

CHAPTER FIFTEEN  
**HARD TIMES**



IT WAS FEBRUARY 1919. THE WAR HAD ended in Europe just a few months before. The world was in the grip of an influenza epidemic that would claim half a million American lives and millions more worldwide. In the United States, the leaders of the Industrial Workers of the World were in jail—but their dream was about to become a reality in Seattle, Washington.

Strikes by a single union or a single kind of worker could get results. But the IWW felt that a general strike, with all kinds of workers walking off their jobs together, would make a stronger statement. In Seattle, after shipyard workers went on strike for higher wages, more than a hundred other unions voted to strike as well. A walkout of a hundred thousand working people brought the city to a halt.

*(left, detail)*  
A caravan of strike pickets patrol a road south of Tulare, 1933.

The strikers kept vital services going. Fire fighters stayed on the job, and milk stations were set up in neighborhoods to deliver milk to families. The strike lasted for five days and was peaceful. In fact, during those five days, the city had less crime than usual. But after the strike, the authorities raided Socialist Party headquarters. Thirty-nine members of the IWW went to jail as “ring-leaders of anarchy.”

Why did the government react this way to the strike? Maybe the answer lies in a statement by Seattle’s mayor:

The general strike, as practiced in Seattle, is of itself the weapon of revolution, all the more dangerous because quiet. To succeed, it must suspend everything; stop the entire life stream of a community. . . . That is to say, it puts the government out of operation.

The general strike made the authorities feel powerless. It seemed to threaten the whole economic and political system of society.

Seattle’s general strike was just one of many large strikes across the United States in 1919. These labor actions were part of a wave of rebellions around the world. From the Communist revolution against royal rule in Russia to a strike by railway workers in England, ordinary people were rising up, making

their voices heard, and bringing about change. A writer for *The Nation* magazine said, “The common man . . . losing faith in the old leadership, has experienced a new . . . self-confidence. . . .”

### The Truth about the Twenties

When the 1920s started, the wave of rebellion had died down in the United States. The IWW was destroyed. The Socialist Party was falling apart. Strikes were beaten down by force. The economy was doing just well enough for just enough people to prevent mass rebellion.

The 1920s are sometimes called the Roaring Twenties, or the Jazz Age—a time of prosperity and fun. There was some truth to that picture. Unemployment was down, and the general level of workers’ wages went up. People could buy new gadgets such as automobiles, radios, and refrigerators. Millions of people were not doing badly.

But most of the wealth was in the hands of a few people at the top of society’s pyramid. At the

bottom of the pyramid were the black and white tenant farmers living in poverty in the countryside, and the immigrant families in the cities who could not find work, or could not earn enough for basic needs. In New York City alone, 2 million people lived in tenement buildings that were known to be unsafe because of fire danger.

Fourteen million immigrants had come to the United States between 1900 and 1920. In 1924, Congress passed an immigration law that put an end to this flood. The new law favored the immigration of white people from English and German backgrounds. Immigration of Southern Europeans, Slavs, and Jews was severely limited, and only a hundred people a year could come from China or any African country.

Racial hatred and violence were everywhere. The Ku Klux Klan came back in the 1920s, and it spread into the North. By 1924 it had 4.5 million members.

After a long struggle, women had finally won the right to vote in national elections in 1920. Yet voting was still an upper-class and middle-class activity, and the new women voters favored the same old political parties as other voters.

*(left)*  
A caravan of strike pickets patrol a road south of Tulare, 1933.



Labor unrest may have calmed for a time, but it had not faded away. With the Socialist Party weakened, a Communist Party formed in the United States. Communists were involved in many labor struggles, including huge textile strikes in Tennessee and the Carolinas in early 1929.

### The Great Depression

DURING THE 1920S, THE AMERICAN ECONOMY seemed healthy—even booming. Prices for stocks, which are shares of ownership in corporations, rose higher than ever. Many people thought that the value of stocks would just keep going up. They invested their money by buying stocks, and they borrowed money from banks to buy still more stocks. The banks invested in stocks, too, using the money that customers had deposited.

In 1929 the boom ended with a crash. When the value of stocks started to drop, people started selling their stocks in a panic. This made the value drop even faster. Banks could not collect the loans

that people had taken to buy stocks, and people could not withdraw their money from banks that had invested it and lost it. Both the stock market and the banking system spiraled swiftly downward, triggering a severe crisis in the economy. The United States had entered the Great Depression.

The economy was stunned, barely moving. More than five thousand banks closed. Thousands of businesses closed, too. Businesses that managed to stay open laid off some workers and cut the wages of other workers, again and again. By 1933 perhaps as many as 15 million people were out of work. A quarter to a third of the nation's workforce could not find jobs.

