
By ROY ROENZWEIG

In the spring of 1932 Governor Franklin Roosevelt met regularly with a group of "Brain Trusters" to develop an economic program for the upcoming presidential campaign. One evening, Columbia University Professor Rexford Tugwell explained to FDR that the Depression should be blamed on the failure of business to pass on the gains of improved productivity through either higher wages or lower prices, thus causing a deficit in purchasing power. The next night, a jobless man caught Tugwell's sleeve and asked for money. Tugwell turned the man down and, as Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., has related, the Columbia professor said, "My friend, I did you a good turn last night." The panhandler "stood openmouthed."  

The tendency to view the bread and butter needs and problems of the unemployed in abstract and theoretical terms was not confined to liberal academics such as Tugwell. American radicals also had difficulties in directing their energies toward the day-to-day wants of the jobless, preferring, instead, to regard the problem as the consequence of the inherent contradictions of capitalism and thus, only to be resolved through revolution. However, whereas Tugwell could brush off a jobless man's plea for a dime, radicals could afford no such luxury. They needed to attract and maintain the support of millions of unemployed workers in order to bring about the revolution which they viewed as so vitally necessary. Yet, the quest to attract a mass base of jobless support invariably involved revolutionaries in non-revolutionary demands. Hence, they were faced with a perplexing dilemma: should

1 Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., The Crisis of the Old Order (Boston, 1957), 402.
they focus on the immediate needs of the jobless worker for relief, jobs, and food or should they concentrate on permanently eliminating unemployment, itself, through a socialist revolution? The former might lead to mass support, but no revolution, while the latter might result in neither.

The question of "immediate demands" versus "ultimate revolution" did not originate in the Great Depression. In the late nineteenth century, for example, the debate was outlined by Samuel Gompers and Daniel De Leon, with the latter insisting that, "A political party that sets up 'immediate demands' by so much blurs its 'constant demand' or goal," and the former maintaining that "The working people are in too great need of immediate improvement in their condition to allow them to forego them in the endeavor to devote their energies to an end however beautiful to contemplate."

Abraham J. Muste and his followers did not view the issue of immediate demands in terms of the polar opposites set out by Gompers and De Leon, but rather as a question of emphasis and priorities. Nevertheless, the activities of the Musteites, in organizing the unemployed point up the problems and dilemmas that faced radicals in their efforts to build mass organizations of the jobless. The case of the Musteites is of particular interest, because their own political orientation shifted substantially in the course of their efforts to organize the unemployed: beginning as vaguely defined radicals, when constituted as the Conference on Progressive Labor Action (CPLA); moving gradually to an independent Marxism with their formation of the American Workers Party (AWP); and ending up as orthodox Trotskyists after their merger with the Communist League of America (CLA) to form the Workers Party (WP). Each stage of this evolution had an impact on the Musteites' view of the proper orientation for their unemployed movement. They began with a preoccupation with immediate demands, but as they became convinced of the imminence of revolution, they started to view the unemployed movement primarily as a revolutionary instrument and a means of attracting revolutionary cadres and arousing working class consciousness.

The Conference on Progressive Labor Action was formed in May, 1929, by Socialists, trade unionists, and labor educators as a propaganda and educational organization centered around opposition to both

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the conservative leadership of the American Federation of Labor (AFL) and the "dual unionist" approach of the Communist Party (CP). However, by 1931, the CPLA had changed in program and composition; that year it adopted a revised statement of purpose which was clearly to the left of the Socialist Party (SP). The CPLA denounced the SP for its gradualism and lack of "clear working class orientation." The CPLA statement of purpose did not enunciate a specific ideological program other than a vague commitment to form a mass labor party, whose "ultimate objective" would be to establish a "workers republic." The CPLA desired to move beyond its earlier narrow preoccupation with education and propaganda to a direct involvement in both labor and political struggles. It broadly conceived of itself as "an inspiring militant rallying center" which above all would stand for action rather than theory. Significantly, Louis F. Budenz, the only real theorist in the CPLA, denounced all radical ideologies as dogmatic "Europeanisms" and "otherworldly theoretics."

Budenz urged instead an "American Approach" that would return to the radical style of the populists, Wobblies, and Debsonian Socialists; he sought "a realistic radical movement ... footloose from the broils of European radicalism."

