

Even in a Pandemic, Workers Can Fight Back

BY

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During the Great Depression, radicals played key roles in helping organize the worker upsurges that led to the New Deal's pro-worker policies. We can do the same today by fighting back against the economic misery and unsafe working conditions of the coronavirus pandemic.

Unemployment in the United States has skyrocketed in the past month. Nearly ten million Americans filed for unemployment benefits between March 14 and March 28, as nonessential businesses have shut down indefinitely and other employers have cut hours and laid off workers in response to the coronavirus pandemic. The Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis has predicted that the unemployment rate could reach 32 percent, surpassing joblessness at the height of the Great Depression.

Our institutions are not set up to address this crisis. Existing welfare and unemployment benefits are insufficient, and millions of people will lose their employer-provided health insurance. Without intense pressure from below to force a rapid change in government policy, the coronavirus-induced recession will mean misery for the vast majority of Americans.

Thankfully, the American left can look to a previous period of crisis, in which mass movements won far-reaching material gains for the working class at a time of widespread misery. Not long after the Great Depression began in 1929, a mass protest movement of the unemployed exploded. And after experiencing a decade of defeats in the 1920s, the labor movement roared back to life in the 1930s with mass strikes and on-the-job action, including general strikes in three major cities in 1934.

So began a wave of workplace struggle, which frightened sections of the capitalist class into making major concessions to the working class in the form of FDR's New Deal, establishing Social Security, offering jobs and unemployment relief to millions, and enshrining collective bargaining rights in law.

The last depression offers inspiration for labor organizers and socialists who are looking to organize in the unfolding crisis. That moment, however different from our own, shows the importance of radical organizing and building solidarity across the whole working class.

The Movement of the Unemployed

The Depression brought poverty to the vast majority and threw millions out of work. The unemployment rate spiked from 3.2 percent in 1929 to 8.7 percent in 1930 and continued to rise, peaking at about 25 percent in 1933.

While union membership continued to decline through the early '30s, a mass movement of unemployed workers emerged. Organizations of the unemployed, often formed or led by left-wing radicals, popped up across the country. These organizations included the Communist-led Unemployed Councils, as well as groups led by members of the Socialist Party and A. J. Muste's American Workers Party.

Unemployed groups engaged in mass protests and direct action to halt evictions and utility shutoffs, find homes for the displaced, and demand relief for the needy. The unemployed organizations claimed members in the tens of thousands. In *The Heyday of American Communism*, Harvey Klehr reports that, on one day in March 1930, the Communist Party led over a million people in a nationwide demonstration against unemployment.

Protests and demonstrations often turned into violent confrontations with police. Klehr reports of Communist-led funeral rallies for party members killed by police in unemployed demonstrations in New York City, Detroit, and Chicago; these rallies attracted tens of thousands of supporters.

These radical-led organizations won significant material gains. Besides successfully demanding immediate relief for people threatened by eviction or denied benefits, these groups' disruptive activity built pressure for FDR's implementation of national unemployment insurance with the Social Security Act of 1935. As historian Roy Rosenzweig noted, "The battle for unemployment insurance had a long history going back to the early 20th century, but the radical unemployed movement can be credited with helping to revive it as a serious issue in the Great Depression."

Perhaps the most important achievement of the radical organizers of the unemployed was their success in building solidarity between jobless workers and those with jobs. The temptation was

strong for workers to work as scabs or strikebreakers when employed workers went on strike, particularly given the widespread misery in society and few opportunities for work. But the unemployed often stood shoulder to shoulder with the strikers — sometimes making the difference between victory and defeat.

In 1934, labor militancy exploded. Textile workers across the East Coast engaged in a protracted and bloody strike, which ended in the recognition of the United Textile Workers union. San Francisco, Minneapolis, and Toledo saw workplace conflicts spill over into mass strikes. These battles marked the start of a nationwide strike wave that continued into the late 1930s.

Radicals played a leading role in these mass strikes. In San Francisco, for instance, Communists made up a large part of the rank-and-file movement of longshore workers which initiated the strike. The Minneapolis general strike was started by a Trotskyist-led effort to organize the trucking industry. In Toledo, members of the socialist American Workers Party turned a faltering strike at an auto plant into a citywide battle.

The Minneapolis and Toledo strikes clearly illustrate the importance of radicals' efforts to unite the struggles of the employed and the unemployed. After Minneapolis truckers voted for a mass strike to win union recognition, Trotskyist strike leaders deliberately sought and won the support of the unemployed workers' groups, as well as farmers and employed workers in other industries. The support of the rest of Minneapolis's working class was crucial to the truck drivers' eventual victory.