There were millions of tons of food in the country, but it was not profitable to ship it or sell it, so people went hungry. Warehouses were full of clothing and other products, but people couldn't afford to buy them. Houses stayed empty because no one had the money to buy or rent them. People who failed to pay rent were kicked out of their homes. They lived in "Hoovervilles," communities of shacks built on garbage dumps. The name comes from President Herbert Hoover, who had said just before the crash, "We in America today



## CHILD WORKERS

BY THE BEGINNING OF THE SECOND DECADE OF the twentieth century, over 2 million American children below the age of sixteen were among America's full-time workers, many toiling twelve or thirteen hours a day. Canneries in the gulf towns of Mississippi employed children as young as three years old, shucking oysters and peeling shrimp. Small girls toiled in cotton mills in North Carolina, spinning cotton at giant, noisy machines. Only whites were hired for mill work, and entire families left their farms to work in the mills. In Pennsylvania, thousands of fourteen- and fifteen-year-old boys were employed legally in the mines—as miners, coal breakers, or slate pickers—and thousands more nine- and ten-year-olds were employed illegally, many of them suffering from chronic coughs from the coal dust.

These children weren't apprentices learning a trade, just some of the cheapest and hardest workers around.

The National Child Labor Committee was founded in 1904 to reduce and regulate childhood labor, but it wasn't until the Great Depression of the 1930s—a period of such high unemployment that adults now competed with children for the worst paying jobs—that resistance to the committee's effort, by those who were profiting from child labor, finally lessened. In 1938, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt signed the Fair Labor Standards Act, which established a minimum wage and a maximum number of daily hours for workers, and which also restricted child labor and prohibited children from working in mines or factories. In 1949, Congress amended the law to include other types of



businesses, and also restricted working hours for children under sixteen to exclude school hours.

In 1913, the National Child Labor Committee composed a "Declaration of Dependence" by and on behalf of the children of America:

#### **Declaration of Dependence**

WHEREAS, We, Children of America, are declared to have been born free and equal, and

WHEREAS, We are yet in bondage in this land of the free; are forced to toil the long day or the long night, with no control over the conditions of labor, as to health or safety or hours or wages, and with no right to the rewards of our service, therefore be it

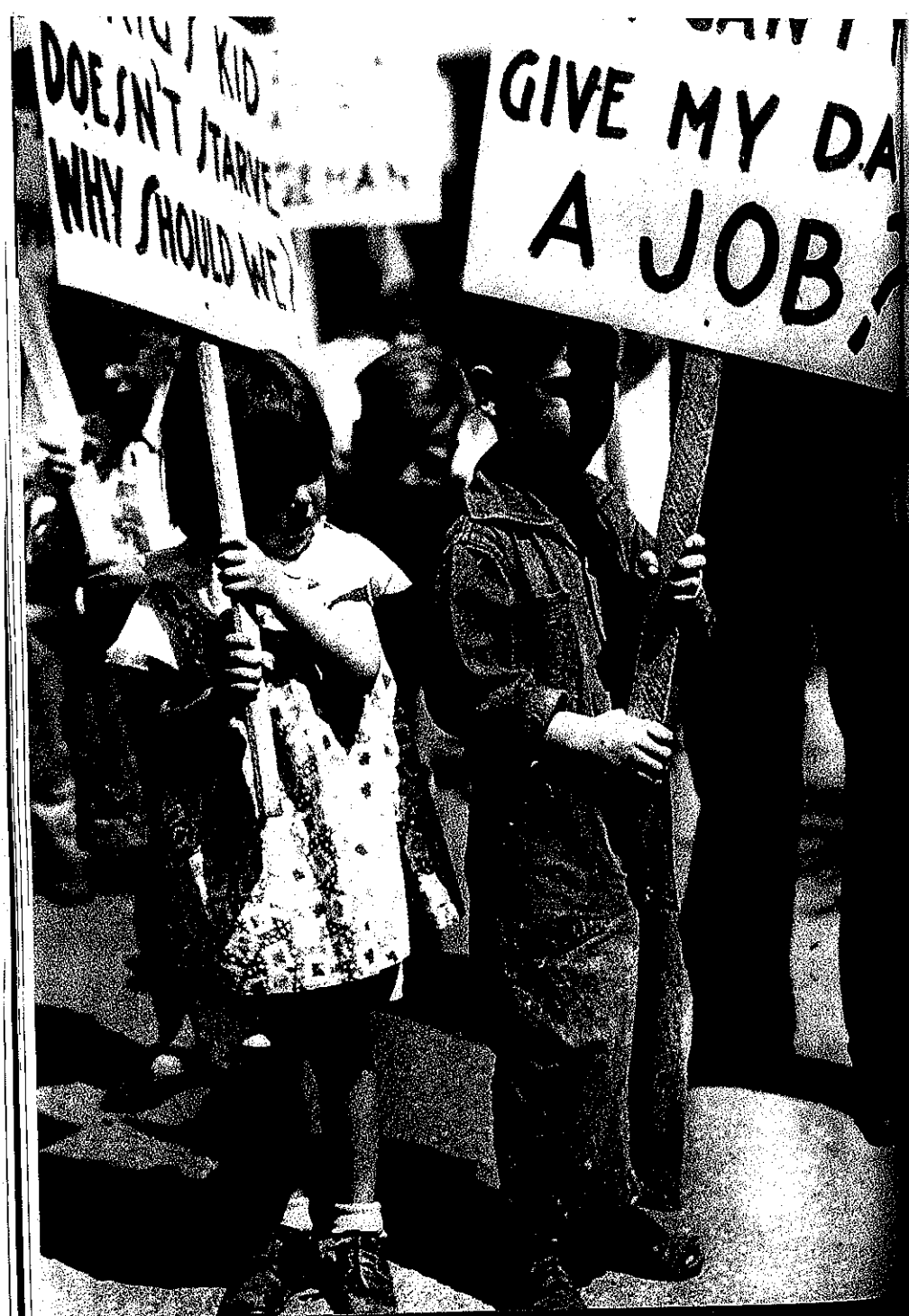
RESOLVED, I — That childhood is endowed with certain inherent and inalienable rights, among which are freedom from toil for daily bread; the right to

