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CHAPTER 13

'Starve, Be Damned!': Communists and Canada's Urban Unemployed, 1929–39

John Manley

Historians have shown relatively little interest in the contribution of the Communist Party of Canada (CPC) to the struggles of the urban unemployed in the 1930s. Although they are prepared to recognize the CPC's leading role in mobilizing the unemployed in this period, they have often questioned the significance of the movement itself. . . . Unquestionably, most of Canada's unemployed masses, who numbered around 800,000 at the trough of the Depression in the winter of 1932–3, and at least 500,000 on the eve of the Second World War, were not politicized. Communist activist George MacEachern has recorded how, even in industrial Cape Breton, an area of highly developed unemployed activity, the jobless often settled for muddling through on '\$3.00 a week and stealing your coal' (Frank and MacGillivray, 1987: 49). Nevertheless, all through the decade,

a militant minority refused to starve in silence.¹ The CPC's efforts to build its challenges to Canada's localized relief system into a broader political assault on the state obviously failed, but its revolutionary ambitions—at least until 1935—ensured that a definable movement emerged.²

Intellectually, the CPC leadership was ready for the economic crisis. 'Life itself' seemed to be confirming the predictive powers of Communist International (Comintern) theoreticians, who announced in 1928 that capitalism had entered a 'Third Period' of postwar development in which a profound political crisis would be precipitated by the working class's recognition that mass unemployment had become 'normal, inevitable and permanent' (Communist International, 15 March 1930; Morris, 1930; Lozovsky, 1931). Faithful to this 'New Line', party leaders held that

only a failure of will on their part could block the emergence of a revolutionary movement of the unemployed. Yet when it launched the National Unemployed Workers' Association (NUWA) early in 1930, the party was ill prepared for combat. Membership had declined steadily since 1925 and, by late 1930, stood at barely 1,400, less than one-third of its peak in the 1920s. Making a virtue of this catastrophe, general secretary Tim Buck claimed that the residual hard core of bolshevik 'fighters' compensated for all the departing faint-hearts and renegades (Penner, 1988).³

For most of 1930, the NUWA targeted young, single, transient men, whose 'rowdiness' and lack of 'bourgeois respectability', it was thought, made them willing combatants in the 'struggle for the streets'. NUWA head Tom Ewan remarked of one notably aggressive young fighter that 'the only theory he has is to get a punch at the police . . . [but] that is a very good theory . . . He is a good element, he wants action . . . his type is hard to control, but . . . should not be condemned.'⁴ Mobilizing transients in rapid-fire demonstrations demanding 'work or wages' at employment and relief offices proved particularly effective in Vancouver, where two immigrant 'Red Clydesiders', Allan Campbell and James Litterick, organized over 100 demonstrations in 1930.⁵ In central Canada, however, police repression hit the NUWA harder. Montreal and Toronto activists complained that the focus on transients reflected a failure to grasp the permanence of mass unemployment. They called for greater emphasis on work among unemployed families and insisted on fresh tactics and demands, arguing that married men and women were reluctant to confront the forces of law and order on a regular basis and could not take seriously the standard NUWA demand of 'work or full maintenance' at \$25 a week—a sum that few had ever earned.⁶ Comrades debated the issue for three months in the *Worker*, with Vancouver party

chief Malcolm Bruce trenchantly defending the status quo against the easterners' 'tailism'. When a Comintern directive endorsed the moderates' viewpoint, Toronto ended the debate in their favour and warned Bruce against indulging in factionalism.⁷

The resulting tactical shift was limited. Party leaders remained committed to the Third Period thesis that leading social democrats were 'social fascists,' or, as A.E. Smith, the general secretary of the Canadian Labour Defence League (CLDL), put it in a letter to the premier 'social fascist', J.S. Woodsworth, an old Labour Church and Social Gospel comrade, 'the servants of the capitalist class among the working class . . . daily [betray] the workers.'⁸ Communists believed that Woodsworth and his fellow Independent Labor Party (ILP) MPs A.A. Heaps and Angus MacInnis (and other labour leaders) should be denied working-class platforms, especially when they sought to muscle in on the unemployed movement. . . .

The NUWA made a turn towards economic demands 'for immediate cash relief, for free electricity, gas and water and against evictions', and organizers followed a standard procedure for developing contacts. Going from door to door, they asked for time to explain the NUWA's purpose and left each household two cards. One contained basic information about the NUWA and an invitation to consult it when faced with difficult landlords and utility companies; the other was a questionnaire eliciting information about local conditions, which would then be used to produce leaflets targeted at rank-and-file concerns. Each card urged: 'ORGANIZE UNEMPLOYED COUNCILS. FIGHT, DON'T STARVE.' Although neighbourhood work did not transform the NUWA's fortunes overnight—the Windsor NUWA was disappointed at the poor response to its call to fight the gas company with a campaign of mass nonpayment—it drew in new members and broadened the base

of the movement, not least by facilitating women's participation (Andrews, 1931).⁹

Recognizing past failures to address 'social problems, women's problems outside of [the] economic situation', the party affiliated its Women's Labour Leagues (WLL) to the NUWA and freed them to pursue women's concerns.¹⁰ The party opposed contemporary pressure against women's waged employment and gave the dominant discourse of maternal feminism a militant twist by calling on housewives to *fight* in defence of their homes and families. 'Special' women's issues had considerable mobilizing impact. Demand for health care 'increased enormously' during the Depression, partly as a result of the party's propaganda and demonstrations. With occasional success, the NUWA and the WLLs opposed cuts in services and demanded increased and improved public provision, especially in the areas of antenatal care and contraception. Vancouver activists exposed how the city's private birth control clinics were beyond the means of the jobless and pressed the city council to open a free, public service. Yet, determined not to promote 'separatist' and 'reformist' tendencies, the party insisted that Canadian women would enjoy the sexual equality that applied in the Soviet Union only *after* the revolution.¹¹

