

There was some truth to the standard picture of the twenties as a time of prosperity and fun—the Jazz Age, the Roaring Twenties. Unemployment was down, from 4,270,000 in 1921 to a little over 2 million in 1927. The general level of wages for workers rose. Some farmers made a lot of money. The 40 percent of all families who made over \$2,000 a year could buy new gadgets: autos, radios, refrigerators. Millions of people were not doing badly—and they could shut out of the picture the others—the tenant farmers, black and white, the immigrant families in the big cities either without work or not making enough to get the basic necessities.

But prosperity was concentrated at the top. While from 1922 to 1929 real wages in manufacturing went up per capita 1.4 percent a year, the holders of common stocks gained 16.4 percent a year. Six million families (42 percent of the total) made less than \$1,000 a year. One-tenth of 1 percent of the families at the top received as much income as 42 percent of the families at the bottom, according to a report of the Brookings Institution. Every year in the 1920s, about 25,000 workers were killed on the job and 100,000 permanently disabled. Two million people in New York City lived in tenements condemned as firetraps.

The country was full of little industrial towns like Muncie, Indiana, where, according to Robert and Helen Lynd (*Middletown*), the class system was revealed by the time people got up in the morning: for two-thirds of the city's families, "the father gets up in the dark in winter, eats hastily in the kitchen in the gray dawn, and is at work from an hour to two and a quarter hours before his children have to be at school."

There were enough well-off people to push the others into the background. And with the rich controlling the means of dispensing information, who would tell? Historian Merle Curti observed about the twenties:

It was, in fact, only the upper ten percent of the population that enjoyed a marked increase in real income. But the protests which such facts normally have evoked could not make themselves widely

or effectively felt. This was in part the result of the grand strategy of the major political parties. In part it was the result of the fact that almost all the chief avenues to mass opinion were now controlled by large-scale publishing industries.

Some writers tried to break through: Theodore Dreiser, Sinclair Lewis, Lewis Mumford. F. Scott Fitzgerald, in an article, "Echoes of the Jazz Age," said: "It was borrowed time anyway—the whole upper tenth of a nation living with the insouciance of a grand duc and the casualness of chorus girls." He saw ominous signs amid that prosperity: drunkenness, unhappiness, violence:

A classmate killed his wife and himself on Long Island, another tumbled "accidentally" from a skyscraper in Philadelphia, another purposely from a skyscraper in New York. One was killed in a speak-easy in Chicago; another was beaten to death in a speak-easy in New York and crawled home to the Princeton Club to die; still another had his skull crushed by a maniac's axe in an insane asylum where he was confined.

Sinclair Lewis captured the false sense of prosperity, the shallow pleasure of the new gadgets for the middle classes, in his novel *Babbitt*:

It was the best of nationally advertised and quantitatively produced alarm-clocks, with all modern attachments, including cathedral chime, intermittent alarm, and a phosphorescent dial. Babbitt was proud of being awakened by such a rich device. Socially it was almost as creditable as buying expensive cord tires.

He sulkily admitted now that there was no more escape, but he lay and detested the grind of the real-estate business, and disliked his family, and disliked himself for disliking them.] CUT.

Women had finally, after long agitation, won the right to vote in 1920 with the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment, but voting was still a middle-class and upper-class activity. Eleanor

Not everyone is happy with Prosperity

Flexner, recounting the history of the movement, says the effect of female suffrage was that "women have shown the same tendency to divide along orthodox party lines as male voters."

* Few political figures spoke out for the poor of the twenties. One was Fiorello La Guardia, a Congressman from a district of poor immigrants in East Harlem (who ran, oddly, on both Socialist and Republican tickets). In the mid-twenties he was made aware by people in his district of the high price of meat. When La Guardia asked Secretary of Agriculture William Jardine to investigate the high price of meat, the Secretary sent him a pamphlet on how to use meat economically. La Guardia wrote back:

I asked for help and you send me a bulletin. The people of New York City cannot feed their children on Department bulletins. . . . Your bulletins . . . are of no use to the tenement dwellers of this great city. The housewives of New York have been trained by hard experience on the economical use of meat. What we want is the help of your department on the meat profiteers who are keeping the hard-working people of this city from obtaining proper nourishment.

