-nine hours a week, while manual laborers worked thirty hours per week.\textsuperscript{30}

Though it too was only meant to be a temporary program, CWA succumbed to conservative Southern Democrats who feared its cost. Roosevelt also feared creating a permanent class of reliefers whom he might never remove from the government payrolls. Revelations of corruption reinforced the decision to end CWA. On February 15, 1934, the liquidation began, and by July 14, CWA was officially closed. In its brief existence it had employed over four million people, pumped a billion dollars of purchasing power into the economy, and established precedents for the Works Progress Administration (WPA).\textsuperscript{31}

But CWA's demise unleashed a storm of protest throughout the country. In one week over fifty thousand letters and seven thousand telegrams came to the White House in response. Rioting even occurred in some parts of the country. The FERA again stepped in and created the Emergency Work Relief Program to assume the unfinished CWA projects. An average of two million people a month were kept at work from the

\textsuperscript{30}Brown, pp. 159, 342; Wecter, p. 74; Conkin, p. 47; Leuchtenburg, p. 121.

\textsuperscript{31}Sherwood, p. 56; Leuchtenburg, pp. 121, 122. CWA accomplishments included the following: 40,000 schools built or improved; 469 airports built and 529 more improved; 255,000 miles of roads built or improved; 12 million feet of sewer pipe laid; 50,000 teachers employed to teach adults or to keep rural schools open; 3,700 playgrounds and athletic fields built or improved; 3,000 writers and artists employed. Sherwood, p. 57.
beginning of this emergency program in April, 1934, to the beginning of WPA in 1935.  

After the 1934 elections FDR confided in Colonel E. M. House that he hoped to abolish relief altogether by substituting a works program. A newly elected Congress working with the President confronted millions of jobless Americans, drought-stricken farmers, and rebellious industrial workers. Now came the time for free spending. In May, 1935, with eleven to twelve million people out of work, and about five million families on FERA relief rolls, Congress passed the Emergency Relief Appropriation Act of 1935 containing $4.88 billion for relief and public works. Out of this appropriation emerged the Works Progress Administration, designed to stabilize the makeshift work activities of prior agencies. The nearly five billion dollars was to be divided three ways: (1) the financing of public works projects, (2) the liquidation of FERA, which officially closed on December 31, 1935, and (3) the creation of WPA. In reality a new works program emerged with a triumvirate of power. Harold Ickes, remaining Secretary of the Interior, would head the Advisory Committee on Allotments. The Division of Application and Information was to be Frank Walker's domain. Harry Hopkins fell heir to the Works Progress Division.

This division of authority, however, soon ignited a bitter, jealous feud between Ickes and Hopkins over control of this and future

32 Sherwood, p. 56; Brown, p. 160.

relief works monies, for Hopkins, in his role of supervising the actual progress of work, could veto a PWA project. He could do this on grounds of insufficient unemployment in a community, or because materials and other costs were greater in proportion than the wages that were to be paid on the particular project. In the division of PWA and WPA work an effort was undertaken to make the cost of the project a criterion for distinction. Those jobs which cost more than $25,000 were to go automatically to Ickes' PWA. But Hopkins frustrated this distinction by subdividing larger projects. Eventually too many marginal cases made it almost impossible to distinguish between heavy and light public works. Further confusion sprang from the name Harry Hopkins chose for his agency. Announced as the Works Progress Division, it was changed to the Works Progress Administration, a change Ickes always believed to have been made to confuse the agencies, PWA and WPA, in the minds of the public.34

But the relief measures in 1935 marked a shift in the Administration's concern over relief and public works. Previous to this act, public works meant long-time construction based upon utility, engineering

34Leuchtenburg, p. 125; Schlesinger, The Politics of Upheaval, pp. 345-347; "WPA Becomes PWA's Big Brother," Literary Digest, September 21, 1935, p. 5. Major differences between PWA and WPA were evident. As stated previously, PWA worked solely through private contractors; it was not involved in the hiring and firing of men. PWA projects usually involved considerable sums of money. For instance, the Lincoln Tunnel in New York, the port of Brownsville in Texas, the aircraft carriers Yorktown and Enterprise were all built with PWA allocations. Another distinction was that PWA sponsors had to contribute 45 percent of the cost of the project. WPA sponsors, perhaps paying as much as 25 percent, would many times be granted by WPA the entire cost of the project. Leuchtenburg, p. 133; Schlesinger, The Politics of Upheaval, p. 347.
soundness, and legal authority. Frank Walker stated in May of 1935 that those considerations would be subordinated in some degree to the acute unemployment problem. Instead of priming the pump through heavy capital expenditures, as Ickes wanted, FDR chose to follow Hopkins' aim of putting to work as many men as he could who were on relief. Not too concerned with the return on taxpayer's money, Hopkins' interest as a social worker was getting relief to the suffering and getting it there quickly.35

In its nearly eight-year history, WPA spent billions of dollars to help the unemployed. Fiscal 1936 found the agency spending $1.6 billion, decreasing to $1.2 billion in 1937, up to $1.7 billion in 1938, down again to $1.6 billion in 1939, and $1.3 billion in 1940. The number of people employed by WPA varied like its appropriations. In February, 1936, 3.85 million people were on WPA rolls, 1.45 million in September of 1937, 3.24 million in November of 1938, and in August, 1939, 1.91 million. Nearly half of those workers, as of June, 1936, were over forty years of age, while 39 percent were over forty-five. Metropolitan areas in the United States employed 38.1 percent of the WPA workers, the low in March, 1940, to a high in November of 1937, of 47.4 percent. Over one million black Americans were hired by WPA. Women between the years 1935 and 1940 made up from 12.1 percent to 18.2 percent of the WPA work force.36


It was not an easy matter to find a sponsor of a work project, for some public body other than WPA had to initiate the plan. The sponsor of a project had many responsibilities. Initially the work had to have a public usefulness. The engineering design of the project and later development of working plans were a responsibility of the sponsor, too. Sufficient funds had to be set aside before the project could be undertaken, and sponsors had to agree to complete any work that WPA could not finish.37

In its early stages the WPA was expected only to assist local agencies to the extent of their deficiencies. But the local units found it to their advantage if they could get WPA to assume most of the economic liability. The increased demand upon WPA support forced the administration to ask Congress for additional funds nine times in its first six years, since the agency was given its money on an annual basis. For that reason, the Emergency Relief Act of 1939 and subsequent ones required a sponsor to provide an aggregate 25 percent of the cost of the project. This contribution could be made in cash, labor, materials, office or warehouse space, or in the use of equipment and tools. Between 1935 and 1937 municipalities sponsored almost 40 percent of WPA projects, almost 27 percent by a county, nearly 16 percent at the state level (through highway departments, hospitals, universities, departments of health), and 14 percent at the township level.38

37Howard, Fiscal Relief Policy, pp. 107, 140-144.
Because Congress allocated the funds to WPA, it also authorized the type of projects that could or could not be funded, which varied for each fiscal year. Though the majority of WPA projects involved construction, non-construction or white collar jobs were also available. Clerical work, technical research, recreational programs, nursery care, school lunches, historical surveys all needed workers. The WPA basically provided work relief for three classes of unemployables: (1) the inexperienced, who might be well trained and prepared, but could not find work, (2) the unskilled, who had no specialized training, (3) the unwanted, who were usually older men and women, once moderately successful. In November of 1937, of those employed by WPA, 55 percent were laborers or unskilled, 17 percent were semiskilled, 13 percent had white collar WPA jobs, and almost 8 percent had a skilled position.39

In the years from 1935 to 1941, the Division of Operations in WPA assumed 78 percent of all projects. This division included highways, public buildings, sewage collection and disposal. Community Service Programs—education, recreation, public health, sewing—accounted for 21.6 percent of the work. The WPA ran special vocational projects training women for domestic service and other workers in skilled positions that would be useful in wartime. These trainees learned the skills of welding, shipbuilding, aircraft and automobile servicing. However, various appropriation acts constricted the relationship between WPA and defense work. The 1935 act prohibited any

defense work; in the 1936-1938 acts such prohibition was not included, but the 1939 and following acts once again forbade the use of WPA funds for defense needs. But other projects were available to the WPA. Projects involving the arts—painting, music, writing, and acting—found sponsors. The theater division, in particular, employed over eleven thousand people in the latter part of April, 1937, alone. This WPA theater program entertained thousands of individuals in remote and rural areas. Of 40,000 such people interviewed, for example, 60 percent indicated having never before seen a theatrical performance. WPA education projects also flourished, spanning nursery schools to adult education.40

Although millions of unemployed received help through relief works, WPA experienced criticism from both the political right and left. Mayors of various cities criticized WPA for not employing more people, and for the lack of local authority in conducting the program. Editorialy, the Economist stated that public works had not been increased, but only prevented from fading away altogether. The New Republic maintained that WPA, being a mistake from the beginning, had been badly mismanaged. In a later editorial the magazine suggested that an even larger works agency should be erected, adequately planned with useful projects and bountifully endowed with money. Such ideas fostered the hope of a permanent WPA program. Relieving that private industry would

never provide jobs for all those willing to work, Harry Hopkins wanted a completely federalized agency to provide work for all the able-bodied unemployed in the country, irrespective of need.41

Still others criticized the WPA program. Public works were expensive to operate, and at no time did the available funds even approach those needed to finance a program for all the unemployed. The National Resources Planning Board concluded that the federal government's works programs had a very small effect upon national income and business activity. Citing the dole's minimal cost, some individuals suggested returning to direct cash payments for those on relief. The approximate cost of work projects per worker ranged from $35 per month under FERA, to $70 in CWA, and $65 a month in WPA. The direct cash payment cost only $22 a month per case. Hugh S. Johnson, who temporarily headed the WPA in New York City in 1935, declared himself in favor of the dole, for the work relief system, as instituted, created little loyalty for the job itself, taught people to be slipshod in their work, and did not create any taste for labor in general.42


In Harper's Magazine Grace Adams added that the dole told a man he had struck the bottom, both spiritually and financially. That feeling of helplessness made a person determine to work at anything. However, she wrote that the WPA destroyed that determination, for

[the person who has worked for three years on a white-collar [WPA] project has already lost his incentive to independent industry, and so he opposes with all the vigor he has left any change in the work relief program. . . not because . . . he considers the work he does worth while [sic], or even because he thinks the government owes him a living, but simply because he knows that so long as the WPA continues as it is he can draw larger bounties from it than from any other public charity.43

Responding to the criticism of overspending and the danger of inflation, FDR slashed government spending in June, 1937, including both WPA and PWA appropriations. By August of the same year a drastic economic slide put another burden upon FDR: the stock market fell by 43 percent; industrial production declined by one-third; and private construction in the years since FDR's inauguration never reached half the pre-Depression figures. In response, payrolls declined by 35 percent, putting two million more people out of work between Labor Day and the end of 1937. In all, the economy plunged about one-half as much in nine months as it had from 1929 to 1933.44

The President blamed business for the decline, citing a conspiracy to embarrass him and frustrate his reform efforts. But in turn, the business community maintained that threatening taxes, the coddling of organized labor by the Administration, and budgeting deficits dis-


44Leuchtenburg, pp. 243, 244; Mecter, p. 100; Conkin, p. 96.
couraged private investment and resulted in the recession. Naturally, major urban centers reported increased unemployment and mayors called upon the Administration to increase relief spending. This Roosevelt did in an emergency appropriation of $250 million in early 1938 to enlarge WPA activities. In that election year, Congress voted a $3.7 billion public works measure for PWA, WPA, and other assorted agencies. But this infusion of money did not preclude Republican triumphs at the polls: they enlarged their House representation by eighty seats, and gained eight Senators. A defeated Democratic Congressman from Pennsylvania blamed his own party losses on the failure of the New Deal to restore prosperity. After the 1938 fall elections enthusiasm seemed to turn against New Deal innovations and public interest waned. When the recession struck, the conservative argument that reforms were no longer necessary took on a greater force. As business opposition to the New Deal grew, the idea reemerged that business could run the economy with greater efficiency than bureaucrats.45