The difficulty some male comrades still found in perceiving the possibility of struggle outside the mainly masculine domains of the workplace and the street was reflected in the observation that, while the WLLs consisted 'in the main of housewives, they can *nevertheless* play a very important role in the everyday struggles of the workers' ('The Work of WLL', 15 July 1931; emphasis added).¹² Party attitudes towards women's role in class struggle were not static, however. One spokesman ambiguously captured the changing perception of women's role when he suggested that their bolshevism was reinforced by femininity. Women, he argued, were 'the most militant section of the

workers', fully capable of achieving 'a high level of class consciousness'. They were the *best* bolsheviks because they were 'more subjugative to the tasks'—they followed orders—and were exemplary on the crucial matter of prompt dues payment (cited in *Unemployed Worker*, 4 February 1933). There was no hint of his equation of bolshevism and good housekeeping in the observations of a female Alberta comrade, who pointed out, simply, that no 'fight is a real fight if only half of those affected are in the front ranks'. Thankfully, she added, the 'old prejudices . . . about the woman staying at home and letting the man do the fighting for his wife and family are disappearing' (Thomas, 1933). The Vancouver *Unemployed Worker* offered a graphic representation of how class consciousness was not essentially masculine: a front cover depicted the interior of a dilapidated working-class household where a defeated male figure sits at the table, head in hands; it is his wife who points through the window at the advancing BC Hunger Marchers and announces: 'STARVE, BE DAMNED! WE'RE GOING TO FIGHT!' Ann Lenihan, a leader of the 1938 Calgary relief projects' workers' strike, was one of several party women who ensured that this was more than an idealized image (*Unemployed Worker*, 20 February 1932; Kealey and Whitaker, 1997).

Side by side with its grass-roots organizing, the party mounted a national campaign in 1931 around the Workers' Unity League (WUL) bill. In line with Comintern directives to unite employed and unemployed, the party in 1930 attached the NUWA to the WUL, its new centre of 'red' labour unions. The WUL bill was really a mass petition, calling for a range of state reforms, notably 'work or full maintenance' and 'state non-contributory unemployment insurance'. The party believed that when the state refused—as it surely would—to grant these reasonable demands, employed and unemployed alike would conclude that they had no option but to take the 'revolutionary way out of

the crisis'. A signature drive exceeded all expectations. Between mid-January and mid-April, over 94,000 people signed the bill. Across Canada, 50,000 demonstrated on the Comintern's International Day of Struggle against unemployment in February, and on 15 April, when a WUL delegation delivered the bill to R.B. Bennett, the party claimed that 85,000 attended solidarity rallies. Local NUWA units were overwhelmed by membership applications. As many as 20,000 Canadians joined the NUWA between January and June. While most of them melted away as soon as the excitement died down, the party was thrilled by the experience of genuine mass work. Even the notoriously hard-to-please Comintern was impressed (*Party Organizer*, April 1931).¹³

A measure of the WUL's advance was the state's decision, immediately after the February demonstration, to prepare a pre-emptive strike against the party. The federal Department of Justice, the RCMP, and military intelligence routinely exchanged information on radical activities with provincial and local officials, and there was clear collaboration between the Tory administrations in Ottawa and Toronto in support of the latter's final onslaught against the leadership in August 1931. Constant police raids on party offices, vigorous breaking up of street meetings, and individual intimidation, especially of European immigrants, shattered the optimism engendered by the WUL bill. Few could have imagined that the purge would end with the arrest of Tim Buck and seven other members of the Political Bureau. As the party reconstructed its underground apparatus and tightened up internal discipline, the NUWA sought to open itself up by accelerating its shift towards grass-roots struggles and changing its sectarian stance towards political competitors (Adams, 1978; Bright, 1997).¹⁴

While repression may have temporarily quelled the Communist advance, it could not end the economic slump. State officials were dismayed

that rising unemployment continued to generate fresh NUWA recruits. A military intelligence officer reported from Windsor that even after rumours had been planted that NUWA members were to be removed from the relief rolls, 'many English-speaking people' continued to join. This was a potentially alarming development, since it challenged the widespread view that party organizations attracted only ignorant foreigners who were easily controlled by the threat of deportation, the British being too phlegmatic and sensible to be attracted to revolutionary organizations (*Border Cities Star*, 21 January 1932). New 'united front from below' tactics made it easier for Anglo-Celts to enter the party's ideological orbit. Acknowledging that their own 'sectarian folly' had helped drive a majority of the organized unemployed into reformist groups, the leaders of the now underground party took the NUWA out of the WUL in March 1932, made it formally independent, and renamed it the National Council of Unemployed Councils (NCUC). They set cadres the task of convincing the unemployed that one did not have to be 'a "red" or a Marxist' to join the new organization's permanent 'block' and 'neighbourhood' councils, and freed them to work within reformist organizations in appropriate circumstances (*Workers' Unity*, 30 October 1931; Burns, 1932; *Unemployed Worker*, 14 May 1932). . . .

