Unions among the Unemployed

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THE depression, like all phenomena of misery, has made strange bedfellows. The economic upheaval has accustomed us to accept many associations we would have disdained, had we even thought of them, during the Era of Prosperity but not of Good Will which was ushered out by the débâcle of 1929. This democratizing power of human misery is nowhere better illustrated than in the unions of the unemployed for the protection of their inalienable right *not* to starve in the midst of abundance. The movement toward the formation of "pauper unions" has made significant strides within the past two years, especially among that class of the unemployed which has benefited from the government's emergency relief program.

The public, or rather, that section of it more fortunately placed in the economic scale, has been surprised and in many cases shocked by headlines in the press to the effect that "FERA Workers Strike for More Relief." The newspapers have regularly carried stories from various states of protests, mass demonstrations and rioting by persons on relief. That these outbreaks, peaceful or violent, are often the result of careful, deliberate manœuvering by the officials and members of unions of the unemployed is known to few people outside of the relief set-ups. The public in general has regarded this agitation as spontaneous and sporadic in its manifestations — in most cases as further evidence of the ungratefulness, the bite-the-hand-that-feeds-you attitude of people on the dole. Some critics have caustically remarked the anomaly of persons on relief striking for more pay. The very absurd-

ity of a relief strike causes the man in the office chair to snort in derision, and dismiss the whole thing with: "They ought to kick that whole bunch of ingrates and reds off the relief rolls, and make them work for their living like I have to do for mine."

The public's conception of the spontaneous nature of this agitation, as well as its estimation of the radical or "red" make-up of the relief victims, are belied by the facts and figures in the case. While it is true that in the first years of the depression (1929–32) the majority of the riots resulted from impulsive actions among crowds and mobs impelled by the immediate call of hunger, the spirit of agitation today manifests itself through various organizations of the unemployed called unions, councils, leagues or brotherhoods.

There are some 200,000 members of three national organizations of the unemployed, and an inestimable number who hold membership in the multitude of "locals" and regional organizations without connection with the three nationals. That these unions are affiliates of the Third Internationale in Moscow, or are directed by the Communist Comintern, is an untenable thesis. It is true that some have been organized by Communist agitators; but even in such organizations the cosmopolitan nature of the membership, including men and women of all creeds, colors, races, professions and political affiliations, prevents the Communists from securing control. If there is a "united front," to borrow a term from the Marxian strategists, it is not based on any political doctrine, but upon the democracy of misery. To regard this movement as a part of the "red menace" because of the few Communists who are associated with it, would be an absurd and dangerous thing.

As a matter of fact, many of the leaders of these

pauper unions are young men and women who are radical only in the most approved sense of that word, that is, in a desire to get to the root of the matter. These youthful leaders profess no desire to reform the world by uprooting the present order of things. Undernourished, lacking the basic necessities of life, and seeing no outlet for their energies and ambitions in the future, they have turned to this work to secure first of all sufficient food for themselves and their fellow victims, and secondly as an avenue to adventure and social usefulness. They have no more love of violence than does the most wizened armchair philosopher, remote in his ivory tower. Their radical plans are concerned only with securing the means to exist, and not with the organization of the whole of existence.

These same young men and women, when asked if they regard themselves as "radical" or "red" (terms that are synonymous to the average American), insist that they are not interested in politics as far as their organizations are concerned. The majority of them feel that they are as American (a term synonymous with anti-radicalism of all shades and varieties) as the fellow with a job. They feel that they have as much right, and actual need, to organize into unions as do their more fortunate fellow citizens who still hold good jobs. They justify their position by precedents in our recent history — and not without plausibility, as a review of events in this country during the past fifty years, and more especially since the depression, amply demonstrates.

The first significant attempt to organize the unemployed in this country was undertaken in 1894 by General Jacob Sechler Coxey. Some forty-one years ago, he led his famous expeditionary force of three hundred and fifty-six unemployed men to Washington to demand the

issuance of $500,000,000 greenbacks, and the institution of a public works program to cure the depression and relieve the unemployed. While General Coxey failed in his mission (he was arrested for trespassing on the grass), Coxey's army succeeded in establishing a precedent for organizations among the unemployed, and for appeal to Washington in time of need.