Compounding President Roosevelt's problems in 1938 were a series of articles by Tom Stokes, a New Deal supporter, and a writer for the Scripps-Howard newspaper chain, who charged Democrats with using the WPA in Kentucky to defeat a Roosevelt opponent. The suggestion that Roosevelt's party purchased votes by promising WPA jobs was not new.46

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46 Leuchtenburg, p. 270; Oliver McKee, Jr., "Work Relief," Commonweal, June 11, 1937, p. 182.
Newsweek called Stokes' articles "... a warmed-over version of charges which Republican newspapers have been making for months."\textsuperscript{47} But the Pulitzer prize-winning articles did persuade the Senate to investigate the charges with the result that Congress passed the Hatch Act of 1939, an omnibus law prohibiting political activity by federal employees. Also, paying the salary or expenses from WPA funds of a person who was a candidate for any state, district, county, or municipal office, in any election, or who served as a campaign manager or assistant became illegal.\textsuperscript{48} WPA administrators reinforced this non-political stance in a 1940 memo which told the WPA worker

\begin{quote}
[y]ou are not under obligation to vote for or against any candidates. . . . No one can threaten to have you fired for any political reason. No one can promise you a better WPA job in return for your support. No one can ask you for money for any political campaign. . . . You do not owe your job to politics—you will not lose it because of your vote.\textsuperscript{49}
\end{quote}

Surrounded with criticism, Congress attempted to reorganize the Works Progress Administration by making it part of a larger works program. Effective July 1, 1939, the Federal Works Agency included, among others, the Bureau of Public Roads, the branch of building management of the National Park Service and United States Housing Authority, the Federal Emergency Administration of Public Works, and the renamed WPA, now called the Works Projects Administration. In another effort to


\textsuperscript{49}Howard, Federal Relief Policy, pp. 116 and 118, citing WPA, Release 4-2120, April 11, 1940, p. 15.
quell WPA controversy Congress endeavored to restructure the rates of pay for many WPA workmen. This endeavor, however, would bring more turmoil to the WFA and produce a series of strikes that spread throughout the nation in 1939.\textsuperscript{50}

\textsuperscript{50}Brown, pp. 345, 346; Hallihan, p. 42.
Depressions and relief work were not new to the America of the 1930's, and strikes by government-paid work relievers had predated the national WPA strike in 1939.

Early State Emergency Relief Administrations experienced 145 press-reported strikes. The Hopkins'-run FERA and CWA had forty-six strikes during 1934-1935. The Resettlement Administration and Civilian Conservation Corps also encountered strikes. With these precedents the Works Progress Administration (WPA) was not immune to strike difficulties. In fact, in its first two and one-half years WPA experienced approximately 600 strikes in every state of the union except Arkansas, Arizona, Delaware, Louisiana, and Wyoming. During that time, 1935-1937, not a single strikeless month occurred.¹

The unionization of WPA workers no doubt prompted the use of strikes by the workers in order to solve their grievances. Though most WPA workers were unorganized, the government became morally bound to recognize the unions of its employees because of President Franklin D. Roosevelt's strong support of the National Labor Relations Act of 1935 (the Wagner Act) which encouraged and guaranteed the right of workers in

private industry to organize. The National Labor Relations Board (NLRB), in a case involving the National Recovery Administration (NRA), held that the federal government must recognize the right of its own employees to organize without coercion, intimidation, or interference. The WPA protected its workers' rights to select representatives to discuss grievances with the administration, representatives who were not necessarily part of the works program. Also, discrimination against individual workers or groups, through such tactics as espionage or blacklists, was forbidden. In some local cases of reverse discrimination, WPA hired only union members for certain jobs, though the WPA in Washington, D.C., refused to sanction the practice. However, while WPA accepted the principle that its workers could belong to or organize unions, no organization meeting could take place during working hours, and, most importantly, WPA workers were forbidden to strike.2

But WPA workers did strike. Some believed that because their projects proved beneficial to the public, they were hired for their labor and had a right to use the strike as a method of protest. A strike, then, was not directed against the government per se, but against the employer who in this case happened to be the federal government. Thus, because some WPA workers chose to see themselves in a regular employer-employee relationship, they wanted the same benefits,

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pay, and especially the respect of private employment. In certain situations, however, this was not to be. Writing in *Forum* magazine, a WPA worker charged that society in general had classed him in the same category as a parolee or a discharged schizophrenic. Leonard A. Allen, also a WPA worker, protested that WPA workers were linked to a lower caste of American Society:

> The next time your Representative or Senator rises in Congress to deplore the plight of the Jews in Germany, make an appeal to his sense of justice. Tell him Germany has its Jews, India its Untouchables, and the United States its Unemployed.3

Another WPA worker echoed similar feelings when he wrote that some businessmen, adhering to old puritanical philosophies, refused to hire men and women who had been on WPA rolls. This attitude forced ambitious, honest people to grovel for a living since private employers refused to assist in removing men and women from the WPA by hiring them. A number of WPA workers suffered discrimination in voting rights since they could not find private employment. As late as 1934, the constitutions of fourteen states deprived relief recipients of the right to vote and to hold public office. A few years later the chairman of the Radio Corporation of America, Major General J. B. Harbord, repeated this idea, believing that the relief recipient, as a voter, had a vested interest in retaining all of the benefits he received. However, in a March, 1939, *Fortune* survey almost three-quarters of those polled felt

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relievers should not lose their franchise.\textsuperscript{4}

WPA projects were often criticized for their expense, and WPA workers for their inefficiency. WPA officials tried to point out the unfair comparison between WPA and private construction. For instance, the law required WPA to keep equipment costs at a minimum, thus affecting a worker's output. WPA workers could only work a certain number of hours a month, necessitating a number of shifts to do one man's work. Unlike private contractors, WPA was compelled to select its workers from the needy, not the most skilled. The word "boondoggle" became a favorite word of WPA critics.\textsuperscript{5} Regarding that word, which described trifling, useless work, or those who loafed on the job, FDR condoned it, for he said if "... we can boondoggle our way out of the depression ... it will be enshrined in the popular mind for years to come."\textsuperscript{6} This sort of ridicule of WPA workers prompted the Council of the Federation of Actors, composed of vaudeville performers, to forbid its ten thousand members from making jokes about WPA, believing that the jokes were often cruel, vicious, and a great injustice to WPA workers.\textsuperscript{7}


\textsuperscript{5}Howard, Federal Relief Policy, p. 137.

\textsuperscript{6}"'Career-Men,' WPA Frankenstein?" Literary Digest, June 12, 1937, p. 10. Naturally some cases of "boondoggling" did arise. For instance, the Literary Digest reported that twenty young men in Dubois, Pennsylvania, were paid eight dollars a day by WPA to teach schoolchildren the game of marbles. Residents of Westchester County in New York learned how to play a better game of golf and tennis through a $100,000 WPA appropriation. Ibid.

\textsuperscript{7}Margaret Marshall, "Notes by the Way," Nation, March 25, 1939, p. 351.
The WPA, sensitive to the claim of inefficiency, put its brick and stone masons, carpenters, and printers to the test in seven cities in January, 1937. Rated by a union journeyman and a WPA engineer, the results showed that over three-fourths of the men produced passable or better work. But because WPA projects could not compete directly with private industry, many could not be employed at their usual occupations. Some workers complained that due to the manual-type labor they lost their former skills for highly delicate work.  

For these and other reasons, WPA workers organized unions. Many WPA workers believed that organizing was the best way to keep their jobs, for they looked upon WPA not as a temporary expedient, but as a vocation, a permanent program. In times of economic depression, the worker employed by WPA found safety or security from joblessness, an escape from the precarious state of private employment. Other WPA workers discovered that the grievance and appeal system worked inadequately. The WPA had established a step-by-step hierarchy whereby the worker could present his grievance to the foreman, next to the local WPA official, then to the state WPA organization, and finally to the assistant WPA commissioner in charge of the Division of Employment in Washington, D.C. However, unions should have more success, workers

believed, than the individual in combating the maze of assistants and supervisors. 9

WPA workers objected to many administration procedures and regulations. Later, if these grievances were irresolvable, the grievances became strike demands. Tardy paychecks were a most prolific grievance. A problem with transportation sparked some strikes. WPA sought to have its local sponsors assume the cost of transporting workers to the projects, but often they neglected to do this, and workers had to walk to the project or pay for transportation. After February 20, 1936, WPA forced all men, skilled and unskilled, to make up time lost on jobs. 10

Complaints against the conduct of WPA foremen and supervisors were numerous. Most of the foremen, also taken from relief rolls, lacked experience in managing workers. Others with experience had developed habits that were frequently contrary to WPA regulations. If the foremen and supervisors maintained a wrong conception of the WPA program, it reflected in their management of the workers. Also, in many regions of the country local WPA administrators opposed union organization and a number of strikes occurred over specific charges of union discrimination.


10 Ziskind, pp. 158-160, 163.
Fingerprinting workers raised a protest, as did undue surveillance and petty persecution. A special type of supervision, the use of armed guards to patrol projects, aroused the ire of the workers, for many charged that persons with complaints were frightened away and at times manhandled.\textsuperscript{11}

But a grievance that aroused more discussion, controversy, protest, and national attention than any other involved the WPA pay scale. This question dated from the beginning of WPA in 1935 and haunted it thereafter. The rate of pay depended on the philosophy of the WPA: was it a governmental means of taking up the slack in the private work sector, or a temporary way to sustain the worker's purchasing power, his health, and working instinct? Under the Federal Emergency Relief Administration (FERA) the size of the paycheck usually depended upon the budgetary deficiency of the worker's family. That is, social workers devised subsistence budgets for families, and the worker received the difference between that budget and whatever other income the family might have.\textsuperscript{12}

In its first year the WPA paid security wages. A security wage was larger than the relief dole, but not so large as to encourage the rejection of private employment. Also, the security wage in WPA's first year was guaranteed. Because workers had to eat despite whatever weather conditions might affect the project, they received their monthly salary.\textsuperscript{13}

\textsuperscript{11}Ibid., pp. 163, 164, 166; Letter to the editor, Nation, January 21, 1939, p. 103; Letter to the editor, Nation, September 21, 1940, p. 255.

\textsuperscript{12}"Mutiny on the Bounty," Time, July 17, 1939, p. 14; Ziskind, p. 135.

\textsuperscript{13}Howard, Federal Relief Policy, pp. 166, 170.
But the organized worker found it much simpler and economically beneficial to refer to the prevailing wage, or the union wage, of his own craft. *Time* magazine labelled paying lower than union wages a return to the inhumanity of the Hoover days, and insisted that relief families were donating part of their services to the state. The American Federation of Labor (AFL) led the fight to demand union rates for skilled WPA workers, for it feared that if the WPA undercut union pay scales, then private employers would be encouraged to cut their wages. In demanding prevailing wages, the AFL could establish its leadership over labor as a whole, both organized and unorganized. Through the intense lobbying efforts of organized labor, and strikes by WPA workers, the cumulative effect forced Congress to reduce the number of hours a WPA reliefer worked. State WPA administrators thus established the number of hours that different classes of workers had to labor to receive the "security wage" based upon the prevailing rates in their respective counties. This system lasted from 1936 to July, 1939.14

WPA workers did not all receive the same pay. Many factors determined the final wage of the reliefer, which could vary from month to month. Neither the size of a worker's family nor the number of dependents affected pay rates, but, simply stated, the variation in wages depended upon (1) the skill of the worker—more highly skilled, higher pay, (2) the section of the country in which he lived—Northern rates were higher than those paid in the South, (3) the degree of urbanization of the county in which the worker was employed—more urban, higher pay. At first WPA paid the worker according to the city in which the worker lived, but this brought problems because some workers with the same skill, on the same project, received different wages. Also, in some metropolitan areas WPA extended the scale over the entire district.