Socialist organizer James Cannon wrote that when police and employers tried to break the strike by opening up the city's wholesale market for the operation of trucks, the police "ran into a mass of determined, organized pickets of the union supplemented by sympathetic unionists from other trades and by members of the unemployed organizations." In what became known as the "Battle of Deputies Run," strikers and their allies forced the police to retreat and foiled the attempt to break the strike.

Minneapolis radicals got the idea for building alliances with the unemployed from the Toledo strike earlier that year. That strike began at an Auto-Lite auto parts plant; less than half of the workers went on strike and the company successfully kept the factory running with scabs. The strike was saved only when thousands of the unemployed (including many members of Communist, Socialist, and Musteite-led organizations) joined the Auto-Lite workers' picket lines. The crowd of employed and unemployed workers fought police and National Guard troops to a standstill, forcing Auto-Lite to acquiesce to strikers' demands.

Radical Organization, Labor Militancy, and the Second New Deal

Workers' victories in the mass strikes of 1934 had far-reaching effects. Political scientist Michael Goldfield writes:

These great battles stimulated and encouraged workers throughout the country, both directly and indirectly, well after the successful strikes had ended. After the 1934 San Francisco general strike, longshore and maritime industries along the whole West Coast remained aflame with militancy, largely under communist leadership. The Trotskyist-led triumph in Minneapolis laid the future basis for the successful organization of over-the-road truck drivers across the Midwest. And in auto organizing outside of Detroit by communist-led shop groups and in Detroit by the radical Mechanics Education Association of America was greatly accelerated.

Goldfield argues that the mix of violent labor unrest and radical organization — spanning unemployed and employed workers, across industries and races — scared the capitalist class into conceding major pro-worker policies in the form of FDR's 1935 New Deal legislation. Legislators' public statements at the time show how the specter of radical-led mass strikes made the New Deal possible.

As mass strikes broke out in May 1934, for instance, Senator Robert La Follette expressed concern over the possibility of “open industrial warfare.” Representative William Connery, defending legislation to establish collective bargaining rights in April 1935, said, “I believe that the big corporations [who oppose the bill] . . . are very short-sighted . . . What we are trying to do is save those corporations from communism and bloodshed.” Goldfield documents similar statements from many other policymakers from the era.

After the “Second New Deal” was passed after this explosion in militancy, socialists and communists joined New Deal agencies in droves, to help implement a program to which they were largely sympathetic. The legislation included the Social Security Act, as noted above, as well as the establishment of the Works Progress Administration and the National Labor Relations Act. The Social Security Act established universal retirement pensions and employer-funded unemployment insurance; the Works Progress Administration offered jobs to millions of out-of-

work Americans; and the National Labor Relations Act guaranteed workers collective bargaining rights and established the National Labor Relations Board to enforce these rights.

These reforms admittedly fell short of many radicals' demands, and some thinkers argue that the New Deal shored up an endangered liberal capitalism. Still, New Deal legislation meant significant material gains for working-class people in an era of desperate poverty. And mass protest and labor militancy, often led and inspired by leftists, were key to winning those gains.

Organizing in the Coming Depression

Our circumstances are very different from those of the New Deal era. We now face mass unemployment — not because of a speculative bubble bursting, but because people are staying home to counteract the spread of a deadly virus. The need for social distancing means that crowded rallies and picket lines are dangerous for our health. Radicals no longer have a significant presence in the working class. And, unlike in the New Deal era, neither the president nor leaders of either major political party seem to be seriously considering the need to transform our economy to deal with the crisis.

Yet we can still draw inspiration from the experience of the Depression. That experience shows the vital role radicals can play, both in organizing workers on the shop floor and organizing the jobless.

Radicals' successes came first from being the most dedicated organizers. But Communists and other leftists helped achieve significant victories also because they understood the importance of building solidarity across different segments of the working class. Rather than letting unemployed and employed workers be pitted against one another, leftist militants brought the groups together in shared struggle.

For much the same reason, radicals also fought to overcome the racial divisions which often set back working-class organization. The Communist Party, in particular, took on a leading role in fighting antiblack racism in this period. Communists, Trotskyists, and others broke with the exclusionary craft-based unions of the American Federation of Labor (which effectively stratified workers by race and national origin) helping to form industrial organizations that included all workers within particular industries.