play and to dream; the right to the normal sleep of the night season; the right to an education, that we may have equality of opportunity for developing all that there is in us of mind and heart.

RESOLVED, II — That we declare ourselves to be helpless and dependent; that we are and of right ought to be dependent, and that we hereby present the appeal of our helplessness that we may be protected in the enjoyment of the rights of childhood.

RESOLVED, III — That we demand the restoration of our rights by the abolition of child labor in America.

Source: Freedman, Russell. *Kids at Work: Lewis Hine and the Crusade Against Child Labor*. New York: Scholastic, 1994.



are nearer to the final triumph over poverty than ever before in the history of any land."

One of the few politicians who had spoken out for the poor during the 1920s was Fiorello La Guardia, a congressman from a district of poor immigrants in East Harlem. After the Depression started, he received a letter from a tenement dweller there:

You know my condition is bad. I used to get pension from the government and they stopped it. It is now nearly seven months I am out of work. I hope you will try to do something for me. . . . I have four children who are in need of clothes and food. . . . My daughter who is eight is very ill and not recovering. My rent is due two months and I am afraid of being put out.

Hard times made people desperate. In *The Grapes of Wrath*, a novel about the misery of Oklahoma farmers forced off their land, author John Steinbeck called the new homeless people "dangerous." A spirit of rebellion was growing in the land.

In Detroit, five hundred men rioted when they were turned out of public housing because they couldn't afford to pay for it. In Chicago, five hundred schoolchildren, "most with haggard faces and in tattered clothes," marched through down-

(left)  
Children carry picket signs at a demonstration for the Workers Alliance during the Great Depression, 1937.

town to demand food from the school system. In New York City, several hundred jobless people surrounded a restaurant, demanding to be fed without charge. In Seattle, an army of the unemployed seized a public building and held it for two days.

Men who had fought in the First World War now found themselves out of work and out of money. Some held certificates from the government that were to be paid off in the future—but they needed the money now. And so war veterans began to move toward Washington, D.C., from all over the country. They came in broken-down old autos, or by stealing rides on trains, or by hitchhiking.

More than twenty thousand came. They camped across from the Capitol, in shelters made of old boxes and newspapers. President Hoover ordered the army to get rid of them. General Douglas A. MacArthur, with the help of officers such as Dwight D. Eisenhower and George S. Patton, used tanks, tear gas, and fires to break up the camp. When it was over, two veterans had been shot to death, a boy was partially blinded, two police had fractured skulls, and a thousand veterans were injured by gas.

### Struggling to Survive

IN THE ELECTION OF 1932, HOOVER LOST TO the Democratic candidate, Franklin D. Roosevelt, who launched a series of reform laws that came to be called the New Deal. These reforms went far beyond earlier changes. They attempted to reorganize capitalism.

The first major law was the National Recovery Act (NRA). It took control of the economy by making government, management, and labor agree on such things as prices, wages, and competition. From the start, the NRA was controlled by big business, but it did give some benefits to working people. Two years later, though, the Supreme Court declared the NRA unconstitutional because it gave too much power to the president.

Other reforms continued. One was the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA), which built a government-owned system of dams and power plants. The TVA provided jobs and lower electricity rates. Its critics called it “socialistic,” and they were right in some ways.

The New Deal had two goals. The first was to overcome the Depression and make the economy more stable. The second was to give enough help



to the lower classes to keep rebellion from turning into a real revolution.

The rebellion was real when Roosevelt took office. All across the country, people were not waiting for the government to help them. They were helping themselves.