Thirty-eight years later the ex-soldiers, borrowing a page from history, organized an army and marched on Washington to urge Congress to enact a bonus measure. This so-called Bonus Expeditionary Force reinforced the precedent set by Coxey's army, with the result that the authorities at Washington have been besieged more or less continuously by special groups of employed and unemployed, of rich and poor during the past three years.

When, in response to the call of public need, the RFC was organized in 1932, the unemployed, variously estimated at from ten to fifteen million people, began to demand assistance. Rioting broke out in the large Metropolitan centers. By midsummer of that year, no part of the country could claim immunity from social unrest. Even in the traditionally conservative agrarian South, mobs fearlessly demanded food. At England, Arkansas, sharecroppers and tenants armed with shotguns moved against the town to secure food and clothing in the memorable bread riot. By September of 1932 the money made available to the state governments through RFC loans was being distributed among the most destitute, so that spontaneous rioting soon ceased to occupy the headlines.

With the advent of the present administration, President Roosevelt promised a New Deal for the "forgotten man." Later when the FERA and in turn the CWA were set up, the President encouraged the unemployed to hope and confidence by his statement that no one would be

permitted to starve. To make the beneficiaries feel that they were getting a square deal, he urged them to address their letters and petitions of complaint to him. The unemployed took him at his word, deluging the White House with thousands of letters every day. For a while these epistolary activities served as an outlet for the wrath of the unemployed, and agitation was at a comparative standstill.

Meanwhile, as early as 1931, sections of the Unemployed Council, the most influential of the pauper unions, were being organized in Chicago. By September of that year there were forty-five branches of this organization in that city alone, with a total membership of around twenty thousand people. The primary purpose of this Chicago group was to resist evictions for non-payment of rent. Mass assistance against threatened and attempted evictions was so effective in calling the attention of the public to the condition of the unemployed, that the Mayor decreed a sort of moratorium on rent debts and forced removals.

Later the Unemployed Council directed its efforts toward raising the standards of living for the twenty thousand men who lived in Chicago's flop-houses. In a mass demonstration five thousand of the unionists marched to the general headquarters of the flop-houses located on Monroe and Green Streets, where they demanded, and later received, three meals per day instead of two, two feet of air space between the beds, free medical attention, tobacco twice each week, no discrimination against members of the Unemployed Council, and the right to hold assemblies in the flop-houses. Later the Chicago headquarters of the Unemployed Council claimed the major share of credit for bringing about, through mass pressure, the enactment by the Illinois

legislature of a twenty million dollar public relief bill.

In states farther west, the pauper unions became still more powerful. In most cases these early western unions were formed from the numerous associations for barter and exchange of commodities and services that had had such a phenomenal growth in that section of the country. Already such self-help organizations as the Mormon's Natural Help Association had accustomed the unemployed members to the necessity, value and method of group action for relieving their destitute situation. As the depression deepened, however, such labor and goods exchanges, with local scrip as a medium, became apparent for what they were in a highly organized industrial economy — mere makeshifts to ward off distress and starvation. The members began to reorganize their associations into unions under the leadership of three parties, the American Worker's, the Socialistic and the Communistic. The pitiful and petty efforts at self-help were abandoned as the government relief program got under way in September, 1932.

In Seattle, Washington, the Unemployed Citizen's League was organized in the latter part of 1931 as a sort of self-help and employment bureau. As the true extent of the economic situation became better known, this organization was forced to interest itself in relief for its members. The League grew by leaps and bounds in size and strength, until by the fall of 1932 it was powerful enough to sweep its entire slate of candidates into the city government. Among these were the mayor, three councilmen, two school directors and a member of the Port Commission. Subsequently these officials influenced the City Council to distribute seeds, tools and other emergency aids among the unemployed.

Social unrest first made itself felt in the eastern indus-

trial centers; but outside of Pittsburgh this agitation was less rapidly organized than in the West, taking the form of vociferous protests and mob violence. In Pittsburgh by 1933 the Unemployed League and the American Worker's Party had organized the majority of that city's unemployed into unions. As in Chicago, the immediate incentive of the Pittsburgh unions was active resistance against evictions. In one case this Pittsburgh group organized a mass demonstration to prevent the eviction of one of its members. Meeting on the day of the threatened removal, they forced the constable who had come to serve the papers to withdraw. Then to celebrate its victory, the group held an auction at which they sold the constable for a high mock bid of eight cents.