-mic drop

During the presidencies of Harding and Coolidge in the twenties, the Secretary of the Treasury was Andrew Mellon, one of the richest men in America. In 1923, Congress was presented with the "Mellon Plan," calling for what looked like a general reduction of income taxes, except that the top income brackets would have their tax rates lowered from 50 percent to 25 percent, while the lowest-income group would have theirs lowered from 4 percent to 3 percent. A few Congressmen from working-class districts spoke against the bill, like William P. Connery of Massachusetts:

I am not going to have my people who work in the shoe factories of Lynn and in the mills in Lawrence and the leather industry of Peabody, in these days of so-called Republican prosperity when they are working but three days in the week think that I am in accord with the provisions of this bill. . . . When I see a provision in this

Mellon tax bill which is going to save Mr. Mellon himself \$800,000 on his income tax and his brother \$600,000 on his, I cannot give it my support.

The Mellon Plan passed. In 1928, La Guardia toured the poorer districts of New York and said: "I confess I was not prepared for what I actually saw. It seemed almost incredible that such conditions of poverty could really exist." *Remember, This is During the Harlem

Buried in the general news of prosperity in the twenties were, from time to time, stories of bitter labor struggles. In 1922, coal miners and railroad men went on strike, and Senator Burton Wheeler of Montana, a Progressive elected with labor votes, visited the strike area and reported:

All day long I have listened to heartrending stories of women evicted from their homes by the coal companies. I heard pitiful pleas of little children crying for bread. I stood aghast as I heard most amazing stories from men brutally beaten by private policemen. It has been a shocking and nerve-racking experience.

~~Text cut. A textile strike in Rhode Island in 1922 among Italian and Portuguese workers failed, but class feelings were awakened and some of the strikers joined radical movements. Luigi Nardella recalled:~~

~~. . . my oldest brother, Guido, he started the strike. Guido pulled the handles on the looms in the Royal Mills, going from one section to the next shouting, "Strike! Strike!" . . . When the strike started we didn't have any union organizers. . . . We got together a group of girls and went from mill to mill, and that morning we got five mills out. We'd motion to the girls in the mills, "Come out! Come out!" Then we'd go on to the next. . . .~~

~~Somebody from the Young Workers' League came out to bring a check, and invited me to a meeting, and I went. Then I joined, and in a few years I was in the Risorgimento Club in Providence. We were anti-Fascists. I spoke on street corners, bring a stand, jump up~~

and talk to good crowds. And we led the support for Sacco and Vanzetti. . . .

After the war, with the Socialist party weakened, a Communist party was organized, and Communists were involved in the organization of the Trade Union Education League, which tried to build a militant spirit inside the AFL. When a Communist named Ben Gold, of the furriers' section of the TUEL, challenged the AFL union leadership at a meeting, he was knifed and beaten. But in 1926, he and other Communists organized a strike of furriers who formed mass picket lines, battled the police to hold their lines, were arrested and beaten, but kept striking, until they won a forty-hour week and a wage increase.

Communists again played a leading part in the great textile strike that spread through the Carolinas and Tennessee in the spring of 1929. The mill owners had moved to the South to escape unions, to find more subservient workers among the poor whites. But these workers rebelled against the long hours, the low pay. They particularly resented the "stretch-out"—an intensification of work. For instance, a weaver who had operated twenty-four looms and got \$18.91 a week would be raised to \$23, but he would be "stretched out" to a hundred looms and had to work at a punishing pace.

The first of the textile strikes was in Tennessee, where five hundred women in one mill walked out in protest against wages of \$9 to \$10 a week. Then at Gastonia, North Carolina, workers joined a new union, the National Textile Workers Union, led by Communists, which admitted both blacks and whites to membership. When some of them were fired, half of the two thousand workers went out on strike. An atmosphere of anti-Communism and racism built up and violence began. Textile strikes began to spread across South Carolina.

One by one the various strikes were settled, with some gains, but not at Gastonia. There, with the textile workers living in a tent colony, and refusing to renounce the Communists in their leadership, the strike went on. But strikebreakers were brought in

and the mills kept operating. Desperation grew; there were violent clashes with the police. One dark night, the chief of police was killed in a gun battle and sixteen strikers and sympathizers were indicted for murder, including Fred Beal, a Communist party organizer. Ultimately seven were tried and given sentences of from five to twenty years. They were released on bail, and left the state; the Communists escaped to Soviet Russia. Through all the defeats, the beatings, the murders, however, it was the beginning of textile mill unionism in the South.