The final amount of pay also depended upon other considerations. A WPA worker in 1936 discovered that he had to make up time lost for weather, illnesses and other absences if he wanted to receive his full monthly salary. He was to be paid only for time worked. Extra pay would not be given for overtime, but the worker could receive time off for the extra labor. A reduction in wages would occur if the WPA worker had other sources of income like veterans benefits. 15

admittedly, the Roosevelt Administration and the WPA had to change its wage scales. Ziskind, pp. 143-148; "Can Relief-Workers Go On Strike?" Literary Digest, August 17, 1935, p. 8.

15"Works Progress Administration Wage Scales," Monthly Labor Review, January, 1939, p. 189; Howard; Federal Relief Policy, pp. 163, 169, 172, 175, 217, 218. A House Committee in 1941 revealed that WPA workers averaged a loss of five percent of their potential earnings each month due to sickness, poor weather, project interruptions, and other reasons. Over an entire year that represented three weeks pay. Howard, Federal Relief Policy, p. 168.
Relatively little is known about the distribution of individual WPA earnings, but in December, 1935, the average security wage was $41.57 a month. In 1935, 32.4 percent of the workers received less than $30 a month, 32.7 percent earned between $30 and $50 a month, while 34.9 percent received $50 or more for their work. However, by 1939 the average wage had risen from $41.57 to approximately $56 a month. Though WPA relievers had the right to spend this money as they saw fit, indirect pressure was applied to spend and not save their earnings, and thus bolster the national economy. The low wages usually meant that workers had to spend their pay in order to survive.16

In a WPA study, Margaret Stecker found that in March, 1935, a family of four needed about $75 a month for an emergency level existence. That level took into account the economies that would be made in depression conditions, conditions which could be unhealthy for families if they had to exist at the emergency level for considerable periods of time. Normal or average minimum requirements, the maintenance level, required an income of $105 for a family of four in a month. Since a discrepancy did exist between what a WPA worker earned and what the family needed, they often received supplemental commodities or income. Yet the WPA rate in some large cities was less than the amount families could have received from relief. Other times WPA compelled workers to leave its rolls to accept private employment which might pay far less than the WPA scale.17

16Howard, Federal Relief Policy, pp. 40, 177-180, 184, 186.

Periodically the wage rate was modified. Up to five percent of the workers in a state could be exempted from the wage schedule because of their specialized training, ability, or technical positions. The President's regulations also exempted administrators and supervisory employees from the established monthly security wage. When the average laborer earned $56 a month, a supervisor of time-keepers in Sacramento was paid $160 a month. Assistant supervisors, also in Sacramento, received $216 a month, while the same position in San Bernardino County paid $233. The salary of Herbert C. Legg, WPA administrator for Southern California, was $625 a month in 1939.18

Work periods for the different classes of WPA workers posed monumental scheduling difficulties for WPA administrators. For instance, a common laborer worked 121 hours a month for his wage, while the carpenter labored just 53 hours. Bricklayers worked 48 1/2 hours a month in certain areas, a hod carrier 63 1/2 hours. A plumber's helper worked 71 1/2 hours, but the journeyman plumber put in 50 hours a month.19

Another problem relating to the working schedule angered organized labor. Skilled WPA laborers, working only a few days each month to receive their WPA check, took private jobs to supplement their incomes, often below the prevailing wage. This employment outside WPA violated administration rules, and while the skilled workmen had the extra time, 


the unskilled men were working as much as 130 hours a month for even smaller paychecks. Due to this unequal work/pay situation, and the complaints from WPA administrators, social workers, and unskilled relievers, the fiscal 1940 Emergency Relief Act stipulated two main changes in WPA procedures. First, all WPA workers regardless of skill had to work 130 hours every four weeks for their security pay, and second, all those employed by WPA for eighteen consecutive months would have to be discharged for at least thirty days before being rehired.20

Thus, beginning July 1, 1939, the wide hourly-wage differential no longer existed, and the 4,000 different wage schedules were reduced to a workable 60 when the new law went into effect. These changes, Congress believed, would be beneficial in improving the planning of operation schedules, providing more effective supervision, completing projects at a faster rate, increasing the efficiency of project operations, and

20"The WPA Strike," Newsweek, July 17, 1939, p. 43; Donald S. Howard, "But People Must Eat," Atlantic Monthly, February, 1940, p. 196; Howard, Federal Relief Policy, pp. 208, 214. Exceptions to the 130 hours provision were made. If necessary more hours could be worked to (1) protect work already done on a project, (2) permit making up lost time, (3) complete work in an emergency involving the public welfare or projects related to national defense. Howard, Federal Relief Policy, p. 213. Robert S. Allen charged Congress with attempting to destroy the President's work relief program by replacing it with a dole. Congress apparently considered making some changes in the works program when the Ryne's Committee, a special Senate committee investigating unemployment and relief, recommended in February, 1939, the creation of a Department of Public Works which would assume all the functions of WPA, PWA, CCC, and other works agencies. Later, Congress attempted to take the WPA program out of the hands of one man and place it in the hands of a Works Projects Board, consisting of three individuals. Robert S. Allen, "WPA—or the Dole," Nation, January 28, 1939, pp. 111, 112; Howard, Federal Relief Policy, p. 112.
providing an incentive for the WPA worker to get and keep a private job.21

Reaction by skilled workers and the American Federation of Labor (AFL) to the change in WPA regulations came quickly. Harry Bates, president of the International Bricklayers Union, stated, "A union man holding a union card does not work below the union scale of wages for anyone."22 Also, the president of the Building and Construction Trade Council of the AFL, Thomas A. Murray, acknowledged he officially authorized a walkout by WPA workers, and emphasized that "[t]he WPA bill, jammed through by Congress at the last minute, is one of the most vicious pieces of legislation ever palmed off on the people of this nation. . . . This fight will be fought to a finish."23

WPA workers around the country began to protest the new WPA regulations by leaving their jobs around July 5. Eventually the strike extended into thirty-seven states with Illinois, Minnesota, Wisconsin, and New York having the largest number of striking workers. On the 7th of July the AFL claimed one hundred thousand WPA workers were idle, with large protests in New York City, Cleveland, and Chicago. After the weekend had passed, the strike continued to gain momentum. On July 10 in Detroit, 17,000 workers walked off their jobs and the number increased


22"War on Congress," Time, July 24, 1939, p. 11.

to 28,000 the next day. Both Illinois and Wisconsin had approximately 30,000 striking WPA workers by July 11.24

Joining the AFL in trying to pressure Congress to reduce the 130 hour work regulation was the Worker's Alliance, perhaps the largest WPA workers' union. The Alliance, formed under Marxist auspices in 1935, represented over 250,000 WPA employees when the Unemployed Council, part of the Trade Union Unity League, and the National Unemployed League, combined with the Worker's Alliance in 1936. In the 1939 strike the Alliance took a very vocal position, especially when David Lasser, president of the organization, stated that depriving WPA workers of the right to strike meant instituting forced labor in the United States. When the series of strikes began, the Alliance called for all WPA workers to stage a massive protest on July 20.25

President Roosevelt and the Administration speedily responded to the strike situation. Initially, FDR facetiously asserted that WPA employees were not striking, merely returning to their homes. But WPA, now led by Colonel Francis C. Harrington, invoked a regulation, with the President's approval, which terminated relievers from administration rolls who did not work for five consecutive days. In addition, the fired strikers could be denied other forms of relief, then prosecuted for willfully refusing to support dependents. By July 12, over 13,000 WPA

24Bakersfield Californian, July 6, 1939, p. 6; Oakland Tribune, July 6, 1939, p. 2; July 7, 1939, p. 2; July 11, 1939, p. 2; Sacramento Union, July 6, 1939, p. 2; July 7, 1939, p. 2; July 8, 1939, p. 2; July 12, 1939, pp. 1, 2; "Strikes in July, 1939," Monthly Labor Review, November, 1939, p. 1145.

workers had been dismissed, with Minnesota leading the total with 6,000.26

Events in Minnesota, especially in Minneapolis, took a fatal turn during the mid-summer, when on July 11 a policeman died of heart failure following a scuffle between WPA pickets and police at a sewing project. Then on Friday, July 14, having earlier dispersed a crowd of 4,000 pickets, police tried to escort one hundred women from their work on the sewing project amid tear gas, bricks, and rock throwing. In the melee one picket was killed, seventeen injured, and 160 people arrested under a broadly interpreted conspiracy provision in the Woodrum Relief Act, a provision which included under the definition of a felon any person who, by means of fraud, force, threat, intimidation, or boycott deprived, attempted to deprive, or assisted in depriving another person of the benefits to which he was entitled. Attorney General Frank Murphy, after reiterating that there must be no strikes against the government, said the Justice Department would thoroughly investigate those who exploited the strike situation. Such strikes by government workers, Murphy contended, laid the foundation for fascism.27

26Ziskind, pp. 3, 224; Howard, Federal Relief Policy, p. 223; Oakland Tribune, July 13, 1939, p. 2; Bakersfield Californian, July 13, 1939, p. 1.

27"War on Congress," Time, July 24, 1939, p. 11; Dwight MacDonald, "WPA Cuts—or Jail," Nation, February 3, 1940, p. 122; Orange Daily News, July 14, 1939, p. 3; New York Times, July 14, 1939, p. 1; July 15, 1939, p. 1; Richmond Daily Independent, July 20, 1939, p. 1. The issue at the trials of the Minneapolis strikers pitted "Communism" vs. "Americanism." U. S. Attorney Victor Anderson reportedly stated that "Minneapolis is not going to become the Moscow of America as long as I am district attorney." MacDonald, p. 122. In a series of trials Minneapolis Judge Matthew M. Joyce allowed mass trials of twenty-five at a time. Thirty-two persons were convicted, fourteen of whom received
Negative news reports concerning the WPA strikes, such as the hostilities in Minneapolis, deflated the hopes of the AFL, especially its president, William L. Green. When the strike began he predicted that the entire membership of five million men would be mobilized to preserve a vital principle of organized labor, the prevailing wage, which had been established through years of suffering, sacrifice, and collective bargaining. Bernard Tassler, on the publicity staff of the AFL, threatened to withhold labor support in future elections from any member of Congress who did not vote in favor of restoring the prevailing wage rates. But on July 12 Green stressed that WPA strikes were spontaneous, and had never been ordered by the AFL because the remedy lay with Congress and not with strikes. A committee of labor leaders met with President Roosevelt on the 14th and discussed the prevailing wage with him. Indicative of the President's position was his statement just before a meeting with AFL leaders that no one could strike against the government. Afterwards Green explained that labor's dissatisfaction with the new WPA wage policy had been presented to the President, and that Roosevelt was asked to intervene to protect the strikers from discrimination.28

jail or prison sentences ranging from thirty days to eight months. However, after twenty-four labor and liberal leaders appealed to FDR in early 1940, the remaining indictments, over one hundred, were dropped. Howard, Federal Relief Policy, pp. 225, 226.

