What Rights for the Unemployed?

A summary of the attacks on the rights of the unemployed to organize, demonstrate and petition.

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AMERICAN CIVIL LIBERTIES UNION
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New York City

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What Rights for the Unemployed?

The record of the past five years as shown by this pamphlet indicates that unremitting efforts must be made to insure the rights of the unemployed to organize and demonstrate. The effort needed will be even greater with the change of policy of the federal government if the bulk of the unemployed are transferred to public works at wages lower than the market rate. Organization will be imperative in order to obtain decent standards of work and wages. Coming presumably directly under federal control, the right of organization will not at least be as much subject to the whims and influences of local organizations. Pressure can be brought directly on Washington.

The main source of trouble in the larger cities is the lack of any established means for dealing with complaints. Some relief administrators have special departments to deal with grievances; some relief heads even fix hours when they will themselves receive individual or group protests. But these are the exceptions. In every city there should be established complaint desks at every relief station for local matters, and at headquarters for appeal from local decisions and for issues of policy. They should be open at all business hours for hearing group petitions or individual cases.

The police, commonly stationed at relief stations to prevent “disorder”, should be everywhere immediately and permanently removed. It is not possible to deal fairly with the unemployed nor genuinely to set up machinery for hearing grievances if police are present to intimidate them.

Organization of the unemployed should be encouraged and given every facility for holding meetings in public places and by freely permitting them to carry on their demonstrations and protests. Even from the point of view of the public and relief administrators themselves, this is highly desirable because only by such means can the weak spots in the relief system be brought to light. Furthermore, such activities alone serve notice on the public that relief is inadequate or unfair. They thus stimulate better, if not adequate, provisions.

Similarly the right of social workers who engage in relief to organize and to bargain collectively should be unchallenged. Many of them are themselves in positions which are in effect relief jobs. All of them are employees, maintaining the relation of workers to the state as employer. Workers on relief projects are, of course, in precisely the same position.
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Every effort to apply to recipients of relief the old laws disqualifying paupers from voting should be fought, and the laws themselves changed where necessary.

The Civil Liberties Union stands ready to aid, as it has in the past, every one of these efforts toward the unrestricted right for the unemployed and relief workers to organize, protest and bargain collectively. No rights enjoyed by citizens generally should be withheld from the unemployed because of their dependence on public relief funds.

In brief, we urge

1. Removal of all police from relief stations.
2. Establishment of regular complaint bureaus at all relief stations.
3. Unrestricted right of unemployed to organize, meet and demonstrate.
4. Unrestricted right of relief workers to organize and bargain collectively.
5. No discrimination in relief against strikers.
6. No denial of right to vote to recipients of relief.
ARE THE UNEMPLOYED PEOPLE?" is the title a liberal weekly gave to a recent article dealing with abuses in the treatment of the jobless. Experience with the suppression of their protests might well raise the questions; Are they citizens? Have they any rights?

In dozens of cities police are constantly stationed at relief stations to prevent demonstrations. The record shows violent police attacks on scores of their protest meetings, hunger marches and parades. In a few states their right to vote has been challenged on the ground that they are paupers. Where they are identified with Communists, the attacks are particularly savage,—solely because of hostility to Communist beliefs, not because of the differences in their tactics.

In resisting attacks by police on assemblages of the unemployed, some few instances of desperate violence have taken place. A few assaults on relief workers mark the record. But these few cases of violence by the unemployed stand out in sharp contrast to the violence against them. Under great provocation they have been on the whole restrained. In clashes between police and jobless at least 14 persons are known to have been killed, many wounded. Hundreds of arrests and prosecutions for disorderly conduct, riot and disturbing the peace have been made from one end of the country to the other.

Past depressions have seen sporadic rioting by hungry men, always drastically repressed. During the present long depression, however, the unemployed have developed organized activity with tactics familiar in industrial disputes. And as in American industrial conflict, repression has been the answer of the authorities to the exercise of fundamental rights. Bans against assembly, refusals of permits to speak, the stationing of squads of police at relief stations, attacks by the police on peaceful meetings, clubbings, arrests, abuse of prisoners, infliction of maximum sentences, prosecutions for criminal syndicalism or conspiracy — these have become in relation to the activities of the unemployed, monotonously familiar.