The stock market crash of 1929, which marked the beginning of the Great Depression of the United States, came directly from wild speculation which collapsed and brought the whole economy down with it. But, as John Galbraith says in his study of that event (*The Great Crash*), behind that speculation was the fact that "the economy was fundamentally unsound." He points to very unhealthy corporate and banking structures, an unsound foreign trade, much economic misinformation, and the "bad distribution of income" (the highest 5 percent of the population received about one-third of all personal income).

A socialist critic would go further and say that the capitalist system was by its nature unsound: a system driven by the one overriding motive of corporate profit and therefore unstable, unpredictable, and blind to human needs. The result of all that: permanent depression for many of its people, and periodic crises for almost everybody. Capitalism, despite its attempts at self-reform, its organization for better control, was still in 1929 a sick and underpendable system.

After the crash, the economy was stunned, barely moving. Over five thousand banks closed and huge numbers of businesses, unable to get money, closed too. Those that continued laid off employees and cut the wages of those who remained, again and again. Industrial production fell by 50 percent, and by 1933 perhaps 15 million (no one knew exactly)—one-fourth or one-third of the labor force—were out of work. The Ford Motor Company, which in the spring of 1929 had employed 128,000 workers, was down to 37,000 by August of 1931. By the end of 1930, almost

half the 280,000 textile mill workers in New England were out of work. Former President Calvin Coolidge commented with his customary wisdom: "When more and more people are thrown out of work, unemployment results." He spoke again in early 1931, "This country is not in good condition." - *A poet in his own mind...*

Clearly, those responsible for organizing the economy did not know what had happened, were baffled by it, refused to recognize it, and found reasons other than the failure of the system. Herbert Hoover had said, not long before the crash: "We in America today are nearer to the final triumph over poverty than ever before in the history of any land." Henry Ford, in March 1931, said the crisis was here because "the average man won't really do a day's work unless he is caught and cannot get out of it. There is plenty of work to do if people would do it." A few weeks later he laid off 75,000 workers.

There were millions of tons of food around, but it was not profitable to transport it, to sell it. Warehouses were full of clothing, but people could not afford it. There were lots of houses, but they stayed empty because people couldn't pay the rent, had been evicted, and now lived in shacks in quickly formed "Hoovervilles" built on garbage dumps.

Brief glimpses of reality in the newspapers could have been multiplied by the millions: A *New York Times* story in early 1932:

After vainly trying to get a stay of dispossession until January 15 from his apartment at 46 Hancock Street in Brooklyn, yesterday, Peter J. Cornell, 48 years old, a former roofing contractor out of work and penniless, fell dead in the arms of his wife.

A doctor gave the cause of his death as heart disease, and the police said it had at least partly been caused by the bitter disappointment of a long day's fruitless attempt to prevent himself and his family being put out on the street. . . .

Cornell owed \$5 in rent in arrears and \$39 for January which his landlord required in advance. Failure to produce the money resulted in a dispossession order being served on the family yesterday and to take effect at the end of the week.

After vainly seeking assistance elsewhere, he was told during the day by the Home Relief Bureau that it would have no funds with which to help him until January 15.

A dispatch from Wisconsin to *The Nation*, in late 1932:

Throughout the middle west the tension between the farmers and authorities has been growing . . . as a result of tax and foreclosure sales. In many cases evictions have been prevented only by mass action on the part of the farmers. However, until the Cichon homestead near Elkhorn, Wisconsin, was besieged on December 6 by a host of deputy sheriffs armed with machine-guns, rifles, shotguns, and tear-gas bombs, there had been no actual violence. Max Cichon's property was auctioned off at a foreclosure sale last August, but he refused to allow either the buyer or the authorities to approach his home. He held off unwelcome visitors with a shotgun. The sheriff called upon Cichon to submit peacefully. When he refused to do so, the sheriff ordered deputies to lay down a barrage of machine-gun and rifle fire . . . Cichon is now in jail in Elkhorn, and his wife and two children, who were with him in the house, are being cared for in the county hospital. Cichon is not a trouble-maker. He enjoys the confidence of his neighbors, who only recently elected him justice of the peace of the town of Sugar Creek. That a man of his standing and disposition should go to such lengths in defying the authorities is a clear warning that we may expect further trouble in the agricultural districts unless the farmers are soon helped.

A tenement dweller on 113th Street in East Harlem wrote to Congressman Fiorello La Guardia in Washington:

X You know my condition is bad. I used to get pension from the government and they stopped. 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.