28New York Times, July 11, 1939, p. 7; July 13, 1939, p. 5; July 15, 1939, pp. 1, 16; "Mutiny on the Bounty," Time, July 17, 1939, p. 14; "War on Congress," Time, July 24, 1939, p. 11; Organized Labor, July 22, 1939, p. 1; July 29, 1939, p. 1. The Congress of Industrial Organization (CIO), under the leadership of John L. Lewis, also threatened political retribution against those in Congress who reduced the WPA wage. The CIO, once the Committee of Industrial Organization in the AFL, had been
Some members of Congress attempted to rectify the problems with organized labor and WPA workers by introducing a bill in both the House of Representatives and the Senate which repealed the new wage regulations. But proponents of the restoration of prevailing wages suffered a setback when the bills displeased the White House and bogged down in Congressional committees. The AFL then concentrated on increasing the funds for the Public Works Administration (PWA), which used private contractors and paid prevailing wages. By increasing PWA appropriations Congress could retain labor support yet seem receptive to the hostile public sentiment of the WPA strikes.  

Strikers began to return to their jobs when the Administration stood firm and when organized labor withdrew its support. The Scranton, Pennsylvania, Building Trades Council rescinded a general strike order for Monday, July 17, and the president of the council admitted that

"... we acted a little too hasty but we are big enough to admit our mistake before any great damage results. Since the President and Attorney General made it plain that there should be no strike against the Government, the Scranton Building Trades Council wants to remain loyal. As good American citizens we stand ready to obey the call of our commander—the President of the United States."  

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a thorn in the flesh for William L. Green from its inception as a committee in 1935 to its final separation from the AFL in 1938. The CIO wanted to enter the field of representing construction workers, thus it awaited any misstep by the AFL which could be interpreted as slighting the striking unions. Leuchtenburg, p. 111; San Francisco Examiner, July 17, 1939, p. 3; "The WPA Strike," Newsweek, July 24, 1939, p. 42.  

29 Sacramento Union, July 11, 1939, p. 2; Washington Post, July 9, 1939, p. 4; July 12, 1939, pp. 1, 9; July 18, 1939, pp. 1, 2; New York Times, July 17, 1939, p. 1.  

30 San Francisco Examiner, July 16, 1939, p. 12.
For all intents and purposes the national WPA strike was over. Residual striking situations remained, for on Tuesday, July 18, almost 27,000 strikers still had not returned to work, but only seven states reported a thousand or more strikers. The Worker's Alliance, however, did not call off its protest scheduled for July 20. The Alliance predicted that demonstrations of its one-day work stoppage, not a strike, would occur in 1,200 cities and involve at least 500,000 WPA workers. The position taken by the United Government Employees, a Negro organization of almost 30,000 members, characterized the mood of most WPA workers concerning the general strike. Its president, Edgar G. Brown, advised its membership to have nothing to do with the protest out of sympathy with the law of the land, the President, and Colonel Harrington. Hence, fewer than 25,000 participated in the July 20 protest.31

Out of almost two and one-half million WPA workers in the United States, the government estimated 123,000 workers were idle for at least one day or more. Many more men were idle for part of a day due to mass meetings or short demonstrations protesting the WPA regulations. Unskilled WPA workers also suffered and were indirectly involved in the strike situation when jobs closed because of work stoppages. WPA officially fired over 32,000 workers, and it was this position of refusing to side with the strikers that dismayed labor leaders and turned the tide of the strikes. A Worker's Alliance official, in assessing the morale of

31San Francisco Examiner, July 16, 1939, p. 12; Oakland Tribune, July 18, 1939, p. 2; July 19, 1939, p. 2; Sacramento Bee, July 19, 1939, p. 6; July 21, 1939, p. 12; San Diego Union and Daily Bee, July 20, 1939, p. 2; Los Angeles Times, July 10, 1939, p. 1; "Labor's Test," Newsweek, July 31, 1939, p. 36.
the strikers, accused the AFL of deserting them after leading them into an untenable position. This lack of support from organized labor, the WPA, and the Roosevelt Administration silenced the protest and insured its failure.32

Chapter 3

THE WPA STRIKES IN CALIFORNIA

When WPA employees protested the new hours regulations, Californians joined in. Most of the activity occurred in Northern California, and in comparison to events elsewhere in the nation, reaction of California WPA workers seemed mild. Few extended strike protests took place, and violent behavior, such as Minneapolis experienced, did not happen. The vast majority of the forty thousand WPA workers in Southern California went about their work as usual.¹

In the San Francisco Bay area WPA workers quickly returned to work when walkouts failed to produce their goals. Beginning on July 5, 200 workers at the Fleishhacker Zoo left their jobs. Two days later leaders of the San Francisco Building Trades Council, affiliated with the American Federation of Labor (AFL), reported that 350 skilled craftsmen had quit their WPA jobs, and that the council was calling a general walkout of WPA workers for Monday, July 10. On the previous Saturday night, July 8, more than 4,000 people gathered at the city hall in San Francisco to protest the change in WPA working hours. Coincidental with the San Francisco demonstration, 1,000 protestors marched to the Oakland City Hall and heard speeches condemning the Congressional action and passed resolutions demanding reversal of the new wage policy. Also, the Alameda County Worker’s Alliance and Congress of Industrial


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Organization (CIO) promised to strike the Tuesday morning after the AFL walkout.²

However, by Tuesday no WPA project had closed. Officials reported only 2,000 strikers out of a total of 13,000 workers at thirty projects. The next day WPA began firing striking employees who had been absent from their job for five days or more. On July 12, 238 WPA workers were discharged, and by Friday close to 900 had been fired in San Francisco and Alameda counties. Seeing that their walkouts accomplished nothing, local building trades leaders called off their strike on the day when WPA began firing workers.³ According to William Mooser, WPA director of operations for San Francisco County, the firing of WPA workers caused them to return to work. In his words, "There's no other work available. They have to eat. They would have to continue on WPA if Congress decreed a 260 hour work month."⁴

When the week closed on July 15, only 500 WPA workers remained away from their jobs, doing so for various reasons including the protest. The Worker's Alliance demanded makeup time for the period that the workers protested, and announced that brief walkouts would occur on the national day of protest, July 20, in some sections of the state (excluding San Francisco), where transportation difficulties would force

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²San Francisco Call-Bulletin, July 7, 1939, p. 1; July 8, 1939, pp. 1, 2; San Francisco Examiner, July 9, 1939, p. 3; Oakland Tribune, July 6, 1939, p. 2; July 7, 1939, p. 1; July 8, 1939, p. 1.
³San Francisco Call-Bulletin, July 8, 1939, p. 2; Oakland Tribune, July 11, 1939, p. 1; July 12, 1939, p. 1; July 13, 1939, p. 1; July 15, 1939, p. 2.
workers to stay out a whole day in protest, which not many workers wanted to do.5

Yet, the strikes by WPA workers did prompt local government agencies to ask Congress for wage changes. In a six-to-one vote, the San Francisco Board of Supervisors adopted such a resolution, and the city council of Richmond notified Washington that the lower payroll would adversely affect the tradesmen, property owners, and merchants in the city. Several groups, such as the CIO Industrial Union Council, the Worker's Alliance, and the Labor Unions Unemployed Council, began a city-wide drive in San Francisco to obtain petitions requesting Congress to repeal its 130-hour work provision.6

Strikes also occurred in other cities in the great San Francisco Bay area. The largest demonstration took place in San Mateo County where the San Mateo Times reported that nearly 1,200 WPA workmen staged a one-day protest strike on July 8 when the strikers, led by the Worker's Alliance, marched in Redwood City. However, San Mateo County WPA manager, George A. Jensen, disputed the number of demonstrators, noting that WPA employed only 850 in the county. Later the county Board of Supervisors declined to take sides on the WPA pay problem, and delayed a protest petition to Congress. Robert Hutter, a representative of the Redwood City Worker's Alliance, claimed that the new WPA bill would force the


firing of 40 percent of WPA's workers and send the workers back to use-
less projects. Furthermore, he reported that many relief families could
not get by on $55 a month. But the chairman of the Board of Supervisors
contended the board was not fully acquainted with the new law and needed
more time to study the situation.\(^7\)

The Redwood City Worker's Alliance did not abandon its plans to
c conducive a mass meeting at the courthouse on July 20. Robert Hutter
cautioned that the rally was not a strike (being scheduled after working
hours), but a demonstration to show the public how WPA workers felt
about the new Congressional law. By the 20th the workers became apa-
thetic—only six WPA workers gathered at the courthouse at the planned
time. An hour later only four workers remained, and shortly later they
left.\(^8\)

No WPA strikes occurred in the cities of Antioch, Salinas, Palo
Alto or at Stanford University. WPA workers in San Jose did demonstrate
on July 14, claiming to have closed every WPA construction project in
San Jose. The WPA assistant supervisor reported some picketing at the
projects, and a few partial shutdowns, but no project became completely
inactive. Agreeing with President Franklin D. Roosevelt's statement that
WPA workers could not strike, the Worker's Alliance leader labelled the

\(^7\)San Mateo Times, July 8, 1939, p. 1; Redwood City Tribune, July
11, 1939, p. 1; Half Moon Bay Review and Pescadero Pebble, July 13, 1939,
p. 1. The entire controversy of the WPA strikes in the United States was
shrouded in a dispute over the number of striking workers. Generally
the Worker's Alliance claimed a far greater amount of strikers than the
WPA reported.

\(^8\)Redwood City Tribune, July 19, 1939, p. 1; July 20, 1939,
pp. 1, 8; July 21, 1939, p. 1.
stop-work demonstration a protest, not a strike. Santa Cruz Worker's Alliance members resolved that the new wage law betrayed America's workers, imperiled the general standard of living, made human distress a political football, and compelled all Americans to conclude that Congress contained a collection of callous, cruel, and inhumanely-minded people. However, almost two weeks later those same Alliance members refused to take part in a work stoppage on July 20.9

Workers in Sacramento began their strike successfully with the Worker's Alliance again emerging as leaders. At a Friday night rally WPA workers listened to the president of the Sacramento Worker's Alliance, William Byrne, explain that pickets would be watching to see if any worker made himself a lackey for those trying to destroy the WPA. Bebel Alonzo, a strike captain, later hinted that children attending the North Sacramento recreation projects might strike by refusing to cooperate with scab instructors.10 Michael Tremaine, the Oak Park Worker's Alliance representative, insisted that the workers had the right to the fruits of their labor:

Remember this workers, . . . those men [Wall Street buccaneers and their stooges in Congress] are as plain as you and I are. They have no more right to the production of this nation than you have. It belongs to you. Your labor, with no help from them, has produced what we have today. And where are your profits from your work? They are in the coffers of the bankers.11

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10Sacramento Bee, July 8, 1939, pp. 1, 4; Sacramento Union, July 10, 1939, p. 2.