The Effect of Demonstrations

Yet these very activities of the organized unemployed constitute for twenty million Americans perhaps, the primary force for achieving what-
ever standards of relief they get. Competent witnesses have so testified. Says Mauritz Halgren in SEEDS OF REVOLT:

“Social workers everywhere told me that without the street demonstrations and hunger marches of the Unemployed Councils no relief would have been provided in some communities, while in others even less help than that which has been provided would have been forthcoming.”

C. R. Walker, in the FORUM of September, 1932, says:

“In the cities I visited the economic status of the unemployed worker, the amount of relief, etc. was directly proportional to the strength and struggle of the Unemployed Councils.”

What is said by these writers about the Unemployed Councils can be said with equal truth of some other organizations of the unemployed. The articles presumably used “Unemployed Councils” as a general term covering them all.

It is a matter of common knowledge among relief workers that vigorous demonstrations — so called “riots” — by the unemployed, produce an almost miraculous effect in loosening the public purse-strings. In the earliest days of the depression it was a raid of armed and angry farmers on provision stores at England, Ark. that first startled the federal authorities into giving relief.

The Organized Activities

The activities of the unemployed vary from sending small delegations to ward or precinct bureaus, through strikes on work-relief projects, demonstrations at evictions, parades, demonstrations, and picketing at relief headquarters, to hunger marches and congresses on a state-wide or national scale.

The objects of these activities are all to gain large relief or to protest discrimination. Sometimes their purposes are general; sometimes specific. Often the sending of delegations of ten or fifteen persons to a relief bureau has won increased relief for workers whose allotment was inadequate; has forced action in the investigation of families when the delay had become unconscionable; has secured medical treatment and medical supplies when
these were necessary; and has succeeded in halting discrimination against Negroes, against single men, against persons active in organizing the unemployed.

Evictions on an unprecedented scale for non-payment of rent have been a striking phenomenon of the depression, especially during the early days when relief was often limited to food or money sufficient only for food. It was in large part the organizations of the unemployed, demonstrating in front of the houses from which tenants were being evicted, assembling the neighborhood to carry back the furniture, that induced the authorities to give consideration to the payment of rents.

Not only betterment of direct relief but of conditions on work-relief projects are the concern of organizations of the unemployed. The mass lay-offs and lowering of wage-scales that followed the change from the C.W.A. to the F.E.R.A. called forth a round of protests and strikes that tempered in some degree the severity of the reorganization. A protest demonstration from eastern cities was made at Washington on March 27, 1934, when nearly 1,000 unemployed CWA workers paraded through the streets, led by the Workers Unemployed Union of New York, the People's Unemployed League of Maryland and other local organizations. Time and again strikes and demonstrations on F.E.R.A. projects have resulted in the adjustment of unfair wage-scales and stopping discrimination.

The most spectacular activities of the unemployed have been the large scale demonstrations and hunger marches, organized either to stop a threatened cut in relief, or to demand better provisions. Here are a few of the instances taken at random from the record:

In Chicago, a hunger-march involving 50,000 persons forced the rescinding of an announced 50% relief cut in October, 1932.

In New York, the Unemployed Councils led a demonstration to City Hall in October, 1930. Although leaders were arrested and treated with brutality, the very next day the Board of Estimate held a five hour meeting and appropriated one million dollars for relief, — the first such appropriation ever to appear in the New York City budget.

In Colorado, after the state legislature early in 1934 had refused for
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six months to vote a relief appropriation and federal funds were being cut off, a demonstration in which the unemployed actually took possession of the Senate chamber to present their demands, finally forced action.

In New York at the end of September, 1934, the city administration announced that relief checks could not be sent out for the following week. Immediately delegations of the unemployed protested at all the city relief bureaus, picket lines were thrown around the central Home Relief Bureau, and these actions were supplemented by a two-hour strike of white-collar worker emergency employees and professional relief workers. Within a day the decision to stop the checks was reversed.

In order to focus national attention on the conditions of the jobless, the Unemployed Councils twice organized, in 1931 and 1932, hunger-marches to Washington with delegates from all parts of the country.