Ironically enough the Federal Emergency Relief program resulted in reducing the number of spontaneous demonstrations and riots, while it gave an added impetus to the formation of the pauper unions which, while less vocal and violent, are much stronger and more effective than the previous methods of manifesting discontent. This state of affairs is attributable not so much to the lack of sufficient relief — for the bounty of the government in most cases is beyond criticism — but to the inefficient administration of the relief funds. Owing more to the necessity for haste than to any political corruption, the administration of relief was carried out by workers who had not the least inkling of the principles of social service work. All offices were overstuffed with incompetent, in many cases downright ignorant case-workers who, though frequently recruited from among the unemployed themselves, soon lost all sympathy for those less fortunate ones who came to them for questioning before being granted relief.

As a result of this incompetence among the case-work-

ers and other administrators, many needy persons suffered from unjust discrimination; while all resented the haughty attitudes of the officials in charge. A classic example of the relation of case-worker to relief client comes from the Deep South where the lack of knowledge of social work is most evident among relief administrators. A young man who had taken several degrees in the social sciences from the state university, with a view to taking up social service work as a profession, found it impossible to secure a position in the relief set-up even as a case-worker. While his political affiliations were orthodox, so were those of many other less educated persons who secured jobs as case-workers through manipulating certain well-known political strings. The young graduate found that his education in the social sciences prevented him from getting possible jobs in the world of business, while his profession of social work was closed to him. Finally, reduced to destitution, he was forced to apply for relief. Imagine his surprise when he discovered that the case-worker detailed to investigate him was an old elementary schoolmate who, he knew, had never finished the sixth grade! Since this case-worker envied him his superior education, he refused to grant the young applicant any assistance — suggesting instead that he ought to find it easy to get a job "with them degrees." Beyond this case-worker's decision there was then no appeal.

This example of the incompetence of relief administrators could be duplicated into the thousands. In the majority of cases, the relief victims mumbled under their breath and bore their chagrin. Many wrote letters to the President, which were in turn sent to the FERA to be answered. In some cases the relief applicants, tired of the unsympathetic attitudes of the case-workers, vented their wrath by assaulting their questioners.

As the unemployed began to realize that individual reactions against injustice in relief administration were ineffective, they decided that mass action alone could set things right. The result was the formation of more leagues, and an increase in the membership of those already organized in every section of the country except the agrarian South. As these unions demonstrated their effectiveness in the adjustment of complaints, their membership grew, and continues to grow, day by day.

In addition to the adjustment of complaints, these leagues have begun to demand, and in many cases to achieve, representation on local grievance committees as well as on relief boards. In imitation of the regular labor unions, many of these pauper unions demand the recognition of their right to collective bargaining on public and relief work. As suggested at the outset, the activities of these organizations are predicated on the inalienable right *not* to starve in the midst of plenty. In consequence, where the officials of these unions feel, after examination, that one of their members is not getting a decent amount of either home or work relief, they make out a case history of the applicant and submit it to the relief authorities for reconsideration. One bureau in Chicago has, during the past two years, successfully handled an average of fifteen hundred of such case complaints.

At the headquarters of many of these unemployed councils there is an elaborate set-up for looking after union affairs. Next to the committees on complaints, who deal directly with the local relief administrations, there are the so-called committees on public utilities, whose business it is to see that no member goes without lights, gas, or water. In case the gas and lights are turned off at the home of a member, service men are dispatched to turn the meters back on. When the water is cut off, the

service men from the unemployed union may solve the problem by turning the meter on again and then pouring cement over it. The water company would have to destroy the meter to remove the cement, so the water is usually left on!

With the influx of thousands of new members recruited from among those on relief, the unemployed councils have become less and less radical in nature. Although originally many were organized by the Communists as well as by the Socialist and American Worker's parties, the simon-pure "reds" are greatly outnumbered by orthodox Republicans and Democrats who have no more concern for the success of Marxism than Mussolini or Hitler would have. Hunger, not Moscow, provides the motivation for these unions.