11Sacramento Bee, July 8, 1939, p. 4.
Should Congress destroy WPA by not changing its regulations, another speaker claimed, workers would be back in shacks and shanty heaps, this time called Congresstowns, not Hoovervilles.12

Agitated thusly, 1,300 out of 1,600 WPA workers in Sacramento took part in strikes on Monday, July 10. WPA officials at the largest single project, the state fair building program, reported only 15 percent of its workers coming to work. Pickets outside the project refused to allow trucks with supplies to enter the fairgrounds until the highway patrol arrived to guard against trouble. But the following day the workers in Sacramento returned to work. Bebel Alonzo insisted the workers were not giving up their protest, only following the national Alliance program. Later, the Alliance leader in Sacramento estimated that about half of the WPA workers had walked off their job at noon on the 20th to protest. However, they returned to work the same afternoon.13

Strike demonstrations also occurred in the Northern California towns of Oroville and Redding. Though the strikes themselves did not last long, they were serious because of the size of the communities in which they took place and the tensions surrounding them. When more than twenty WPA workers left their jobs on an irrigation ditch in Oroville on the 5th of July, the entire project of 150 men stopped working. They returned to the project the next day, and in various mass meetings between July 5 and July 10 they tried without success to organize a co-

12 Ibid.
harent strike action. Basically, they awaited information concerning
the response of other WPA strikers in the state, and when those strikes
did not materialize the Oroville workers resorted to a one-day strike on
July 20.\textsuperscript{14}

In their fight for the prevailing wage the protestors sought the
aid of local businessmen by showing that WPA employed over 600 men in
the Oroville area whose loss of purchasing power, reduced by lower WPA
wages, would directly affect the store owners. Leaders of the protesting
WPA workmen asserted that they were ready to boycott merchants who failed
to sign petitions to Congress lifting the wage cut and to patronize only
those retailers who gave support. If the AFL and CIO called a strike,
one leader added, every WPA worker in Oroville was ready to quit his job.
But the local director of the State Relief Administration (SRA) warned
the strikers that anyone who turned down a security wage under WPA could
not get relief from the state. Knowing this consequence loomed over
any striker, directors of the Oroville Progressive Merchants Association
unanimously approved a resolution against all petitions, explaining that
the situation was not just one of a local matter but of national conse-
quence, and that the President and Congress had thoroughly investigated
the wage situation.\textsuperscript{15}

The protest demonstrations in Oroville ended on July 20 when
nearly 100 WPA workers left their jobs at 11:00 a.m. and paraded in their

\textsuperscript{14}Oroville Mercury-Register, July 5, 1939, p. 1; July 6, 1939, p. 1, July 10, 1939, p. 1.

\textsuperscript{15}Ibid., July 6, 1939, p. 6; July 13, 1939, pp. 1, 3; July 18, 1939, p. 1.
cars throughout the county, carrying signs which read, "WPA 34 cents-hour protest;" "We don't want charity, we want decent wages;" "Think right, people, you are citizens and Americans—WPA." All the workers returned to their projects on the 21st.  

Events in Redding closely paralleled those in Oroville with an initial group of workers quitting work, then returning to the projects, a series of mass meetings, and requests for help from the local businessmen. Approximately 300 men worked for the WPA on three projects in Shasta County, and 160 of them left their work on Wednesday morning, July 5. Though the majority of the strikers went back to work on the 6th, in a meeting of WPA workers held on the following Saturday night they decided to shut down all three projects the following week. The strikers succeeded in their goals, for the projects did close, principally because threats were made against the WPA men who might work. In fact, striking reliefers intimidated scab workers by damaging their cars or literally pulling them from the ditches. Between 250 and 350 WPA workers by Tuesday the 11th protested through the use of strikes.

The publicity committee for the strikers, however, denied that any threats had been made by the official striking group. Stressing that their demonstration was a protest strike, not a destruction strike, all strikers reportedly had strict orders to avoid violence and threats of violence. In addition, the strikers claimed local businessmen had helped

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16 Orville Mercury-Register, July 17, 1939, p. 1; July 20, 1939, p. 1.

to avert violence. WPA strikers appealed for public support through solicitations of money, food, and clothing, and, unlike the merchants in Oroville, Redding businessmen assisted the strikers. Later the WPA strike committee acknowledged that violence would have erupted had the merchants not cooperated by feeding the families of the strikers.18

In a Saturday night meeting on the 15th the strikers voted to return to work under protest, believing they should follow the national trend. But many of the returning strikers found themselves jobless for being absent more than the allowed number of days. Though the toll of fired workmen numbered more than 150, this did not stop about 100 WPA relievers from protesting on July 20, the national day of protest called by the Worker's Alliance. Workers in a sound truck stating the case of the strikers led the parade of men, women, and children down Redding's streets. Perhaps due to the sympathetic feeling of the community towards the strikers, almost all of the dismissed WPA workers in Redding recovered their jobs.19

Elsewhere in Northern California smaller cities and towns experienced limited strike difficulties when WPA workmen left their projects for a few hours or, at most, a day, in public protest against the work-hour change. Such limited strike activities occurred in Humboldt and Yolo counties, and in the cities of Willows, Roseville, Marysville, Yuba City, Grass Valley, and Nevada City. But WPA workers in the Chico-


Paradise area refused to join on grounds that demonstrations could not change an act of Congress. Instead, they decided to send resolutions of protest to their Senators and Congressmen in Washington, D.C. Humboldt County supervisors, also persuaded by the strikers, sent telegrams to the two California Senators urging them to amend the WPA wage law. Protestors in Auburn preferred the petition to the strike, and wired this message to President Roosevelt:

We respectfully solicit your support to revise the recent WPA wage and hour law, enacted by the present session of congress.

Thirty four [sic] cents per hour is below the prevailing wage in our community.

It being conceded that the unemployed and economic ills of our country are caused by the lack of purchasing power of our people.

We condemn any sub-standard or security wage being paid by our government as detrimental to the welfare of the worker as well as hindering the efforts of our government and private industry to restore the purchasing power of the people.

One-day protest demonstrations by WPA workers occurred throughout the central valley of California. But farmers in California, and especially those in the agricultural valleys, faced an irony in the depression year of 1939: because of the low wages they could not find enough laborers to harvest their crops. While fruit growers in Hollister paid harvesters thirty cents an hour or five cents a bucket, many people received more money on relief. When the WPA changed its wage scale, and

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20 Humboldt Times, July 12, 1939, p. 1; July 15, 1939, p. 3; Humboldt Standard, July 14, 1939, p. 10; Woodland Daily Democrat, July 10, 1939, p. 1; July 12, 1939, p. 1; Willows Journal, July 11, 1939, p. 1; Roseville Press, July 11, 1939, p. 1; Marysville-Yuba City Appeal-Democrat, July 7, 1939, p. 1; July 8, 1939, p. 1; July 20, 1939, p. 1; Yuba City Independent-Farmer, July 7, 1939, p. 1; Grass Valley and Nevada City Morning Union, July 6, 1939, p. 3; July 12, 1939, p. 8; July 13, 1939, p. 2; Chico Record, July 21, 1939, p. 1.

in effect lowered the hourly rate to compete with agricultural wages, various farm organizations forced their Congressmen to retain the new WPA wage rates through the pressure of petitions.\(^{22}\)

While most WPA employees were not concerned about the plight of the farmer, preoccupied as they were with the wage scale, they still could not unify themselves in order to demonstrate their opposition effectively. An attempted three-day strike in Stockton revealed that only 727 men out of 1,777 in the county failed to show up to work on July 12, and a portion of those were normal absentees, not strikers. Later the WPA administrator in that region dismissed 110 men for their strike absences.\(^{23}\)

The local unit of the Worker's Alliance in Modesto, not being as strong as those in Stockton or Merced, did not publicly protest. Merced workers struck for one day primarily because they received less money than Fresno employees for the same work. But Fresno WPA workers participated only in after-hours rallies where demands were made for the prevailing wage. Also, some clergymen (such as Rev. James G. Dowling, director of the Associated Catholic Charities, and Rev. J. C. Coleman, pastor of the First Unitarian Church) pledged their support for the workers. Approximately 200 to 300 WPA workers in Madera County, a few miles north of Fresno, struck for one day, and preceding the July 14


strike a delegation of WPA wives appeared at the local administrator's office to protest on behalf of their husbands.24

Further south in the San Joaquin Valley a brief walkout by WPA workers in Shafter and a protest demonstration by 200 Bakersfield employees occurred. Along the coast WPA laborers in San Luis Obispo County threatened to strike, but when Area Engineer Hugh Shippey certified that they were not receiving the lowest hourly rates in the state they returned to work. Santa Maria workers participated in an after-work demonstration parade on July 19.25

Despite the fact that WPA workers in Ventura and Santa Paula voted to strike for one day, Santa Barbara relievers hesitated, seeming suspicious of the Worker's Alliance. On Friday, July 7, a group of WPA workers gathered to discuss the options available to them, being cautioned to guard against violence and dissension within their own ranks. John W. S. Hodgdon, emerging as the leader of the assembled workers, urged the men not to strike, but advised them to acquaint the taxpayer with the WPA employees' real economic condition, and, if need be, to threaten a change in political party affiliation. Yet Hodgdon agreed to lead the men in whatever direction they chose. Thus the group organized themselves to work independently of the Worker's Alliance or any other

24 Modesto Bee, July 20, 1939, p. 9; Merced Sun-Star, July 6, 1939, p. 1; July 15, 1939, p. 1; Stockton Daily Evening Record, July 8, 1939, p. 1; Fresno Bee, July 8, 1939, p. B-1; July 9, 1939, p. 4; July 13, 1939, p. 12; Madera Daily Tribune, July 11, 1939, p. 6; July 14, 1939, p. 2.

25 Bakersfield Californian, July 7, 1939, p. 6; July 20, 1939, p. 1; San Luis Obispo Telegram-Tribune, July 6, 1939, p. 1; Santa Barbara News-Press, July 18, 1939, p. 2.
labor union. Later, in attempting to solve their own problems, committees were formed within the organization to solicit food, find jobs, and rectify grievances.26

But the workers in Ventura resented the wait-and-see attitude of their neighbors to the north, and in a meeting on July 14 decided on a peaceful one-day strike for the following Thursday, July 20. At a meeting earlier in the week, the Ventura workers ridiculed their colleagues in Santa Barbara and one man attacked the organization headed by John Hodgdon as a vigilante outfit for thwarting WPA protests. But the Ventura group that voted for a strike was itself a minority of WPA workers. Out of more than 300 WPA workers in Ventura County, of which approximately 90 percent were classed as unskilled workers who already worked 120 hours a month; only 55 voted to strike. However, since only 60 or so workers attended the meeting a clear majority wanted a strike. Though the Oxnard WPA workers refused to join the strike, reportedly half the workers in Ventura County left their jobs at noon and paraded in their cars for most of the afternoon on July 20.27

The farther south in California that strikes took place the less newspaper coverage they received, possibly because there were fewer strikes in Southern California. Some sporadic strikes were attempted by the 19,000 WPA workers in Los Angeles County, but generally the strikes

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26Santa Barbara News-Press, July 8, 1939, pp. 1, 2; July 18, 1939, p. 2.

27Santa Paula Chronicle, July 21, 1939, p. 2; Ventura County Star-Free Press, July 11, 1939, pp. 1, 2; July 14, 1939, p. 1; July 19, 1939, p. 1; July 20, 1939, p. 1; Santa Barbara News-Press, July 21, 1939, p. 11.
or protests lacked substance. Perhaps the local Southern California rule for dismissing a worker after three days absence, not the five-day national regulation, averted major strikes. In any event, most WPA workers stayed on the job. Brief walkouts in Long Beach, Santa Monica, Venice, and Chavez Canyon occurred, and the sheriff's office in Newhall received threats of violence against workers who did not join fellow WPA relievers in a strike. Rumors existed of work slow-downs or outright refusals to work, but Herbert C. Legg, Southern California WPA director, praised his workers for their steadfast work amid the false reports.28

The greatest strike action in the Los Angeles area happened on the Worker's Alliance-sponsored national day of protest, July 20. On that day, WPA reported that 2,000 out of its 30,000 workers in the ten counties of the district had walked off their jobs for the day. On the Whittier storm drain project, the largest job completely closed by that strike, approximately 800 men quit work at noon instead of 2 p.m. Other cities affected by the one-day strike on the 20th included Hawthorne, Long Beach, Manhattan Beach, and Redondo.29

WPA workers to the east of Los Angeles in the San Bernardino area were divided in their reaction to the new wage law. A group of San Bernardino men on July 11 voted to oppose any strike, while on July 20