Leadership of the Unemployed and the Red Scare

THE chief organizations of the unemployed are the National Unemployed Councils, under Communist leadership, the National Unemployed League, under Workers Party leadership, and a loosely federated group composed of the New York Unemployed Union, the Illinois Workers Alliance, the Wisconsin Federation of Workers, the Indiana Workers Alliance, the American Workers Union, and others. This third group is mainly under Socialist leadership. All of these organizations are in fact non-partisan in membership. Their influence extends far beyond their formally enrolled members. Thousands of unemployed workers swell the ranks of their demonstrations and mass-meetings.

Of these organizations the Unemployed Councils, being under Communist leadership, are most subject to attack by the authorities. Raising the cry of “reds” gives the police justification for suppressing their demonstrations. The Communist leaders are also attacked as not sincere in their professed purpose of seeking only the betterment of conditions, and are portrayed as trying to break down the administration of relief in a general scheme to destroy society.

Even a superficial acquaintance with Communist methods would show that sniping at isolated elements of capitalism is not among them. Commu-
nists are interested in aiding and leading all mass movements of workers as a force for social change. They regard them hopefully as ultimate revolutionary material — but their present purposes are solely the satisfaction of the needs of the workers. Their methods are determined, their activities militant; and their attitude uncompromising. It is these qualities which bring down upon them the wrath of the authorities, and the attacks of the police.

These same vigorous qualities are shown by other local organizations of the unemployed in many sections, and with similar results. While the police tend to discriminate against organizations of the unemployed with known Communist leadership, they come down hard on all militant and determined demonstrations, whether by the National Unemployed League, local groups or the Unemployed Councils. But it is these very qualities which have been mainly responsible for the concessions which the unemployed have forced from reluctant officials.

Police vs. Unemployed

In spite of the fact that 60% of relief money comes from federal funds local authorities control its distribution. The attitude of local officials and police therefore determines the treatment of the activities of the unemployed.

The unemployed have first of all to contend with the licensing powers vested in local authorities. They run up against refusals of permits for meetings and parades, bans by mayors on meetings and parades, refusals of the use of tax-supported meeting places such as school-halls, police orders to landlords to refuse to rent halls, misapplication of ordinances against the distribution of advertising matter by hand bills, refusal of permits to post notices, and rarely, injunctions. Sometimes the welfare authorities themselves are responsible for attempts to hinder or disrupt the organization of the unemployed. Cases are not infrequent where persons active in organization work have been cut off the relief rolls. Similar cases have occurred on C.W.A. and F.E.R.A. projects in spite of clauses in the regulations of the C.W.A. or the F.E.R.A. prohibiting discrimination against any person for membership in any group or organization.

More common is the use of the police in combating the activities of the organized employed. It has become a matter of routine to have police sta-
The clash arose when demonstrators determined to see their heads through a police barricade reached hands to pull them off the police who were both policeman in uniform and plainclothes reporters. Some officers refused to admit them to the rebel offices. Some were the police refused to admit them to the rebel offices. Some demonstrated a police barricade that was 100 feet wide between police and demonstrators withaded police and demonstrators withaded police and demonstrators withaded police and demonstrators withaded police and demonstrators withaded police and demonstrators withaded police and demonstrators withaded police and demonstrators withaded police and demonstrators withaded police and demonstrators withaded police and demonstrators withaded police and demonstrators withaded police and demonstrators withaded police and demonstrators withaded police and demonstrators withaded police and demonstrators withaded police and demonstrators withaded police and demonstrators withaded police and demonstrators withaded police and demonstrators withaded police and demonstrators withaded police and demonstrators withaded police and demonstrators withaded police and demonstrators withaded police and demonstrators withaded police and demonstrators withaded police and demonstrators withaded police and demonstrators withaded police and demonstrators withaded police and demonstrators withaded police and demonstrators withaded police and demonstrators withaded police and demonstrators withaded police and demonstrators withaded police and demonstrators withaded police and demonstrators withaded police and demonstrators withaded police and demonstrators withaded police and demonstrators withaded police and demonstrators withaded police and demonstrators withaded police and demonstrators withaded police and demonstrators withaded police and demonstrators withaded police and demonstrators withaded police and demonstrators withaded police and demonstrators withaded police and demonstrators withaded police and demonstrators withaded police and demonstrators withaded police and demons
tioned at relief bureaus. Peaceful demonstrations or marches, held in spite of refusal of permits, have been broken up, often with brutality. Demonstrations where permits were issued have been on occasions dispersed with equal brutality. Scores of such cases have been reported. Two of the most vivid are taken from published accounts — one by an organizer in Columbus, Ohio; the other from a news story in a New York newspaper.