Activists constructed a culture of solidarity around the many issues arising out of the relief system. The Burnaby Unemployed Council's winter 1932-3 campaign against price increases, for example, incorporated political education, the assumption of representative functions by unemployed council leaders, and direct action. Organizers sought initially to focus unemployed anger on the nearest class enemy—the store-keeping 'gentry'—but then shifted their attention to the responsibility of the local state to sustain the decency of its citizens. After several delegations

demanding emergency winter relief returned empty handed from visits to the municipal council, the unemployed council turned to direct action. Around 400 members surrounded three stores to await news of a last appeal. When the appeal was refused, organizers invited the demonstrators to take what they needed in a disciplined manner, announcing as they left that this procedure would be repeated if the need arose (*Unemployed Worker*, 15 October 1932, 21 January 1933).

Behind such actions lay the theory that each success would move the struggle towards the limits of what the state could concede, encourage the unemployed to view concessions as rights, and show them the value of mass pressure. To forestall the possibility that the rank and file might settle for concessions, the party incorporated political education in the life of the neighbourhood councils and tried to recruit the best activists into the party. If few were ready for the personal demands of party membership, many were prepared to join such 'fronts' as the CLDL, Workers' Ex-Servicemen's League (WESL), and Friends of the Soviet Union (FSU).¹⁵

The significance of the overtly political aspects of the movement should not be exaggerated. One of the most attractive features of the unemployed 'family' was its social life, in which escapism played a prominent role. Every left organization offered diversion from the meanness of life on relief. Between 9 January and 4 February 1932, for example, anyone with the inclination and stamina could have attended seven social functions (dances, concerts, banquets, and get-togethers) organized by five different party organizations. 'Next Friday at 8 p.m.,' the Waterfront Neighbourhood Council announced, 'we will hold a social and dance and there will be some pep to it. This is the real stuff and the admission is free.' House parties, childrens' outings, film shows, drama groups, and

team sports were regularly on offer. Most of those originally attracted by a cheap night out probably developed no additional commitments to the left, but the forging of a distinct oppositional culture contributed to the Vancouver left's unusually cosmopolitan vibrancy (*Unemployed Worker*, 13 June 1934; Liversedge, 1973: 33).

The unemployed movement helped the party scrape a foothold even in traditionally hostile centres like Hamilton and Montreal. In Montreal, Communists dominated the mainly anglophone Verdun Workingmen's Association and Rosemount Tenants' League (RTL), two groups well known for successfully resisting forced property sales and evictions!¹⁶ An eviction in 1933 precipitated the single event that thrust the CPC into the consciousness of working-class Montreal: the 'murder' of Nick Zynchuk. When the party discovered that Zynchuk's assailant, Constable Joseph Zappa, was a member of a fascist group, it tried to turn the case into a *cause célèbre*. The CLDL rushed out a pamphlet that made the case the centrepiece of an attack on the growing 'fascization' of the Canadian state; Montreal CLDL secretary Bella Gordon pilloried the findings of a coroner's inquest that not only exonerated the police but praised their forthright treatment of the 'foreigners'; the Progressive Arts' League based the agit-prop play *Eviction* on the case, performing it at unemployed conferences, and the WUL issued an appeal calling for the organization of a national unemployed movement strong enough to ensure that no 'cowardly police thugs' ever again 'drew a murderous gun against unarmed workers.' An estimated 10,000 Montrealers followed the cortege at Zynchuk's 'red funeral' (CLDL, 1933; *Nova Scotia Miner*, 1933; *The Worker*, 11 March, 17 June, 1 July 1933; *Toronto Daily Star*, 10 March 1933; Abella, 1977). . . .

Toronto's unemployed councils also found eviction struggles congenial. By 1935 they were

involved in so many that CCF Mayor Jimmy Simpson accused them of concocting cases to discredit him (*The Worker*, 29 April 1933).¹⁷ As in Montreal, they increased their participation in non-party groups, especially in the working-class suburbs. Ernest Laurie in Long Branch, Ewart Humphreys in York Township, and Jimmy Wilson in Scarborough all gained leading positions in their respective Workers' Associations despite unconcealed Communist views. Even where no particular leader stood out, the party seemed to be shaping the language of unemployed protest. In March 1933 a deputation of four North York unemployed organizations presented the township council with demands for a 10 per cent increase in the value of relief vouchers and the right for welfare recipients to redeem them in stores outside the municipality. To these they appended a manifesto that espoused the labour theory of value, drew attention to warehouses full 'of the necessities of life . . . while thousands [were] starving', and demanded that 'the needs of the unemployed be looked after before profits are paid'. 'Dividends must be cut,' it stated, 'taxes must be increased on the incomes of the rich, the stored-up food and clothing and the empty houses must be used to satisfy the needs of the million unemployed and their families' (*Toronto Daily Star*, 7 March 1933).

Credit accumulated in neighbourhood work helped the Toronto Central Unemployed Council reclaim the public space the party had lost in 1929–30. Between June and August 1933 a 'Free Speech Fight' revealed a significant shift in opinion. In 1929 Police Chief Dennis Draper's red-baiting inspired little working-class protest; in 1933 large numbers of workers were willing to turn out to defend the party's freedom of speech. Battles raged at most of the seven venues in the unemployed council's open-air circuit, climaxing in a showdown at Allen Gardens on the evening

of 15 August. A crowd of over 2,000 turned out for a meeting co-hosted by the unemployed councils and the WESL. When foot police failed to stop the crowd gathering around the speakers, motorcycle officers used a dispersal tactic that had been successful on at least one earlier occasion. Encircling the crowd, they faced their machines outwards and inwardly projected a fog of exhaust. The Allen Gardens crowd, including many veterans (one of whom wrote to the *Star* comparing the assault to German poison-gas attacks in the Great War), knew what to expect. Demonstrators made a stand and battled the police for two hours. Two nights later, 5,000 Torontonians listened in Earlscourt Park as speakers 'shot defiance' at the watching police and cited their non-intervention as a victory for mass action and a sign that Draper's rule was on borrowed time. A few weeks later the Police Commission ordered him to restrain his men from interfering with meetings unless the law had actually been broken (Houston, 1933a, 1933b; *Saturday Night*, 1933; Smith, 1933; *Toronto Daily Star*, 16, 22 August 1933; Betcherman, 1982).