29Santa Barbara News-Press, July 9, 1939, p. 2; Long Beach Press-Telegram, July 8, 1939, p. B-3; Venice Evening Vanguard, July 12, 1939, p. 1; Los Angeles Times, July 10, 1939, p. A; July 11, 1939, p. 3; Pasadena Post, July 8, 1939, p. 5; July 14, 1939, p. 1; Pasadena Star-News, July 10, 1939, p. 6; Bakersfield Californian, July 8, 1939, p. 2.
the Mill Creek flood control project in Redlands closed at noon because of striking workers. In a unique situation in Hemet, controversy arose over the right of the Worker's Alliance to use school buildings for meeting purposes. The Alliance had used the San Jacinto High School Auditorium, but found it too small for their purposes. When they requested to use other school buildings the board of education turned down their request on grounds that the Alliance had, according to a member of the board, Communistic leanings which subverted American institutions. However, the Worker's Alliance, after consulting with A. L. Wirin of the American Civil Liberties Union, threatened to file a lawsuit in federal court to compel the use of the school buildings.30

Apparently WPA workers in Orange County put little faith in strike action, for no walkouts took place. However, in the San Diego area Assemblyman Paul Richie told a group of WPA relievers to exercise their own judgment in using a strike as an effective means of protest. He claimed that reactionaries were trying to pretend that WPA was a temporary agency. He also predicted the time when resources and the means of distribution would be in the hands of all the people. In response the group voted to strike, but less than 200 out of a total of 3,700 WPA workers in San Diego County complied. This prompted the Worker's Alliance president in the area to charge that WPA supervisors threatened and intimidated Alliance members before the strike date.31


31 Fullerton Daily News Tribune, July 20, 1939, p. 1; San Diego Sun, July 2, 1939, p. 2; July 12, 1939, pp. 1, 2; July 21, 1939, p. 8. The San Diego Union and Daily Bee later attacked Assemblyman Richie for
Possibly the WPA workers were intimidated, not only in San Diego, but throughout California. The fact was that workers could jeopardize their government-sponsored employment if they chose to protest too long. The overwhelming majority of WPA workers in California remained on their jobs. Yet the extensiveness of the sporadic strikes is significant, for some workers throughout the state, regardless of the consequences, elected to demonstrate their dissatisfaction with the new hours regulation.

All workers in California, WPA reliefers and others, lacked the strong bonds of organized labor that were present in the East. The strong union bonds which prompted Eastern WPA workers to dedicate themselves to change Congress' action, the sense of unified commitment by all WPA workers in the country, evaporated when the American public rejected the strikers' demands.

urging the WPA workers to strike and failing to suggest any peaceful solution to the wage controversy. The newspaper also added that dividing the wealth evenly among all Americans would not solve economic problems. Editorial, "Don't Let 'Em Fool You," San Diego Union and Daily Bee, July 13, 1939, p. E-2.
Chapter 4

THE NEWSPAPERS SPEAK

For over four years various polls had tested American opinion on unemployment relief, methods of aiding the poor, and, in particular, the Works Projects Administration (WPA).

In a 1936 Fortune magazine poll, over 30 percent believed the unemployed had been extravagantly treated. Americans, in several polls between 1936 and 1939, insisted that recipients of government aid should work for their assistance, rather than receive a direct cash payment or dole. Over 70 percent favored the creation of jobs by the government in the 1936 Fortune magazine survey, and George Gallup in May, 1939, found 89 percent supporting work relief for four main reasons: a dole meant the relievers gained something for nothing; work relief encouraged self-respect; the taxpayers received some return on their money; and work relief discouraged laziness. Asked what solution would best help those able-bodied people who could never find jobs, over half of the respondents in a 1938 Fortune survey believed government-made jobs, like WPA, was the answer. Yet the public realized work relief had problems, for in a 1939 Gallup Poll 53 percent thought politics affected relief, and over 60 percent favored returning relief administration to the state level from the federal government.  


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Questions concerning WPA elicited generally favorable responses. In 1936 almost 55 percent of those polled felt the WPA performed useful work in the community. The WPA was the greatest accomplishment of the New Deal, according to 28 percent of a Gallup Poll. But polls between 1937 and 1939 on the public's reaction toward strikes in the WPA found one overwhelming attitude: WPA work relievers had no reason whatsoever to strike. While cities with over a million people were more tolerant of the strikers, 70.1 percent in 1937 responded negatively to WPA workers leaving their jobs in disputes for better pay.²

When the Gallup Poll asked about the specific WPA strike in July, 1939, 71 percent approved the new 130 hour wage plan, and 74 percent agreed with the Administration that strikers should be fired after five days away from their jobs. Those polled desired WPA work to be sufficiently hard that relief work would not be attractive. In addition, since the respondents believed that the new regulation to work 130 hours a month was not too severe, the WPA worker should be willing to labor any reasonable amount of hours and be thankful for the job. The 1939 polls also referred to the fact that when WPA began in 1935 over half of the people opposed paying prevailing union wages to WPA workers.³

Accustomed to sporadic WPA strikes previous to the 1939 events, Americans grew intolerant of strikes by governmental beneficiaries.


Thus when the national WPA strikes began in July, 1939, newspaper editors proclaimed that the American people would not support the strikers. As the Turlock Daily Journal put it,

> The taxpaying public feels that relief clients have no right to squeeze from the government—which means from the taxpayers—any more in the way of relief benefits than can be afforded. The public ... resents this kind of "pressure"... 5

Some newspapers realized that the WPA strikes were a national issue. Ultimately, public opinion would decide the outcome, for in a democracy the majority's will prevails over any minority. 6

Yet according to many California newspapers the strikes were of President Franklin D. Roosevelt's own making. The Administration created WPA for the purpose of giving relief, but the workers refused to continue on their charity jobs. 7 The Daily Palo Alto Times and Redwood City Tribune printed an editorial that accused the President of generating factional rancor by encouraging the labor movement and protecting their right to strike. WPA workers assumed that striking was also their right.

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so that President Roosevelt "is reaping where he previously has sowed."  

But many more newspapers detailed weaknesses of the WPA which had directly led to the strikes. For the WPA strikes in 1939 had forced the American taxpayers to take a retrospective survey of WPA's purpose and its contribution to society. A considerable number of newspapers and their readers did not like the image given of the WPA employee. Whether that worker be lazy, indifferent, or unappreciative, the press distrusted a bureaucratic institution which could produce such an employee. Thus some reactionary newspapers had an opportunity to lead the attack against the WPA and agitate for its abolition.  

Various newspapers indicated the philosophy which had given birth to the WPA. The federal government initially established WPA as an emergency, stop-gap measure to aid the unemployed until they could find a job in the private sector. When the Administration attempted to combine relief and recovery and administered the law neither as ordinary relief nor as ordinary employment, WPA became a self-perpetuating system of relief which competed with private enterprise in the labor market. This competition arose, a writer to the Woodland Daily Democrat contended, because WPA workers mistakenly received prevailing wages. Columnist R. C. Hoiles, defining a prevailing wage as a wage established by the

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coercion or intimidation, asserted that paying prevailing wages to relief workers actually retarded recovery. In addition, the San Diego Union stated that if a government takes emergency measures to aid workers when private employment lags, then the extent to which private employment is abandoned should be the precise extent to which private wage standards are relinquished.\textsuperscript{10}

The skilled WPA worker, accustomed to the privilege of being paid more money for less work than the unskilled, failed to realize WPA hired him not because of his skill but according to his need. WPA as far as their workers were concerned became a substitute PWA.\textsuperscript{11}

National columnist Dr. Lewis Haney, professor of economics at New York University, claimed four different philosophical ideas combined to make the WPA strike a peculiar one. The ideas of need, employment, politics, and collectivism showed the evils of mixing employment and relief. The WPA came to represent "all that is half-baked and insincere in the new deal [sic]."\textsuperscript{12}


\textsuperscript{12}Dr. Lewis Haney, "WPA Strike Has Unique Features," San Francisco Call-Bulletin, July 13, 1939, p. 27.
Numerous newspapers editorialized the belief that failing to delineate succinctly the purpose of the WPA produced a class of workers who lacked the initiative to seek other jobs. By paying prevailing wages, the WPA in essence furnished such soft jobs with which private employment could not compete. Mrs. Erle Shorey told the Oakland Tribune that many WPA men in her neighborhood had never attempted to find another job, for WPA had demoralized the worker. Perhaps the change of working hours, the Humboldt Times suggested, would provide WPA workers more incentive to find private employment.\(^\text{13}\)

Pursuing the alleged lack of initiative and incentive one step further, newspapers asserted that WPA came to be looked upon by many protesting WPA employees as a career. Workers had forgotten the emergency basis for WPA's existence and had grown satisfied with their lot. In striking, they announced that they were not only a favored class on relief, but that they considered WPA a career. The Calexico Chronicle labelled those men chislers, those who would rather stay in a comfortable WPA job than seek regular employment. Another newspaper cautioned the striking workers to govern themselves sensibly because they had no vested right to their jobs.\(^\text{14}\)


The federal government must continue providing relief, the El Centro Morning Post stated, yet

[t]here is no reason why the federal government should maintain persons on relief in the same comparative state of existence with all the conveniences and luxuries they had before going on relief. Relief should be made as unattractive to the client as it is to the taxpayer. . . .

To one reader of the Oakland Tribune it appeared that the striking WPA worker did not appreciate the job he had been given. Other editorials and letters with similar feelings emerged during the strikes. In Yolo County a reader found it hard to understand how work relievers, given government-created jobs as a means of support, could not be thankful and remain on the job. If men and women honestly desired to earn a living, said an editorial in Willows, they would not dictate their wage.

A letter to the Sacramento Bee complained how little WPA workers appreciated their good fortune, and suggested that taxpayers—the ones who assumed the financial burden and responsibility of the WPA—go on strike to protest this unappreciative spirit of the WPA workers.


A concerned citizen asked the Modesto Bee when WPA workers would get up the nerve to demand bicycles for transportation. Another suggested that if the WPA worker actually felt abused he should read John Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath*, then thank God for WPA. But another reader, in writing to the San Diego Sun, resented such newspaper portraits of WPA workers. The record proved, he insisted, that WPA men were not the murderers, thieves, and slackards depicted, but in reality were courageous individuals protesting intolerable working conditions.¹⁷

One alternative remained for those WPA strikers who did not like the new wage and hours rules: they could take them or leave them, for the right to quit work, whether in private or public employment, continued unchallenged. WPA did not compel the worker to accept the aid against his will, and if skilled workers were not willing to put in the additional hours per month, many unskilled laborers waited to take their places. Thus, the Morning Post of El Centro advised WPA workers to find a real job if unsatisfied with WPA. But if they remained on the government payroll, they should be satisfied with the salary.¹⁸

However, newspapers suggested that the realization of the great financial cost of the WPA endangered the work relief plan. The Stockton Daily Evening Record warned that when the public's compassion toward WPA


strikers had reached its limit, the strain might cause abandonment of the entire WPA program. For WPA, labelled as mismanaged and inefficient in carrying out the mandates of Congress, became an example of the federal government's inept attempt to control the economic fate of the American citizen through a planned economy.19

Also, WPA stood accused of paving the way for chiseling and making the average man's pocketbook its first victim. A letter to the San Diego Sun reminded the people that the federal government could not remain an inexhaustible Santa Claus or gravy train. Other newspapers maintained that local governments' ideas to spend today and forget tomorrow was at an end because the federal government forced the sponsoring states and cities to assume at least 25 percent of the cost of a project. If the striking WPA workers demanded too much, one newspaper claimed, it would only take fifteen minutes for any city or county to eliminate WPA by simply refusing to sponsor any projects.20


Ironically, when WPA employees remained off the job during disputes, the taxpayers benefitted and the strikers suffered. A widely-printed editorial, "Upside Down Strike," noted that unlike a strike in private industry which reduced profit, the government did not lose money, but actually saved it when no projects were constructed. Other newspapers admitted that the WPA performed some useful work, but suggested the fiscal economy of closing projects might override the primary objective of WPA.21