A Story From Ohio

Here is the story from Columbus as told by Bill Reich in the NEW REPUBLIC (Sept. 1934).

"Police are everywhere. They line the sidewalk and seem to fill the house... After hours of dilatory labor another family is on the streets. The wages paid the officials of law enforcement (sixteen police, three bailiffs and two flunkeys) would pay the rent of the unfortunate family for six months... Often evicted families have no place to go. In such cases street homes are set up. A portion of the street is roped off. American flags are draped over the ropes. Tables, beds and stoves are arranged and the family lives on the pavement until a house is obtained...

"Such was the plight of the Smith and McGuffin families on Good Friday... On the Eve of Easter a dozen police, a lady social worker and two rubbish trucks pull alongside the McGuffin 'home' to perform their duty. The relief officials have conceived a brilliant solution to the problems of street homes: women and children are to be taken to the Salvation Army, fathers to the transient bureau, and furniture to the storage! The lady social worker tries to persuade Mrs. McGuffin to comply with this magnanimous offer. Mrs. McGuffin refuses to consider the plan; at least not until Mr. McGuffin can be consulted. He has gone in search of a house.

"The police insist upon moving the furniture at once. Women pick up tent poles to defend the meager pile and upbraid the police for their heartlessness. Members of the Unemployed League quiet the women. 'No violence', they say. The police gather to one side in a huddle. Reinforcements have arrived. Thirty or forty uniformed men are on the scene. A crowd of four or five hundred people have been attracted by the commotion. I mount a chair and speak: 'Presumably laws are devised to protect the institutions upon which civilization is based. Here, however, is an example of the law being used to destroy the most fundamental of human institu-
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All red-blooded Americans should protest the breaking up of homes in this manner. It is an outrage!

"Suddenly the police come out of the huddle swinging blackjacks and clubs; they charge ruthlessly into the crowd of helpless men, women and children, slugging all who are in the way. A child is hurled to the pavement. A woman is felled by a blackjack and kicked in the abdomen time and again. Screams pierce the air. A gray-haired lady picks up a kettle of hot soup and dashes it over a cop. Several police start for me. 'This is the one we want,' they cry as they pull me from the speaker's chair. An elderly woman takes my place. She is pulled over the top of the chair to the pavement. A cop strikes me over the head with a blackjack. Blood spurts. Several cops hold me while a third slugs me in the face. I attempt to spit out fragments of broken teeth. All becomes black. I am dragged, dazed and bleeding, to the radio cruiser and thrown in like a bag of potatoes. Clamps are screwed tightly to my thumbs, piercing the flesh. I am rushed to Mercy Hospital.

'Take care of this dog,' cries the cop as he pulls me to the operating table. 'And get ready for more pretty soon.' My lacerations are sewed up. I hear screams of others being brought in.

'A day has passed. My head aches, my eyes and lips are swollen and I can hardly eat and speak because of broken teeth. Nobody is permitted to see me. Friends, worried about my condition, are turned away with the retort, 'He is doing well.' Finally a minister, the Reverend Arthur Milne, comes in bringing news and personal necessities. His transgression is discovered by Dr. D. Price, who is in charge of the hospital. He is called 'a hell of a minister' and chided for 'consorting with criminals.'

"On the fourth day Dr. Price comes in and examines me. He is curious regarding the activities of the unemployed. 'Who is paying your doctor's bill?' he asks. 'The police put me here, I presume they will pay the bill,' I reply. Enraged, he slams the door and shouts in a voice that can be heard all over the building, 'Call the police and tell them they can take this man whenever they want him.'

"In fifteen minutes the Black Maria arrives. Two cops come into the room and order me to get dressed. My shirt and undershirt are stiff with
blood. I put on bathrobe, trousers and shoes. My head is heavily bandaged. Garbed thus, I am taken to jail.”

A Story From New York

Here is the New York DAILY NEWS report of what happened as a crowd was peacefully leaving the Tombs Police Court on May 27, 1934, after the judge had ordered the court room cleared.

“With smooth precision, thirty policemen who had been hidden in rooms adjoining the courtroom drove the spectators down the stairs and into White St. On the sidewalk, Lechay and his wife failed to move as rapidly as one patrolman thought they should.