The Toronto Free Speech Fight was part of an explicit attempt to keep politics in the movement's foreground, a purpose also served by national and provincial unemployment conferences and hunger marches. The Workers' Economic Conference (WEC) in Ottawa in August 1932 offered a proletarian counterpoint to the Imperial Economic Conference on Parliament Hill. The chance to play up the symbolic contrast between 'pot-bellied . . . empire economic big shots' and the 'lean and hungry lot' in an abandoned garage they had scrubbed down and whitewashed themselves was too good to miss. Delegates contrasted their class demands with the bourgeois selfishness of the imperial motherland and the white dominions. As the official conference sought to shore up the British

imperialist bloc, the anti-imperialist and internationalist WEC called for Canada to fund unemployment insurance—and promote the USSR's 'peace plan'—by cutting the defence budget. . . .

These events invariably provoked coercion. R.B. Bennett ordered continuous armoured car patrols of Parliament Hill during the March 1932 National Unemployment Conference, and, to prevent embarrassment at the Imperial Economic Conference, he had the RCMP conduct a stop-and-search operation to eject possible WEC delegates from Ottawa-bound freight trains. When WEC delegates defied a ban on an open-air rally, they were baton-charged. A delegation from the Provincial Unemployment Conference was so intimidated by the armed police presence in and around the Nova Scotia legislature that it slipped quietly into the building, deposited its demands, and left unnoticed.¹⁸ The Communist Party believed that coercive displays were advertisements for communism. . . .

As displays of armed force struck influential non-party observers as illiberal, immoderate, and un-Canadian, the state gradually reduced the level of anti-Communist coercion (although the On-to-Ottawa Trek showed that it was being held in reserve). The 1933 National Hunger March to Ottawa passed off uneventfully, with only one of many supporting local solidarity marches, at Nelson, British Columbia, producing a significant clash between the police and the jobless (*Globe*, 17, 18 January 1933; *Ottawa Evening Journal*, 17, 18 January 1933; *Toronto Daily Star*, 17, 18 January 1933; *Winnipeg Free Press*, 17, 18 January 1933). . . .

A major weakness of the unemployed effort was that—like the party itself—it mainly attracted the foreign born. Many Anglo-Celtic workers gravitated towards non-Communist groups because the Communist-led movement was identifiably

'foreign' and 'dangerous'. Only weeks after a group of 27 Yugoslavs and Ukrainians formed a NUWA branch in Cranbrook, British Columbia, immigration officials removed several of them for summary deportation. Hungarian activist John Farkas made a militant speech to the Oshawa Unemployed Workers' Association in 1932 and was promptly arrested, convicted of contravening section 98 of the Criminal Code, and deported. A minimum of 'several hundred' immigrants were deported for political radicalism in the 1930s, including, in one sixteen-month period in 1932–3, an estimated 100 party members. Many others were ostensibly deported as public charges, but were in reality victims of political repression.¹⁹ Immigrant workers who risked the double jeopardy of vagrancy and activism displayed a profound degree of political courage. Their commitment may well have stemmed from the CPC's staunch anti-nativism. Although the party was keen for its members to become naturalized citizens, it consistently challenged notions of 'racial' hierarchy. Unemployed demonstrations invariably celebrated proletarian internationalism and sometimes achieved symbolic unity between European immigrants and those of British stock. Ethnic representatives would take turns to insist that 'the status of a hungry, homeless "British" worker in no way differs from that of the foreign born worker . . . [all were] victims of the same system in every country of the world . . . [except] the Soviet Union.' Ethnic rivalries by no means dissolved, but Anglo-Celts were joining the party through the unemployed movement; between 1929 and 1934 the 'British' minority rose from around 5 per cent to around 25 per cent.²⁰

Middle-class organizations such as the Kiwanis, YMCA, YWCA, Women's Institutes, Imperial Order Daughters of the Empire, Junior Leagues, and the Rotarians joined with business and the churches to ensure that the CPC did not enjoy unopposed

access to the 'native' unemployed. Using sporting activities, training schemes, and make-work projects, they sought to 'bring the more and the less fortunate members of the community . . . into active and sympathetic contact' and to detach the jobless from those who were 'intent on "sowing the seeds of discontent"',²¹ . . .

The unemployed movement was too fluid for any single organization to exercise absolute control. Every radical tendency was represented, as were the Liberal and Conservative parties and individuals of no fixed political abode. The executive of the Earls Court Unemployment Council was a coalition of representatives from the ILP, labour unions, ratepayers' and property owners' groups, the Canadian Legion, the British Imperial Association, and the Orange Order.²² . . . The classic example of an individual who built a career in the working-class movement through the unemployed struggle was Arthur Williams, who emerged from nowhere to dominate the East York Workers' Association (EYWA), before going on to become township reeve, a leading official in the Canadian Congress of Labour, and a CCF member of parliament (Schulz, 1975: 19–20, 33–41).