In Detroit and Chicago, when police removed the furniture of people who had been evicted from their apartments for not paying rent, crowds gathered on the sidewalk to carry the furniture back inside. In Seattle, fishermen, fruit pickers, and woodchoppers traded with each other for supplies they needed. Often labor unions helped make these self-help arrangements.

Self-help sprouted in the coal mines of Pennsylvania. Teams of unemployed miners dug small mines on company property, hauled the coal to the cities, and sold it for less than the companies charged. When the authorities tried to halt the trade in "bootleg" coal, local juries would not convict the miners, and local jailors would not imprison them. These were simple actions, but they had revolutionary possibilities. Working people were discovering a powerful truth: that they could meet their own needs. Soon, though, a wave

of large-scale labor outbursts caused the government to get involved in the labor movement.

It began with strikes by West Coast longshoremen—workers who loaded and unloaded cargo ships. They struck, tying up two thousand miles of coastline. A general strike in San Francisco followed, then another in Minneapolis, and then the biggest strike of all: 325,000 textile workers in the South.

New unions formed among workers who had never been organized. Black farmers were hit very hard by the Depression. Some were attracted to the strangers who started showing up, suggesting that they unionize. Hosea Hudson, a black man from rural Georgia who had worked the land from the age of ten, joined the Communist Party and helped organize unemployed blacks in Birmingham, Alabama. Later he recalled those years of activism:

Block committees would meet every week, had a regular meeting. We talked about the welfare question, what was happening, we read the *Daily Worker* and the *Southern Worker* to see what was going on about unemployed relief. . . . We kept it up, we was on top, so people always wanted to come cause we had something different to tell them each time.

In many strikes, the decision to act came from the rank and file—the ordinary members—not from the union leaders. Rubber workers in Akron, Ohio, came up with a new kind of strike called a sit-down. Instead of leaving the plant and marching outside, they remained inside and did not work.

The longest sit-down strike took place among auto workers in Michigan. Starting in December 1936, for forty days there was a community of two thousand strikers. "It was like war," one of them said. "The guys with me became my buddies." Committees organized recreation, classes, postal service, and sanitation. A restaurant owner across the street prepared three meals a day. Armed workers circled the plant outside, fighting off a police attack. Finally the strikers and management agreed to a six-month contract, and the strike ended.

To bring a halt to this type of labor unrest, the government set up the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB). The NLRB would recognize the legal status of unions, listen to their complaints, and settle some of their issues. At the same time, the unions themselves were trying to become more influential, even respectable. Leaders of the major associations, the American Federation of Labor

(AFL) and the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO), wanted to keep strikes to a minimum. They began channeling workers' rebellious energy into things like contract talks and meetings.

Some historians of the labor movement claim that workers won most during the early years of rank-and-file uprisings, before unions were recognized and well organized. While the AFL and the CIO each had more than 6 million members by 1945, their power was less than it had been before. Gains from the use of strikes kept getting whittled down. The NLRB leaned more toward the side of management than toward labor, the Supreme Court ruled that sit-down strikes were illegal, and state governments passed laws that made striking and picketing more difficult.

By the late 1930s, the worst of the Depression had passed for some people. New laws passed in 1938 limited the work week to forty hours and outlawed child labor. The Social Security Act gave retirement benefits and unemployment insurance (but not to everyone—farmers, for example, were left out). There was a new minimum wage, and the government built some housing projects. These measures didn't help everyone who needed

help, but they made people feel that something was being done.

Black people gained little from the New Deal. Many worked as tenant farmers, farm laborers, domestic workers, and migrants. They did not qualify for the minimum wage or unemployment insurance. Blacks suffered job discrimination—they were the last to be hired and the first to be fired. Lynchings continued, and so did less violent forms of racial prejudice.

In the mid-1930s a young black poet named Langston Hughes gave voice to frustration and hope in a poem called "Let America Be America Again":

... I am the poor white, fooled and pushed apart,  
I am the Negro bearing slavery's scars.  
I am the red man driven from the land,  
I am the immigrant clutching the hope I seek—  
And finding only the same old stupid plan.  
Of dog eat dog, of mighty crush the weak. . . .  
O, let America be America again—  
The land that never has been yet—

The New Deal had brought an exciting flowering of the arts, such as had never happened before in American history. Federal money was used to

pay thousands of writers, artists, musicians, and photographers for creative projects. Working-class audiences saw plays and heard symphonies for the first time. But by 1939, the arts programs ended. The country was more stable, and the New Deal was over.

Capitalism had not changed. The rich still controlled the nation's wealth, as well as its laws, courts, police, newspapers, churches, and colleges. Enough help had been given to make Roosevelt a hero to millions, but the system that had brought the Great Depression remained in place.

Elsewhere in the world, war was brewing. German leader Adolf Hitler was on the march in Europe. Across the Pacific, Japan was invading China. For the United States, war was not far off.