A most severe assault on WPA equated it with the Democratic Party machine. The Oakland Tribune insisted that few worse crimes existed than taking funds voted for the relief of the unemployed and using them to pay political obligations or influence political expression. Striking WPA workers knew that as a bloc they posed an electoral threat, and they did not intend to surrender any of their political power. Yet columnist Ray Tucker quoted James Farley, a confidant of President Roosevelt, as saying WPA was a political liability rather than an asset in the 1938 elections. A citizen told the San Francisco News that the Democratic Party would be kept busy mending fences before the 1940 elections because of the WPA strikes.22


Solutions were offered to control the political evils of WPA. A reader of the San Francisco Chronicle urged Congress to pass a law eliminating the professional politician from the WPA payroll. Columnist William Allen White claimed that hiring qualified executives and publishing the salaries of WPA administrators would help to reform the WPA. 23

While much editorial comment spoke negatively about WPA, several newspapers praised President Roosevelt and Congress for their position on the new WPA wage and hours plan, and urged them to stand firm against the strikers. The Long Beach Press-Telegram thought this display of firmness derived not from a lack of sympathy for the WPA workers, but from a possible new Administration policy in settling labor disputes. The Los Angeles Times believed that President Roosevelt's previous support of the Wagner Act, guaranteeing the right of unions to organize and strike, placed him in a weakened position in dealing with the present WPA situation. Yet because FDR had stated, "You cannot strike against the Government," the majority of newspaper editorials contended the people were behind him. Evidently the President had learned the benefits of standing firm from the past when years earlier governor Calvin Coolidge thrilled the American people by telling striking Boston police,

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"There can be no strike against the public safety anywhere at any time."24

The WPA strikes would fail if the Administration and Congress did not retreat from their position. A compromise in the face of such coercion portended enormous consequences not only by reducing President Roosevelt's authority, but also by jeopardizing the stability of the government. Striking WPA workers, motivated by selfish desires, claimed the Oakland Tribune, were threatening and intimidating the government to abdicate its power to legislate for all the people. If Congress admitted its political fear of WPA strikers and acceded to their demands, then other pressure groups' attempts to impose their rule on the government would result in a rule by the minority producing chaos throughout the United States.25


Numerous newspapers not only classified WPA strikers as lawbreakers, but asserted the strikes were tantamount to rebellion and revolution. Columnist William Bruckart questioned the necessity of a union established to perpetuate government charity which was trying to dictate to Congress the terms upon which the workers would receive relief. This mass demand by WPA strikers posed a grave test—whether government ran relief or relief ran government.26 Hugh Van Arsdale, a spokesman for the Electrical Workers Brotherhood of New York, threatened war against the nation, according to the Sacramento Union, when he urged, "If Congress [sic] deserts the building trade unions, I suggest we strike every government job in the country and not let a wheel move on any job in which the government has an interest. . . .27

Equating a strike against government rulings as insurrection, the Chico Record declared that inducing Congress to change the rules was much different from revolting against the rules after they were made. Other newspapers rebuked the proposal that the State Relief Commission provide relief for the strikers, in effect having one branch of government pay for a revolution against the government as a whole.28


An editorial entitled, "Mutiny on the Bounty," its authorship attributed by the Healdsburg Sotoyome Scimitar to Clem Whitaker, appeared in eight different newspapers. Written as a metaphor of a ship called the Federal Bounty, the "biggest liner ever floated on the industrial high seas..." its crew became mutineers when they struck against a most generous captain, Uncle Sam. The editorial went on to state:

Other ships have foundered in the stormy weather of late years. Buffeted vessels of private industry have gone down here and there, and their anxious crews have struggled gamely to get new jobs—berths of any sort, on any ship. But the WPA ship was equipped with every device the government could provide. So huge, it had a crew of millions, its pay list guaranteed by the crews and owners of the industrial ships of Commerce, Industry, and Agriculture—who chipped in their taxes to maintain the gigantic craft... But the WPA workers struck against the government that built their vessel, against the law; and against the real owners of the good ship Federal Bounty, [sic] the American people. And the Captain, at this writing, has sternly ordered those mutineers to report for duty, or to go ashore and look for something else, while he puts the Bounty [sic] out of service. Before it is too late, those crewmen might ponder the old maxim, "Beware the wrath of a patient man!"


30 All of the following editorials are entitled "Mutiny on the Bounty" and are found in: Santa Ana Register, July 18, 1939, p. 12; Roseville Press, July 19, 1939, p. 2; Lincoln News Messenger, July 20, 1939, p. 4; Fairfield Solano Republican, July 20, 1939, p. 3; Bridgeport Chronicle-Union, July 20, 1939, p. 2; Healdsburg Sotoyome Scimitar, July 20, 1939, p. 1; El Centro Morning Post, July 21, 1939, p. 6; Atascadero News, July 28, 1939, p. 2.
In any "mutiny" the possibility of violence is always present, and newspapers editorialized on the violent aspects of the WPA strike especially the occurrences in Minneapolis. They stated that violence had become almost commonplace in strikes against private employers, but that violence against the federal government, in principle the same as armed men surrounding the Capitol in Washington, D.C., was a different matter. By defying the federal law and preventing the activities of the government from continuing, WPA strikers in Minneapolis had forced a reaction of militaristic harshness that Americans regarded as foreign to their country.\(^3\)

Naturally, someone had to foment this violent revolution, and in most cases the blame rested on radical elements in society. Newspapers reported that Communist malcontents, recognizing an opportunity to cripple and embarrass the United States, had begun the Workers Alliance to coerce Congress and seize control of labor. These agitators found WPA workers pliant pupils and led them astray. The San Diego Union insisted that leaders of any organization which attempted to disable the government had no place in America.\(^3\)


Non-striking WPA workers fared better in the press. Faithful WPA men who remained on their projects were congratulated and praised as good Americans. The Sacramento Bee singled out for commendation John Connolly of Rochester, New York, for not walking off a project like his 300 fellow WPA relievers. (After the strike concluded, Connolly was promoted to a skilled classification because of his attitude.) The Bee used this to show that determination to make the best of bad conditions brought a merited reward, and to serve also as an example for those who had forgotten the purpose of the WPA program.\footnote{Editorial, "The WPA Strike," Antioch Daily Ledger, July 13, 1939, p. 2; Editorial, "Merit is Rewarded," \textit{Sacramento Bee}, July 20, 1939, p. 32; Editorial, "Recreation Week Observance Highly Appropriate," \textit{Yuba City Independent-Farmer}, July 25, 1939, p. 2.}

The press warned WPA employees, and especially organized labor, that they harmed their own interests by striking and jeopardized the usefulness of the WPA, which had produced many accomplishments throughout the country. The Hanford Morning Journal admitted that the strike weapon could be used in legitimate circumstances, but held that in the present conditions, with organized labor fostering a rebellion of government employees, unions were stepping into dangerous territory. Guided by misinformed friends and adhering to false ideals, organized labor damaged its own cause by placing WPA in a bad perspective with the people who maintained work relief by their taxes. William Bruckart thought it ironic that with labor's prestige at its lowest point in
years, the unions could presume to gain respect and esteem by striking against the government.34

But a Santa Rosa paper accused the leaders of organized labor, not the workers themselves, of advocating strikes, and encouraged the WPA relievers to reject attempts to continue the protest. A letter to the Oakland Tribune indicted labor officials for their failure to realize the plight of WPA men if they could not work. It further questioned labor's reluctance to permit all to join the unions, but then expecting everyone to walk out during a labor dispute. Another letter to the Sacramento Bee claimed that William Green, John L. Lewis, and Harry Bridges, by attempting to rally workers, intended to convert the presidency to a Russian dictatorship.35

Labor, once weak in dealing with Congress, had grown strong, according to the San Diego Sun, but it was abusing its power and neglecting the responsibilities that accompany power. Bruce Catton believed that organized labor had failed in its duty to represent the interests of the WPA workers when the change in wage and hours law first appeared in Congressional committees in June, 1939. Congress, hearing no testimony nor seeing any coordinated campaign to save the prevailing wage by

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The American Federation of Labor (AFL), assumed labor's indifference to the amended wage rate and repealed the prevailing wage for WPA workers. After the new law went into effect and organized labor realized the mistake that had been made, they began to protest, but did so too late.36

In its counterattack, the AFL claimed the prevailing wage to be the very heart of the labor movement, and held that WPA workers should be able to strike as an effective means of protest. Workers were not striking against the government, but were loyal, law-abiding Americans fighting for a principle that had become almost a religion to them. A letter to the Riverside Daily Press asserted that organized labor had fought for many years to obtain the wages that men were now earning. Another in the Modesto Bee credited labor unions with forcing industry to pay increased salaries, and claimed that if wages were not as high the average person would have to beg, borrow, or steal to feed his family, for those in Wall Street would have all the money stored away.37

Thus not everyone joined in condemning the role of labor in the WPA strikes in July, 1939. Some newspapers defended labor and the WPA workers' right to strike by attacking Roosevelt's alleged hypocritical stand on the use of strikes by private and public workers. Private industry looked to FDR during the strikes to see if the government


subjected itself to the same conditions it imposed on others, and, according to the Santa Rosa Republican, found that the government was not any better than business. The government had forbidden private industry to cut wages or lengthen hours, and through the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB), businesses were forced to pay wages to unemployed strikers. Yet when WPA workers attempted to retain their current working hours by striking, the government fired them, and, in effect, locked them out. The Orange Daily News stated that the right to strike was a constitutional right, not to be denied to any worker, whether public or private.38

Columnist R. C. Hoiles believed the government failed to practice what it preached through the Wagner Act, and added,

"If the government cannot operate and permit men to work when they want to and how they want to and pay them when they do not work, how can any man with common sense expect private employers to employ labor under such arbitrary condition [sic] as the government requires? They expect a miracle from private employers but they cannot do it themselves."39

Some newspapers attacked the government's pay scale as discrimination against the unskilled WPA workers. A consensus among those newspapers held that all men on relief were equal in needing employment and should be paid the same. Charles M. Vernon, the editor of the Yorba


Linda Star, wrote that the WPA worker, regardless of his skill, had no services to sell for which anyone was willing to pay, so that different pay scales ought not to exist. Unfortunately, stated the San Diego Sun, skilled workers got accustomed to earning more money than the unskilled and believed that that privilege had become a right. Thus, as one writer put it, a caste system of WPA workers evolved which contained underprivileged relievers, middle class relievers, and an aristocracy of relievers.40

Newspaper readers did not overlook the unequal pay rates. The wife of a WPA worker wrote the Modesto Bee and complained that WPA workers should be paid the same wages as any other county, state, or federal employee doing comparable work. A reader in San Francisco noted that the bricklayer and hodcarrier received the same benefits from the State Relief Administration (SRA), but were paid differently by the WPA. The bricklayer, aggrieved because he must work the same number of hours as the unskilled worker, was not asking the hodcarrier to join him in the protest, "[a]nd the hodcarrier, the poor say, may help him. Perhaps that explains why he is a hodcarrier. . . ."41

The poor conditions under which WPA workers labored and the meager pay received were justifications for the strikes that newspaper

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readers offered. A reader attacked the idea that WPA offered jobs only to lazy workers by writing:

We hear so much about the workers leaning on their shovels. I like to ask some of those disturbed about it if they ever tried for themselves to operate the pick and shovel any length of time? It would be an education for them and they would discover that for the average human being it is practically impossible to continue for six or eight hours without stopping or leaning on the shovel now and then. I have a suspicion that some of those noble, overtaxed critics are very much accustomed to a nice home and leaning on their comfortable armchair extensively.42