. . . Communists could not take the loyalty of the unemployed for granted. The British Columbia party mistakenly assumed that the unemployed councils would readily consent to becoming the basis of the 1933 provincial election campaign of its alter ego, the BC Workers' and Farmers' United Front. When it proceeded to suspend normal unemployed activities, many rank-and-file unemployed council members made it clear that they resented this attempt to exploit the movement for partisan ends. The Burnaby council—which, ironically, had been formed by ILP members before entering the NUWA in 1931—dissolved itself rather than become a 'political' organization. When members reformed it as the Burnaby Workers'

Association, the party no longer enjoyed sole leadership. Paradoxically, some of the unemployed chose to join new unemployed bodies being created by the CCF and the recently reformed Socialist Party of Canada (SPC) (Purvis, 1933; *Unemployed Worker*, 27 December 1933, 13 June 1934).

During 1933–4, changes in the international situation enhanced the party's willingness to look outwards and make conciliatory gestures towards former rivals on the left. Sanctioned by cautious Comintern signals, party leaders felt it was worth running the risk of political dilution to obtain a mass audience (James, 1933; Sims, 1933). United front work developed more rapidly in the unemployed movement than in any other area (much more so than in the labour unions). As early as March 1933 Ewart Humphreys, president of the Mount Dennis branch of the York Township United Workers' Association, drew delegates from 30 organizations, 19 of them non-party, to a United Workers' Conference, to share experiences, pool knowledge, and build a unified township body. Toronto Trotskyists approved of this 'more . . . correct Leninist approach'. There were similar attempts in the Kitchener-Waterloo-Galt-Preston area, Toronto's Lakeshore suburbs, the Niagara Peninsula, and in other provinces. Despite the hostility of CCF national and provincial leaders, a significant degree of unity developed between CPC and CCF rank and filers.²³

This affinity helped prepare the unemployed for the fresh upsurge in their struggle provoked by the new relief measures Bennett introduced following the August 1934 Dominion-Provincial Conference. Against the background of an eighteen-month-old economic upturn, Bennett found it hard to believe that unemployment stemmed from anything other than fecklessness. He announced that a Public Works Construction Act would be combined with a 22 per cent reduction in federal

contributions to the provinces' direct relief funds. Provinces and municipalities, he insisted, should toughen up their relief regimes: too many recipients were squandering an overgenerous dole on 'movies, candy and beer' (*New York Times*, 1 August 1934; *Toronto Daily Star*, 23 August 1934; Struthers, 1983: 116–18). As cuts trickled down to the municipalities, however, they precipitated a new wave of militancy. This was particularly intense in Ontario, where cuts amounted to 37 per cent of direct relief funds, and where Mitchell Hepburn set aside his sympathy for the unemployed, announced plans to 'clean out the fakirs' from the relief rolls, and handed welfare minister David Croll the dubious privilege of launching an austerity drive, to begin in February 1935.

Unemployed groups, fearing a new wave of evictions and humiliated by the welfare department's demand that new relief applicants undergo investigations of their probity, morality, and personal hygiene, made clear, almost in trade union fashion, that they resented being tagged 'fakirs' and 'shirkers' and would oppose any cuts in relief standards. The next two years produced mass resistance, expressed in protest meetings, rallies, occupations, anti-eviction confrontations (an eviction had only to be rumoured for flyers to appear on telegraph polls giving the time and place at which volunteers should gather to keep out the bailiffs), and relief work strikes. When the introduction of direct cash relief in September 1935 was accompanied by a new cut in the value of relief and an increase in the amount of task work needed to obtain it, unemployed leaders countered the implication that they were choosing to stay on the dole and pointed out that, by increasing task-work requirements, the state was actually hampering their chances of finding real employment. An expanded conception of legitimate protest was soon manifested in highly visible ways. Relief recipients locked the mayor of Pembroke in

his office until, seven hours later, he withdrew a cut [in relief]. . . .

Female militancy was a much-noted feature in this phase of the struggle. The party pulled non-Communist women radicals to the left, into support of the desperate plight of single unemployed women (Laing, 1935; *Toronto Daily Star*, 15 March 1935; Sangster, 1989). When the Ontario Educational Association stated that working-class mothers needed to be taught the proper nutritional needs of their children, the party cited 12 Long Branch mothers who had besieged the township welfare board, demanding the issue of emergency food rations for their children. These women were 'showing that they need no "educating". They know what their kiddies need and are determined to get it for them.' In a brief report on an unemployed demonstration in Niagara Falls, the *Toronto Star* twice mentioned that the 'angry mob' that 'stormed the relief office' was made up of men and women. Mothers were developing a sense of entitlement for themselves and their children. Those in the EYWA threatened to picket the homes of township council members if they were not provided with children's clothes for the new school year. They then rejected the clothing they were offered a few days later, declaring that *their* children would not be wearing 'easily distinguishable' sweaters—they were printed with Disney characters—visible 'a block away'.²⁴

This action suggests the complex character of the class-consciousness generated by unemployed activism: the mothers' resistance to the labelling of their children suggested both assertiveness and a residual sense of shame at their reliance on the state. As the hanging in effigy of David Croll indicated, militancy did not necessarily lead to socialist conclusions. The unemployed often personalized their anger, directing it at 'unfair' housing administrators, relief officers, policemen, and local councillors rather than at the abstraction of an

unfair system; demonizing an individual seemed more natural than sustaining a class analysis of the system he or she serviced. Their challenge to authority was invariably accompanied by a willingness to settle for a mixture of paternalism, accountability, and respect. . . .