“With a shove between the shoulders which sent the woman sprawling on her face, the patrolman launched his attack.

‘Let us alone,’ shouted the man. ‘We’re going.’

“The two stumbled into the street, obviously trying to obey the order to move on. The patrolman, with a comrade at his heels, pursued.

“Just as the couple reached the opposite curb, the patrolman struck the woman on the head with his fist, knocking her into the gutter while his comrade pushed her husband on top of her.

“Caught between two closely parked cars, the couple, struggling to rise, were the targets for a rain of blows and kicks.

“Lechay and his wife managed to regain their feet and started to flee down White St. toward Centre St. They made only a few yards before the infuriated police flung themselves upon the hapless pair.

“As the woman lay on the sidewalk, seeking to protect herself from the blows and moaning at each fresh assault, her husband screamed: ‘My God, she’s my wife! Let her alone!’

“Knocking down her husband, the cops went to work in real earnest. Kick after kick landed in the ribs of both the man and woman. They dragged Lechay to his knees and threw him down again. The fists of one patrolman beat a tattoo upon the woman’s head.
ALBANY HUNGER MARCHERS ON WAY TO SEE GOVERNOR ABOUT WINTER RELIEF MEET POLICE BILLIES—Albany
Evening News, October 30th, 1934.

One of the worst of all brutal police attacks on demonstrators since the bonus army was driven out of Washington in 1932 was the unprovoked attack of the Albany police on hunger-marchers from New York City and the western part of the state arriving in trucks. They were turned back at the entrance to the city, brutally beaten and left to shift for themselves. They spent the night in cold weather without blankets by a roadside.
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"It was then that the reporters, gathered upon the stairs across the street, set up their cry of protest. For answer, the two policemen seized the woman and, twisting her arms behind her back, dragged her back across the street.

"Lechay, momentarily free, ran after his wife, still crying: 'For God’s sake stop it! She’s my wife!'

"Other policemen seized him and beat him while the two who held his fainting wife slapped her face with their free hands until she collapsed.

"Two reporters, at this point, leaped from the steps to report the cruelty to superior officers. The police then seemed to realize they had overstepped all bounds.

"The police carried Lechay and his wife to the complaint room and a few minutes later they were arraigned."

Arising out of this incident and others connected with it, letters were exchanged between Major General O’Ryan, at that time the Police Commissioner of New York, and William Hodson, the Welfare Commissioner.

In a letter to Mr. Hodson (June 11, 1934) Major General O’Ryan said:

"We have already placed on trial several policemen for failure to use all the force at their disposal and necessary for the purpose of suppressing violence, and charges will be prepared against any officer of the Department who fails to act promptly and effectively in such instances, including the protection of their own persons."

This routine use of police violence, often with frank official approval, against a body of citizens such as the organized unemployed, is unprecedented in American history.

Prosecutions

Such severity also extends to the prosecutions to which persons arrested in demonstrations have been subjected. Not only are maximum sentences common on such charges as disorderly conduct, disturbing the peace, unlawful assembly, resisting arrest, felonious assault, assaulting an officer, rioting, inciting to riot, etc. but the courts often display an animus wholly unrelated to the legal question at issue.
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As an indication of the volume of court cases involving the unemployed, reports of the International Labor Defense show 256 persons arrested in unemployed demonstrations in New York City in the month of October, 1934 alone. Most of the cases got to court.

It would be impossible here to list the cases of those prosecuted and those now serving sentences in connection with unemployed demonstrations. Many of the cases are reported only casually in the press. It is estimated that some 50 major prosecutions have taken place resulting in sentences of six months or over, with hundreds of minor cases.

A Court Case in New York

The summary of the case of George E. Powers in the February 1934 number of the International Juridical Association Bulletin is illuminating:

"George E. Powers, one of the leaders of the Unemployed Councils of New York, was arrested April 21, 1932, for seeking to force an audience with Mayor Walker on the question of relief for the unemployed. The arrest occurred simultaneously with a brutal police attack on the unemployed demonstration in City Hall Park. The charges against Powers were riot, incitement to riot, and assault on the police.