The conservatism of these organizations often appeals to the officials in charge of relief administration in the various states. Last January relief authorities in Denver even encouraged unionization among the unemployed. These organizations later succeeded in influencing the Colorado legislature to pass certain tax and bond bills for relief purposes. While the Colorado legislators debated various relief measures, members of the unemployed unions crowded the galleries. Opponents of the relief measures favored by the union members were heckled, and their voices drowned in songs from the gallery.

There is, however, a possibility that these pauper unions will become increasingly revolutionary in spirit unless the government adopts a long-term relief policy. So far these unions have in reality been interested primarily in achieving one thing — a sense of security for their members. In most instances the relief administrations have, on the contrary, discouraged the development

of this feeling of security among their relief clients on the theory that the unemployed, assured of the dole, would cease their individual efforts to secure jobs and would relapse into apathetic idleness. The motto has been "morale must be maintained."

But the fact that the essential basis of morale is a sense of security has been overlooked. In consequence, no relief client has been permitted to feel that the government will take care of him indefinitely until such time as he can refit himself into the scheme of things. Like the sword of Damocles, want has hung suspended by a thread of uncertainty over his head. Today food, but tomorrow possible starvation. With the worry and concern about his future, his morale has suffered. In this state he has turned to the pauper unions where he finds not only fellowship in his misery, but also some degree of assurance as to his future.

The failure of the relief administration to adopt a long-term policy at the outset of its program brought about the general acceptance of the theory that the unemployed must not be encouraged to feel secure in their positions as beneficiaries of the dole. The policy of relief has been predicated upon the assumption that prosperity will round the corner, and make unnecessary the maintenance of the relief program. In consequence, its administration has been opportunistic in nature, a condition which has been encouraged by the emergency of the situation. The sudden shifts in direction, name and set-up of the relief administration have been exceedingly expensive and often extravagant, and such changes have not retarded or prevented the break-down in public morale. The pangs of hunger among the unemployed have been temporarily appeased; but no provisions have been made for the futures of men without work.

In this, the sixth year of the depression, it has become apparent that a large majority of the present unemployed population of ten and one-half million people cannot expect to be absorbed by industry, even with the latter functioning on a basis of pre-1929 prosperity. To realize that for them the depression may be here to stay is not to accept a counsel of despair. As Keynes has pointed out with regard to the powerful Roman Empire, there was one depression that lasted eight hundred years! Indeed, it is more pleasant to believe that prosperity lies just around a fabled corner for every one of us, and it would not be good politics to think and say otherwise.

But unfortunately, reality is ineluctable and forces itself to be recognized. That the present Administration has come to recognize this situation, at least in part, is indicated by its experiments with the idea of rehabilitation and subsistence farming. Meanwhile, however, it continues its original policy of expensive expediency in the administration of relief, hoping against hope that the Golden Era will return. And all the while the pauper unions continue to grow in strength and membership in an effort to alleviate the uncertainties of the governmental program.

Only by the adoption of a long-term policy, and the institution of a permanent set-up to insure security for those on relief, can the government hope to discourage the growth of unionism among the unemployed. Eventually this will have to be done — the sooner the better and the less expensive for all concerned. For instance, with a permanent organization of relief workers selected on the basis of merit, preferably through civil service examination, the expenses of relief administration could be cut in half through increased efficiency. Even greater savings might be effected if a Department of Social

Service were established, equal in rank to that of the Army, Navy and others, for the direction and coördination of all relief and social activities of the Federal government.

Until such time as the government moves to the adoption of a permanent relief program, social service workers will do well to encourage the growth of unions among the unemployed. These pauper unions can preserve the morale of the unemployed by serving as counter-agent to the vacillating activities and inefficiency of the relief administration. To bait their members as "reds" is absurd. Taking them at their own estimation, they are citizens who have no desire to overthrow the government that continues to feed them. What they do desire to secure through their unions is a sense of security — that sense which, far from being inimical to government, is rather its basis and only excuse for being.

If these pauper unions become increasingly radical and menacing to the powers that be, this will be owing not to personal inclination on the part of the members, but to the force of outside circumstances over which they have no control. If the government continues its policy of discouraging that feeling of security, they will naturally turn more and more toward the acceptance of the plans of demagogues which seem to promise them some hope of future certainty.