Between 1935 and 1939 Popular Front imperatives forced the indefinite postponement of socialist revolution and made the party's main objective the construction of cross-class alliances to defend bourgeois democracy. To this end it either dissolved or transformed its front groups into broad mass bodies 'congenial to . . . the petty bourgeoisie, the office employees, and the progressive intelligentsia' and eased itself away from struggles in which its leading role was too exposed or which threatened to frighten away potential allies. It quickly abandoned any attempt to build a national unemployed movement, initially opposing the 1935 On-to-Ottawa Trek on the grounds that 'the fight against the Bennett government must be fought out in each locality.'²⁵ Although Buck complained to the party's Central Committee in late 1936 that in many key centres the party's unemployed work had 'diminished rather than otherwise,' despite sweeping cuts in relief appropriations, this decline did not presage a revival of the movement (Buck, 1936: 62). Unemployment all but disappeared from the agendas of major national and provincial conventions.

During 1936 and 1937, Communist energies were largely consumed by the Aid to Spain movement (and other anti-fascist campaigns) and by the struggles in mass-production industry precipitated by the dramatic rise of the Committee for Industrial Organization. With unemployment continuing to fall, the party tried—without success—to offload responsibility for the unemployed to the Trades and Labour Congress (TLC) of Canada. Unemployment rose sharply again during the 'Roosevelt recession' that started in the fall of 1937, but the

party no longer saw the unemployed movement as a priority. Though Communists remained in the forefront of important local struggles, such as the dramatic month-long occupations of Vancouver's Art Gallery and post office by the British Columbia Relief Project Workers' Union (RPWU) in the summer of 1938 and the relief strikes that swept metropolitan Toronto in 1939, their leaders were increasingly eager to keep the level of militancy under control. RPWU organizers warned the Vancouver sit-downers against provoking confrontation and to 'refrain from any action which might alienate public sympathy'. In Toronto the party lost support among the single unemployed by 'agitating [them] . . . to the point where they were ready to take militant action and then restraining them from doing so.'²⁶ Now unashamedly reformist, the party channelled mass protest into representative lobbies (invariably including at least one clergyman) of provincial governments, electoralism, and faith in the state: the way to defeat unemployment was to elect a progressive federal government with the will to finance a massive recovery program of slum clearance and the construction of the St Lawrence Seaway.²⁷ . . .

The CPC clearly failed to induce insurrection or unify employed and unemployed workers partly because unemployed work always ranked lower than workplace activity. Even during the exceptional period of the WUL bill, Tom Ewan complained that 'we have been so active among the unemployed that we have entirely lost sight of everything else.'²⁸ If the jobless often sustained the party's contention that they would not 'scab', the employed avoided thinking about unemployment until it became a reality—which, for most, it is worth remembering, it never did. Not only did workers remain hesitant about taking action even in defence of their interests as workers but the party tended to provide them with moral exhortation rather than practical advice on *how* to support

the unemployed. The extent to which unemployed activism built new solidarities that would later find expression in industrial unionism has still to be seriously examined, but considerable cross-fertilization between the two wings of the workers' movement certainly occurred, and some rank and file workers first perceived the virtues of collective organization as unemployed activists (Cochrane, 1933).

Although local contexts need to be examined to determine whether a specifically Communist presence brought *additional* material benefits to the unemployed, the party's constant agitation on the systemic nature of the crisis and the right of the working class to make demands on the state stimulated popular expectations and greater boldness in expressing them, and almost certainly sustained levels of relief expenditure that would otherwise have been cut. . . .

Ultimately, it is probably impossible to quantify the movement's value. Some of the men and

women who chose to fight rather than starve knew they were also fighting the humiliation of being perceived, labelled, and treated as social failures. Collective action broke down personal isolation and gave combatants the dignity and self-worth needed to survive the Depression with their individual personalities intact. Winnipeg unemployed activist Mitch Sago eloquently expressed the psychological and spiritual value of participation in the unemployed struggle. When 'all you could see was a sort of dead end towards any changes year after year,' he observed, 'the organization of the unemployed created a feeling of optimism, it provided certain goals that projected beyond the immediate question of what do we eat today, what do we eat tomorrow' (cited in Abella and Millar, 1978: 284). Brutalized conditions, in other words, did not need to produce brutes—or victims. How many of the tens of thousands of Canadians who passed through the movement discovered and acted on similar feelings is worthy of further investigation.