"Although Powers pressed for an immediate trial he was not brought to trial for nearly two years. On January 31, 1934, he was found guilty in the Court of General Sessions in New York City on the charge of unlawful assembly, which Judge Freschi brought into the case by implication. Despite the fact that the prosecution dragged in the issue of Communism the court refused to allow Powers to define his position. Judge Freschi sentenced him to an indeterminate sentence, which means a maximum of three years, and then suspended the execution of the sentence so that the threat of this prison term may act as a deterrent to further labor activities on the part of Powers." Earlier in the prosecution of the case Powers had been further harassed by an order to submit to a psychiatric examination.

Criminal Syndicalism

Particularly striking are the increasing numbers of prosecutions on the far more serious charges of criminal syndicalism and conspiracy to overthrow the government which carry prison sentences up to twenty years.
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Prosecutions on such charges need involve no overt act on the part of the person accused, but can be based simply on the fact that he advocates certain forbidden doctrines. An illuminating example is the case of fourteen persons arrested in connection with unemployed demonstrations at Hillsboro, Ill. and charged, among other offenses, with criminal syndicalism. These charges were later dismissed but the men were held for months in jail in default of high bail. Even more flagrant is the prosecution of Angelo Herndon, a young Negro Communist, sentenced under a Georgia statute to 18 to 20 years for "inciting insurrection". He had attempted to organize white and Negro unemployed together. His case is on appeal to the U. S. Supreme Court.

Restricting Civil Rights

Restrictions of the civil rights of the unemployed are common. On the right of workers on relief projects to organize, Henry Epstein, counsel to the New York State Temporary Relief Administration, recently ruled that relief employment

"is a form of public welfare aid and not the accepted form of employer-employee relationship. There is no question of bargaining here, because the basis of earning is the relief need, and of that the administration is the final judge. So, too, of the duration of employment and the approval of the project on which they may work."

He concludes that workers may organize, but may neither make demands, strike, nor picket.

This theory that the unemployed on the dole or working on relief projects are wards of the state and consequently forfeit the privileges of ordinary citizens can also be seen in several court decisions. In six states courts have denied workmen's compensation to persons injured on relief projects. In Wisconsin and New York, courts found workers guilty of desertion or neglect of their families when they refused to accept relief on conditions they thought unfair.

Efforts have also been made to deprive the unemployed of their right to vote. In sixteen states where property qualifications or the payment of a poll tax are required of voters, this to an undetermined extent already takes place automatically. Fourteen states have constitutional provisions
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denying the right to vote to persons in receipt of public aid. Attempts were made to apply these archaic pauper laws to present conditions, sporadically during the 1932 elections—notably in Maine—and on a wider scale in twelve states during the 1934 elections. President Roosevelt, when informed of this, denounced the proceeding as thoroughly un-American. He said:

"Under no possible honest conception of the law could a man out of work and willing to work be regarded as a pauper and be denied the privilege of voting . . . No court in the land would classify a person willing to work as a pauper. Anyone suggesting such a course would be suggesting a thoroughly un-American procedure."

Nevertheless, pressure is strong from certain business quarters to disfranchise the unemployed. The New York State Economic Council, for instance, states that it "favors withholding from all persons receiving public unemployment relief the right of suffrage during the period in which such relief is being received."

Organization of Social Workers

JUST as the depression has seen the growth of organizations of the unemployed so has it seen a movement towards greater organization among social workers, especially the thousands of relief workers recently recruited. Growing realization by these social workers of their employee status prompted organization to protect their wages and homes.

Such attempts at organization have met in many places stiff opposition from the heads of relief agencies. In Chicago in November, 1934, six members of the Federation of Social Service Employees, all admittedly competent workers, were discharged without notice and without statement of cause. In Kansas City a letter was included in the pay envelope of every relief worker threatening dismissal to anyone found "inciting discord" closing with the reminder, "... if you are discharged from this work for just cause, you cannot go back on the relief rolls". Similar incidents have occurred in many cities.

In the struggle to protect their own conditions of work the members of these organizations have come to feel kinship with the general struggle of the unemployed. They have also felt that their professional function de-
manded support of this struggle of the unemployed. Often they have protested inhumane treatment of clients and have taken part in united front activities of the unemployed. Delegates of the Emergency Home Relief Bureau Employees’ Association of New York participated, for instance, in the demonstration held at City Hall in New York in September, 1934, to protest the threatened suspension of home and work relief.