With the new wage and hours law in effect, one paper foresaw more loafing than before on WPA projects: the WPA laborer could not be expected to break his back for a security wage while counterparts in private industry worked no harder for three to four times the money. The WPA security wage came under attack because, as a reader of the Oakland Tribune wrote, the WPA administrator did not know the economic hardships faced by a WPA family. Another reader noted that many WPA households would be forced onto the state's relief rolls because of their inability to exist on a WPA income. The increase in transportation costs and the thirty-day layoff after working eighteen consecutive months on the WPA also adversely affected the WPA worker's earnings.43

Besides declaring more people would be added to the state welfare rolls, various readers criticized the one month dismissal on other

42Letter to the editor, San Francisco Chronicle, July 12, 1939, p. 12.

grounds. A reader stated that WPA wages were so low that the employees could not start bank accounts to save money, and thus that thousands of creditors would be adversely affected if WPA workers had no pay for thirty days. Training certain WPA employees for technical skills also meant that the best workers would be required to leave the projects after eighteen months, which would force the WPA to take the time and expense to retrain replacements. However, a satirical letter suggested that the thirty day "vacation" might solve the national employment problem. If all the thousands of laid off WPA workers went looking for private jobs, as the WPA intended the workers to do during their furlough, employers would have to hire interviewers to inform the job seekers that no jobs were available. These new interviewers would require assistants, and the entire process could return the United States to prosperity. The government, it was suggested, should sponsor this project by confiscating the salaries of Congressmen and Senators!44

However, letters to the editor expressed the view that the poor, the unemployed, and the WPA workers were victims of the game of politics. When the taxpayers' call for governmental economy became an issue, fate always pointed to the reliefer, as one reader put it. The little fellow, the WPA worker, assumed the burden of being laid off, rather than the

44Letter to the editor, Modesto Bee, July 12, 1939, p. 12; Letter to the editor, Oroville Mercury-Register, July 17, 1939, p. 1; Letter to the editor, San Francisco News, July 19, 1939, p. 14; Editorial, "Stop Dismissals," Newport Balboa News-Times, August 1, 1939, p. 2. Fred Warshaw's letter in the Modesto Bee is an example of a common trait of the Bee chain in that period. Two days earlier the same letter appeared in the Fresno Bee. Other letters to the editor and replies were published in the Modesto, Fresno, and Sacramento newspapers, with the city of residence being changed upon publication.
larger-salaried supervisor and bureaucrat. Congressman Lee G. Geyer from the Los Angeles area wrote that WPA workers desiring to express their dissatisfaction with the new laws had no recourse but to strike. As taxpaying citizens the strikers too wanted their strawberries and cream like everyone else, another reader said. In a land of plenty, common decency necessitated a living wage for the WPA worker, a wage that would insure against revolution.45

A revolution within the country would most certainly bring a change in the system of government, and some editorials and readers posed the question whether totalitarian methods to control unemployment could be applied to America. Two wives of WPA workers felt they were already living under totalitarianism when Congress refused to protect the workers' liberties and imposed unconstitutional laws which forced honest, needy people to work for starvation wages. However, the Hollister Evening Free Lance believed that though America was headed for fascist regimentation, it only had a slim chance for success. Totalitarian governments boasted of their lack of unemployed, but their methods of forcing their citizens to produce military hardware for vast armies at the expense of peaceful progress did not appeal to Americans.46

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46Editorial, "Easy Way to Make Jobs," Redding Carrier-Free Press, July 14, 1939, p. 4; Letter to the editor, Sacramento Bee, July 14, 1939,
While the strikes forced Americans to survey the purpose of WPA, it also inspired the search for solutions to the immediate problem of the strikes and unemployment relief. A letter to the Long Beach Press-
Telegram claimed most citizens had neglected to consider the rights and feelings of others and had only thoughts of their own well-being. This self-seeking had produced class hatred and political rivalries that threatened the American system of government. The Chico Record maintained that the fundamental issues of unemployment remained untouched and suggested a need for permanent plans, not emergency makeshift ones, to combat the problem. Thus cooperation among the entire population, with greater coordination of resources, was the first step in finding solutions to the unemployment controversy.47

Other suggestions from the public for alleviating the relief dispute ranged from teaching WPA workers to have fewer children to cutting taxes which would give private industry the capital to expand and increase employment. Also, businesses were urged to show appreciation to WPA workers for their good work. Most importantly, because the new WPA law reduced the skilled worker's salary, manufacturing interests, if

they were truly concerned about living conditions, should refrain from the pay-scale reductions of which organized labor warned. 48

However, many newspapers presumed WPA was not succeeding in curing unemployment, and suggested two alternatives. First, they urged a greater role for the Public Works Administration (PWA) because it stimulated construction by providing contracts for private construction firms which paid prevailing wages. Also, PWA enjoyed a reputation for efficiency and a good return on money expended. Secondly, permanent recovery could only be attained by the creation of more jobs in private industry, not through emergency measures by the federal government. Worded similarly to an editorial in the Long Beach Press-Telegram, a letter to the Woodland Daily Democrat repeated the idea that the government had no business competing with private construction. Columnist Bernard Kilgore indicated public works could complement private industry, but the government had been soft-hearted in pushing relievers into private employment. 49

Government's distinct role appeared to be one of attempting efficient and beneficial work projects, encouraging WPA relievers to

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leave the administration as soon as possible, and opening up the channels of private capital by removing political obstacles which hindered economic recovery. 50

Some of the sagest comments of the whole strike period observed that the relief issue, the most serious problem confronting the American people at the time, could not be disposed of by classifying all recipients as chiselers or by wiping thousands off the relief rolls in hopes they would find jobs in private employment. The need for public works, as a necessary method for meeting unemployment in private industry, became a well-established fact. But because Americans were accustomed to a tradition of successful achievements,

... they are inclined to become impatient if their plans do not work successfully almost overnight. If they do not "click" the popular verdict is to throw them out and start all over again. The relief problem cannot be solved that way. It is one that must be solved by a long-range program and it is to be hoped that we will have patience and ingenuity enough to solve it. 51


The period of the Great Depression required Americans to exercise the virtues of patience and ingenuity to a degree incomparable to any other time of economic distress in our nation's history.

The Works Progress (later Projects) Administration (WPA) evolved as one method to relieve the suffering of the unemployed. Though WPA did not fulfill all of its established goals or bring economic recovery to the nation, the federal government through it had taken direct responsibility for the welfare of its unemployed citizens.¹

When WPA officially concluded its operations on February 1, 1943, it had touched the lives of more than fifty million people. One-fifth of the nation's workers had at one time or another been employed by WPA, while millions of dependents and shopkeepers benefitted from the federal program.²

But as the Fowler Ensign declared, ingenuity had to be coupled with patience, and the American public's tolerance of WPA waned because of the scandals within the administration and other problems, especially strike-related difficulties. President Franklin D. Roosevelt, in a letter to the Federal Works administrator, could thus praise the WPA


organization for displaying "courage and determination in the face of uninformed criticism."³

Criticism of WPA could be classified under two main categories. One involved the nature of WPA work relief program itself, and, the other, the way WPA carried out its projects, or executed its program.⁴

Many people were critical of WPA, for it did not meet the needs of the unemployed. They believed the administration inadequately provided the assistance that millions of Americans required to sustain themselves. One WPA worker wrote of his hatred of the American social and economic system which allowed widespread poverty, misery, sickness, ignorance, and filth to exist. Reasons for this inadequacy involved the failure of Congress to appropriate the large amounts of funds requested, and local and state governments' lack of financial participation and responsibility for the expense of the WPA projects.⁵

If by 1939 most Americans condoned the federal government's enlarged responsibility for the individual, many citizens nevertheless felt their work ethic threatened by some of the philosophical foundations of WPA. It was the conservative beliefs held by the public which allowed the government to aid the unemployed, yet not spend excessive amounts of money. Americans might applaud an institution like WPA, but when its workers rebelled in strike situations and failed to keep within

³Howard, Federal Relief Policy, p. 18.

⁴Ibid., p. 105; James Wechsler, "Record of the Boondogglers (Part I)," Nation, December 18, 1937, p. 683.

⁵Donald S. Howard, "But People Must Eat," Atlantic Monthly, February, 1940, p. 197; Letter to the editor, Nation, September 21, 1940, p. 255.
the bounds of how the taxpayers believed grateful recipients should act, the strikers and WPA incurred the wrath of conservatives. As Richard Hofstadter wrote,

It was the conservatives . . . who represented the greater moral indignation and rallied behind themselves the inspirational literature of American life. . . . If one wishes to look for utopianism in the 1930's, for an exalted faith in the tangibles of morals and character, and for moral indignation of the kind that had once been chiefly the prerogatives of the reformers, one will find it far more readily in the editorials of the great conservative newspapers than in the literature of the New Dealers.6

The "tangibles of morals and character" to which Richard Hofstadter referred required the WPA worker in July, 1939, to submit quietly to the change in hours and wages and, as quickly as possible, to find a job in private employment. When some WPA employees chose to rebel against the changes, in effect appearing as ungrateful for the aid given them, the angry outburst by both taxpayers and newspapers forced the unions to absolve themselves from the WPA strikes, and required FDR and Congress to assume a hard-line opposition to the strikes. Public opinion, as exemplified through newspaper reaction, forced a quick end to the WPA strikes of July, 1939.

A Commonweal article of July 21, 1939, insisted that the excitement concerning the WPA strikes "to judge from the newspapers--was not very great nor widespread."7 This thesis takes exception to that statement. for California newspapers were aroused by striking WPA workers. Newspaper editorials in America, as David Ziskind declared, led the way

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7"Relief and Revolt," Commonweal, July 21, 1939, p. 320.
in generally fostering unsympathetic feelings toward the WPA strikers by emphasizing the extreme demands of the workers, the presence of agitators among the strikers, the incompetence of WPA administrators, or the tremendous expense of the WPA program.  

Yet California newspapers did not assume an editorial position contrary to the beliefs of their readers. Editorials reflected the public's anger concerning the actions of men receiving government work-relief.

While labor unions had been able to exert the political persuasion needed in 1935 to obtain prevailing wages for WPA workers, they could not stem the anti-strike feelings of Americans. The Hollywood Citizen News urged WPA strikers to influence once again legislators and public officials in order to change the new laws, for they were not hurting the feelings of the public by refusing to work at their jobs.

When the WPA strike began a New York City government official warned labor leaders that they "could not strike 'unless the public is with you.'" In a short while the strikers realized the truth of that statement, and when FDR declared no one could strike against the government, that statement may have turned the tide of the strikes.

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11 San Jose Mercury Herald, July 21, 1939, p. 2.
The strikers might have had legitimate demands, but unfortunately for them the American public--its patience at an end with a government agency born in controversy--had no sympathy. For

[when public sentiment--which eventually is the determining factor in any strike--was shown to be plainly in opposition to the WPA demonstrations the politicians abandoned their interest in the affair just as they abandoned any cause when it ceases to indicate votes.

The strikes played into the hands of every reactionary in the country. It was a boon for all those elements who would like to crush unions and civil liberties. It was damaging to the cause of organized labor. Had it continued it would have created public resentment not only against WPA but against all those other humane measures adopted under the New Deal to help the poor and the weak.

The nation knows that if congress [sic] had been whipped by strike action into passing certain laws, then the next likely step might be the compelling of other legislation by other violent means.12

Organized labor survived the debacle of the 1939 WPA strikes. It learned that American citizens could be tolerant only to a point. President Roosevelt acknowledged the pressure of public opinion and opposed the strikes. (He had learned from his 1937 Supreme Court scheme and Democratic losses in the 1938 elections the price of withstanding public opinion.) The strikers learned to subsist as well as possible on the WPA wage, and wait for a private job. Fortunately for workers, World War II and its job-related industries lay ahead.

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