Notes

1. See National Archives of Canada (NA), Michael Fenwick Papers, interview with Michael Fenwick; University of British Columbia, Special Collections, interview with Alex Fergusson; Harry A. Cassidy, *Unemployment and Relief in Ontario, 1919–1932* (Toronto and Vancouver: J.M. Dent, 1932); James Struthers, *No Fault of Their Own: Unemployment and the Canadian Welfare State, 1914–1941* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1983).
2. For two excellent local studies of urban unemployed protest, see Patricia V. Schulz, *The East York Workers' Association: A Response to the Great Depression* (Toronto: New Hogtown Press, 1975); and Carmela Patrias, *Relief Strike: Immigrant Workers and the Great Depression in Crowland, Ontario, 1930–1935* (Toronto: New Hogtown Press, 1990).
3. Norman Penner, *Canadian Communism: The Stalin Years and Beyond* (Toronto: Methuen, 1988), 89–94; See also Ontario Archives (OA), Communist Party of Canada (CPC) Papers, 8C 0588-66, Tim Buck's reply to discussion, CPC Central Executive Committee (CEC) Plenum, Feb. 1931.
4. See CPC Papers, 8C 0497, Tom Ewan, comments at CEC Plenum.
5. See Vancouver City Archives, Police Commission Files, vol. 15, Chief Constable V.A. Bingham, Report re 'Unemployed Situation and Agitation 1930–1931', 21 Jan. 1931; Harry McShane and Joan Smith, *Harry McShane: No Mean Fighter* (London: Pluto, 1978), 142, 146; Stuart Macintyre, *Little Moscows: Communism and Working Class Militancy in Inter-War Britain* (London: Croom Helm, 1980), 95–9.
6. D. Chalmers, Dave Weiss, and J. Carey, articles in *The Worker*, 6 Dec. 1930, 17, 24, Jan. 1931.
7. Malcolm Bruce, "'Tailism'" in the Work among Unemployed', *The Worker*, 18 Oct. 1930; CPC Papers, 1A 0709, Malcolm Bruce to Tim Buck, 3 Dec. 1930; 10C 1850 ff, 'The Resolution of the Anglo-American Section of the Profintern on the Situation and Tasks of the Workers' Unity League of Canada', 28 Nov. 1930; NA, Comintern Fonds (CF), reel 11, file 98, unsigned [probably Stewart Smith] to Tom [Ewan], 24 Dec. 1930. By 'Tailism,' Lenin referred to his Menshevik rivals' habitual tendency to 'tail' behind

- the working class's 'trade union' consciousness. See, for example, *What Is to Be Done?* [1902], and *One Step Forward, Two Steps Back* [1904]. In effect, Bruce was charging the central Canadians with a failure of leadership, even political cowardice.
8. NA, J.S. Woodsworth Papers, vol. 6, file 8, A.E. Smith to J.S. Woodworth, 22, 25 April 1930.
 9. George Andrews, 'How to Organize Local Councils of the NUWA,' *Party Organizer*, June 1931; See also CPC Papers, 2A 1200, Arthur Seal to Tom Ewan, 6 June 1931; 2A 1201, March 1931; 2A 1119, George Andrews to Sam Carr, 16 March 1931; Stevens, 'Radical Political Movements,' 87-8.
 10. 'The Work of WLL,' *Workers' Unity*, 15 July 1931; CPC Papers, 4A 2446, Catherine Lesire to Julia Collins, 20 May 1931; Sangster, *Dreams of Equality*, 71-4.
 11. See Leonard Marsh, *Health and Unemployment* (Toronto: Oxford University Press for McGill University, 1938), 92, 132-3, 177; Vancouver *Unemployed Worker*, 6 June, 28 Nov., 5 Dec. 1931, 20 Feb., 3 Sept., 27 Nov., 3 Dec. 1932; Gillian Cresse, 'The Politics of Dependence: Women, Work, and Unemployment in the Vancouver Labour Movement before World War II', in Gregory S. Kealey, ed., *Class, Gender, and Region: Essays in Canadian Historical Sociology* (St John's: Canadian Committee on Labour History, 1988), 134-8; 'Winnipeg Police Use Gas to Quell Riot', *Winnipeg Free Press*, 21 July 1933; 'Four Doctors Are Now Ministering to City's Jobless', *Winnipeg Free Press*, 7 Sept. 1933; *Canadian Medical Association Journal* 29 (Nov. 1933), 553-3; Anna Bell, articles on birth control and abortion in *Daily Clarion* (DC), 18, 20 Nov. 1936; 'Russian Mothers, Canadian Mothers,' *Workers' Unity*, 6 Aug. 1931.
 12. 'The Work of WLL' (emphasis added); University of Toronto, Fisher Library, Robert S. Kenny Collection, box 2, folder 6, 'Resolution on Women,' and A.M. Cooke, 'Resolution of Work among Women', CPC Eighth National Convention, Oct. 1937; Kenny Pamphlet Collection, Communist Party of Canada, *Resolution of Enlarged Plenum*, Feb. 1931, 54-9; National Committee of Unemployed Councils, *Building a Mass Unemployed Movement* (Toronto, undated [1933]), 21-7.
 13. See also CPC Papers, 3A 1842, Charlie Marriott to Sam Carr, 20 April 1931; RILU Letter, 8 May 1931, in *Agents of Revolution: A History of the Workers' Unity League, Setting Forth Its Origin and Aims* (Toronto: Attorney General's Office, no date [Feb. 1934]), 6; Carl Cuneo, 'State Mediation of Class Contradictions in Canadian Unemployment Insurance, 1930-1935', *Studies in Political Economy* 3 (Spring 1980): 37-65.
 14. See also Robert Kenny Papers, box 26, folder 1, Hugh Guthrie to W.H. Price, 18 March 1931; CPC Papers, 4A 2505, Malcolm Bruce to Tom Ewan, 13 July 1931; 3A 2303-4, Ewan to Bruce, 29 July 1941; Jack Kruger, . . . *Canadian Labour Defender*, March 1931.
 15. Report of W. Alexander's talk to a meeting of Kingway Block Council no. 3, in *Labor Defender*, May 1934. On the CLDL in British Columbia, see *Canadian Labor Defender*, May 1934, March 1935; UBC, Special Collections, interview with Alex Fergusson; Kenny Collection, box 39, folder 4. CLDL, *Report of the Annual District Convention*, Vancouver, 25-6 Aug. 1935. Copious information on the WESL and FSU is available in Gregory S. Kealey and Reg Whitaker, eds, *R.C.M.P Security Bulletins: The Depression Years, Part 1: 1933-4, Part 2: 1935, Part 3: 1936* (St John's: Canadian Committee on Labour History, 1993, 1995, 1996).
 16. See Comrade Morgan, Report to Anglo-American Secretariat, 2 July 1932; Andrée Lévesque, *Virage à Gauche Interdit: Les Communistes, les Socialistes et Leurs Ennemis au Québec, 1929-1939* (Montreal: Boréal Express, 1984), chaps. 1-2; 'Rosemount Tenants League Scores Another Victory', *The Worker*, 13 May 1933; 'Militant Montreal Jobless Put a Bailiff to Flight', *The Worker*, 1 July 1933; 'Tenants League Stands By', *The Worker*, 29 April 1933; *Unemployed Worker*, 21 Feb. 1934.
 17. 'Eight Days of Picketing Makes Welfare Department Act', *The Worker*, 29 April 1933; NA, CF, reel 18, file 152, 'Estimation of Work in District #3 [S. Ontario] on the basis of the Plan of Work adapted at the end of January', 20 June 1933; 'Radicals Warned by Mayor: Eviction Riots Must Cease', *Toronto Daily Star*, 7 March 1935.
 18. See *Ottawa Evening Journal*, 2, 4 March 1932; *New York Times*, 24, 30 July 1932; *Workers' Unity*, Aug.-Sept. 1932; Borsook, 'The Workers Hold a Conference'; *Toronto Daily Star*, 18 Jan. 1933.
 19. CPC, 4A 2470, 4A 2529, Alex Meronyk to Tom Ewan, undated [c. June 1931] and 16 July 1931; NA, CF, reel 2, file 206, John Navis, Report on Canada to Anglo-American Secretariat of the Comintern, 4 May 1933; Barbara Roberts, *From Whence They Came: Deportation from Canada, 1900-1935* (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 1988), chaps. 7, 8.
 20. DND, Directorate of History, file 161.009, Windsor City Police, Reports re: 'Communist Meetings in Lanspear Park', 1 May, 13 Aug. 1932; Robert Kenny Papers, box 1, Comintern Executive Committee, closed letter to the Central Committee, CPC, 8 April 1929; NA, CF, reel 19, file 152, 'Estimation of York in District #3', 20 June 1933; reel 9, file 163,