Organizing in pandemic conditions will require innovation in tactics. Mass in-person meetings are out the window, but we can meet, strategize, and deliberate remotely through online messaging and video chat platforms. Workers are already replacing crowded demonstrations and picket lines with socially distanced protests, in which each person maintains a distance of at least six feet from one another. While the need for social distance might be felt as a loss, it also suggests interesting new aesthetic possibilities for protesters.

Striking workers at a Chicago Amazon warehouse showed off a new tactic when they were joined on the picket line by a car caravan of supporters, who blared their horns in support of strikers' demands. As in-person demonstrations become harder, we may need to rely more on publicly pressuring employers and elected officials through social media. Oakland nurse John Pearson, for example, is using his social media platform to demand protective gear and adequate staffing from negligent hospital bosses and politicians. Amazon worker Christian Smalls, who was fired for organizing with his coworkers, has similarly used Twitter to spread the word about the dangerous conditions at his New York warehouse.

We will no doubt see more tactical innovation as organizers adapt to the new reality. Radicals are especially well-suited to play a role in devising effective tactics. Because of our commitment to advancing class struggle, radicals can draw on a rich history of working-class militancy for inspiration, seeking to apply lessons from the past to current conditions. We are also in a good position to learn from contemporary struggles happening around the world, by observing and analyzing current events through the lens of class struggle. And radicals can stay abreast of the latest tactical innovations by making use of personal and organizational connections with other militants.

Whatever new tactics we come up with, the insight which informed radical organizing during the Depression — that we must build solidarity as widely as possible — remains relevant today.

Seeds of Solidarity

The coronavirus pandemic is already generating an upsurge in labor militancy. Workers in different occupations across the country have organized to shut their workplaces down during the pandemic (including autoworkers and public school educators). Verizon employees successfully

demanding paid leave during the outbreak; food service and delivery workers at a number of companies have gone on strike to demand paid leave and safety protections.

In fighting to shut down nonessential workplaces, win paid leave, and establish adequate safety measures, these workers are not only fighting for their own health. By forcing sick people to come to work, or by unnecessarily exposing people to coworkers or customers who might be infected, employers are hastening the spread of the coronavirus and putting everyone at risk. This means that all workers, employed or unemployed, have a common interest in these workers winning their demands.

The situation of frontline health care workers makes our interconnectedness even more obvious. First, the dangerous conditions in which many of them are being forced to work are not just their problem. Short staffing and lack of necessary medical equipment makes it more difficult to treat patients, and more likely that health care workers will spread the disease to previously uninfected patients.

Second, failing to do everything we can outside of the hospital walls to slow transmission of the coronavirus adds to the risk faced by workers inside the hospital. Letting the disease spread more rapidly means it is more likely that hospital staff and supplies will be overburdened, making the jobs of health care workers even more dangerous.

Recognizing our shared interests, health care workers are beginning to make demands on behalf of the wider public. A coalition of California health care and social services workers has released a petition calling on Gov. Gavin Newsom to take immediate action to address the pandemic. In addition to demanding the rapid production of medically necessary equipment and the reopening of closed hospitals, health care workers are calling for a number of measures not directly related to their work: paid leave for all Californians, a statewide ban on evictions and suspension of rent payments, and cancellation of all student debt.

Other workers have also started taking action on behalf of the common good. After General Electric announced mass layoffs, employees at a Lynn, Massachusetts factory protested and demanded that the company's jet engine factories be converted to producing badly needed ventilators. On April 8, the protest spread to factories in New York, Texas, and Virginia.

A broad but atomized working-class movement seems to be taking off. Socialists can play a key role to help connect apparently separate working-class fights with one another. That means amplifying these workers' struggles; making clear the connections between different fights; articulating demands that serve all workers, employed and unemployed alike; and bringing working-class people and organizations together to collaborate around those shared demands.

Labor Notes is already doing this, as was Bernie Sanders before he suspended his presidential campaign. Wherever workers are being forced to work in dangerous conditions, we can organize our coworkers to fight for our health and safety. Socialists who are unemployed or working from home can help workers get organized, too — for example, by participating in the United Electrical, Radio and Machine Workers and the Democratic Socialists of America’s COVID-19 organizing project. This project is connecting people trying to organize their own workplaces with experienced workplace organizers, who are providing advice and support from afar.

The New Deal materially benefited and empowered workers, but it didn’t challenge the basis of capitalist tyranny. We are fighting, ultimately, for more fundamental social transformation. But the path to a democratic-socialist society runs through fights in the workplace and for exactly the kind of pro-worker reforms that are needed now.

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FILED UNDER

UNITED STATES

STRATEGY / HISTORY

NEW DEAL / LABOR ORGANIZING / CORONAVIRUS