A Case in New York

A striking instance of the obstruction which these organizations meet is afforded by the case of Miss Sidonia Dawson, a supervisory aide in the New York Home Relief Bureau. Her professional competence is unquestioned. A leader of a delegation of the unemployed was beaten by the police at the precinct bureau where Miss Dawson worked. She protested sharply against this piece of brutality both at the time, and subsequently, at a public meeting. For this she was peremptorily discharged. The letter of dismissal informed her that her “activities . . . have indicated that it is no longer desirable to have you remain on the staff.”

In a letter of explanation to the Nation, Welfare Commissioner Hodson, while giving a diametrically different account of the circumstances that led to Miss Dawson’s protest, was silent as to why Miss Dawson was summarily dismissed without a hearing and why no attempt was made to check the official police version of the incident by hers. The letter furthermore attacks the organizations of the unemployed, and condones police violence as the “meeting of force by force”. The Nation pertinently asks “Have the New York police a past record of restraint in the face of provocation sufficient to justify a public official of Mr. Hodson’s importance officially to sanction meeting force with force?”

Relief for Strikers

When workers become unemployed through strikes, they raise a special issue of relief because their unemployment is an act of choice. From the point-of-view of their rights, the question arises whether the government should maintain on relief those strikers in want. The federal government has taken this position in a memorandum by the head of the FERA:

“The Federal Emergency Relief Administration will not attempt to judge the merits of labor disputes. State and federal agencies
exist, as well as courts, which are duly qualified to act as arbitra-
tors and adjusters in such disputes. Unless it be determined by the
National Labor Board of the National Recovery Administration
that the basis for a strike is unreasonable and unjustified, the Fed-
eral Emergency Relief Administration authorizes local relief
agencies to furnish relief to the families of striking wage earners
after careful investigation has shown that their resources are not
sufficient to meet emergency needs.”

“Each case applying for relief to the local emergency relief agencies
should be treated on its needs wholly apart from any controversy
in which the wage earner may be involved.”

No strike has as yet been declared “unjustified”.

Objections to extending relief to strikers of course are voiced by em-
ployers on the ground that their unemployment is wilful and that the
government by giving them relief encourages strikes. The answer to this
contention is that by refusing relief, the government would be in a position
of discriminating against persons in want and would thereby become an
ally of employers in driving workers back to their jobs on the employers’
terms.

Despite the official government policy, many instances of discrimina-
tion against strikers have occurred. In the textile strike they were reported
from all over the country. Local authorities ordered that strikers be
dropped from relief rolls. In Waterville, Me. overseers of the poor stated
publicly “Let the union support them. They will either work or not eat.
Anyone who strikes in these times deserves to starve.” In some counties
in the south during the textile strike, where the textile industry predomi-
nated, relief funds were allowed to run out before the strike began and
were not renewed. Pressure was brought to bear everywhere on relief of-
ficials to prevent them from giving relief to textile workers. In many sec-
tions of the Carolinas and Georgia it was reported almost a universal
practice for persons on the local relief rolls to have their names removed
because of one or more close relatives participating in the strike. In Hunts-
ville, Ala. the Chamber of Commerce threatened to remove any welfare
workers found giving food to striking mill workers.
While the pressure to withhold relief from strikers was greater in the textile strike than others, it is everywhere present in all large strikes, especially where unions are weak or new.

**Conclusion**

We have given this summary to indicate the widespread resistance put up by authorities to unemployed demonstrators and to show the specific restrictions upon what we regard as their rights. But we do not tell the story just to exhibit the facts or to attack the authorities. We do it to help organize practical aid among sympathizers and defenders of civil liberties.

We urge all of our interested friends to aid local unemployed organizations in getting their rights to hold meetings, demonstrate and parade. More important, we urge our friends to take up with local officials the establishment of normal and regular means for getting complaints of the unemployed before the authorities. Most important, we urge concerted action to withdraw police from all relief stations. Less important, of course, are the restrictions of the right of the unemployed to vote.

Defense of the right of unemployed, relief workers and social workers to organize and carry on their activities should be championed at all times for all purposes. Only by organized insistence upon these rights can they be maintained.

Those particularly interested in this issue tear off and return the coupon below.

American Civil Liberties Union
31 Union Square, West
New York City.

1. Count on me to aid in the campaign for protecting rights of the unemployed to organize and carry on their activities.
2. Send me special information as to when and how to help.
3. Remarks

Signed
Address
City

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20