- Report from District #6 [Lakehead], CPC, 21 March 1934; 'Materials on Alliance Recruiting Campaign,' *Communist Review*, Sept. 1934.
21. 'Report of the Department of Labour for 1931', *Ontario Sessional Papers 10* (1932): 34-5; 'A Canadian Plan for Employment', *The Times* (London), 3 Nov. 1932; 'Edmonton Employment Service Plan Successful', *Industrial Canada* 34 (Aug. 1933): 42; 'Mayor Stewart Says Relief Not Perpetual', *Toronto Daily Star*, 10 Feb. 1933; 'Winnipeg Service Bureau . . . Closes . . . This Week', *Winnipeg Evening Tribune*, 30 June 1934; David Croll, speech reported in *Toronto Daily Star*, 5 April 1935.
 22. OA, H.G. Ferguson Papers, box 131, A.M. Barnetson to E.G. Ferguson, 14 Aug. 1930.
 23. OA, George Henry Papers, box 168, 'Report of Motions Passed at York Township Workers' Conference', undated [11 March 1933]; 'Notes from the Townships', *October Youth*, April 1933; 'Holds Workers' Body Is a Rudderless Ship', *Toronto Daily Star*, 3 March 1933; 'Ask Food Allowances Keep Up with Prices', *Toronto Daily Star*, 9 Feb. 1934; 'Plan for United Activities', *The Worker*, 15 April 1933; John Weir, 'After Calgary Strike', *The Worker*, 19 Aug. 1933; NAC, Sound Archive, interview with Pat Lenihan; University of Toronto, J.S. Woodsworth Papers, box 1, J. Houston to All Trade Unions, Mass Organizations, CCF Clubs, and All Meetings of Workers, 11 Aug. 1933; CCF Ontario Provincial Council, Minutes, 26 Jan., 19 April, 4 May 1935; 'Evictions,' *New Commonwealth*, 4 Aug. 1934.
 24. Anne Smith, 'With Our Women', *Daily Clarion*, 1 May 1936; 'Niagara Falls Mob Threatens Relief Head', *Toronto Daily Star*, 27 April 1935; 'Women Plan to Protest "Brutal Axe of Economy"', *Toronto Daily Star*, 27 Aug. 1935; "'Mickey Mouse" Sweaters Evoke Workers' Protests', *Toronto Daily Star*, 12 Sept. 1935; "'Keep Vigil Till Tots Fed" Say Women after 40 Hours', *Toronto Daily Star*, 18 April 1936.
 25. NA, J.L. Cohen Papers, vol. 3, file 2342, CLM, National Convention, 19-20 Oct. 1935, *Main Resolution*, 4-5; 1, 4, 6 June 1935.
 26. NA, Communist Party of Canada Papers, Box 2, folder 2-8, 'Labor College: A Short Course on Trade Unionism', undated [c. Jan. 1936], 28-34; Brodie, *Bloody Sunday*, 12; Kealey and Whitaker, eds, *RCMP Security Bulletins, 1938-1939*, 177, 278, 369; Struthers, *No Fault of Their Own*, 192-4.
 27. Kenny Collection, box 2, folder 5, CPC, *We Propose. . . Resolutions of the Eighth Dominion Convention*, Toronto, 8-21 Oct. 1937.
 28. CPC Papers, Ewan to Drayton, 18 April 1931.

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