These changes in the CPLA forced the departure of many prominent SP members, and resulted in the emergence of A. J. Muste and his followers as the dominant force in the organization. Tall and thin, Muste appeared more like the Dutch Reform minister of his earlier years, than the labor organizer who had led the 1919 Lawrence Textile Strike. After two years as head of the Amalgamated Textile Workers Union, Muste became in 1921 the Dean of the newly organized Brookwood Labor College, which he fashioned into America's foremost labor school, as well as a center for trade union progressivism. Out of Brookwood emerged talented organizers committed to an aggressive industrial unionism, fiercely loyal to Muste, and ready to implement the programs of the CPLA. A 1931 survey of 186 graduates of Brook-

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wood between 1921 and 1930 found that eighty percent of them were active in the labor movement in some capacity. Many of them were college graduates who had completed postgraduate training at Brookwood. As an example, Elmer Cope, a leading CPLAer, had studied at Ohio Wesleyan University, Swarthmore College, and Brookwood before organizing steel workers and unemployed for the CPLA. This dedicated core of hard working, fulltime activists, composed primarily of Brookwood graduates, progressive trade unionists, and unaffiliated radicals, soon constituted themselves as a new and distinct grouping on the American left. The Musteite, as Edmund Wilson succinctly observed, was a combination of two almost contradictory characteristics:

There is a Musteite type quite distinct from those of other radical groups. The Musteites differ from the Communists in maintaining the conventional dress, literate language and polite approach of intelligent middle-class people. They might be students or instructors from any college, and the influence of Muste himself has perhaps had the effect of making them a little like the students of a divinity school. On the other hand, they also differ from the truly academic radicals in possessing the conviction and courage which carry them into industrial battles and make them do thankless work and venture into situations which few middle-class people care to face.

Of course, not all Musteites fit this description. For example, Bill Truax, who was one of the most effective Musteite unemployed leaders, was originally a local United Mine Workers Union official in Ohio.4

This emerging Musteite movement sought to transform the CPLA into a powerful, independent, working class center competitive with the AFL, CP, and SP. The unemployed were seen as a possible power base for this transformation. In 1930 the CPLA had responded to the needs of the jobless with an educational campaign to promote unemployment insurance, but in 1932 the members and organizers of the CPLA aggressively began to organize the unemployed in local areas.5


A strong factor in the Musteite's decision to turn to organizing the unemployed was the successful, earlier, independent efforts of Carl Branin, a labor editor and active CPLA member. In the summer of 1931 he joined with students and teachers at the Seattle Labor College to organize the Unemployed Citizens' League (UCL), a Seattle-wide movement of several thousand jobless. Initially engaged in advocating public works jobs for the unemployed, the UCL soon turned to the concept of self-help as a means of meeting the immediate needs of its membership. By early 1932, UCL members, through barter and exchange of labor, had obtained 120,000 pounds of fish, 10,000 cords of firewood, and eight carloads of potatoes, pears, and apples. Over 6,000 families were organized into what one commentator labelled, "The Republic of the Penniless."

The CPLA closely followed the progress of the UCL and the imitations it spawned, and began to sense the potential that existed in jobless organizations. Soon local Musteite organizers began to copy the Seattle model: organizing groups around self-help and attempting to push them toward political militancy. The Musteites' first efforts were successful. Hundreds of unemployed from the small industrial and mining towns of Ohio, the steel mills of Pittsburgh, the coalfields of Eastern Pennsylvania and West Virginia, and the textile mills of North Carolina, enlisted under their banners. The Ohio unemployed proved especially eager recruits.

Throughout the history of the Unemployed Leagues (ULs)—as the Musteite groups came to be called—over half their support was concentrated in Ohio, particularly in rural areas and small industrial towns. In the summer of 1932 organizations sprung up in such places as Smith Township, Wetherfields, Hubbard, Austintown, Howland, and Belmont County. Often a group would begin with a self-help project such as sharecropping coal, but would turn to direct protest when the occasion arose. For example, the unemployed group in Smith Township used its pressure to win a more fairly administered work relief program.7


7 On Musteite interest, see: Labor Age, XX (Nov. 1931), 28; XXI (April, 1932), 8; XXI (June, 1932), 4, 6; XXI (August, 1932), 18; *Bulletin #3*, The Papers of Ernest Rice McKinney, Archives of Industrial Society, University of Pittsburgh
At the CPLA convention in September, 1932, the National Executive Committee proudly reported that during the previous six months, "in some instances through branches of the CPLA or individual members, some notable experiments in the building of organizations for the unemployed have been carried through." Even though the CPLA exerted little formal control on either their organizers or the unemployed groups, both followed the general proposals of Louis Budenz, the CPLA's organizational and strategic mastermind. Budenz viewed the Unemployed Leagues as an opportunity to experiment with the CPLA's non-sectarian progressivism and his own "American Approach" doctrine. He sought to attract the largest possible number of jobless workers by: (1) opening the groups to "all the unemployed regardless of their belief"; (2) identifying the Leagues with popular patriotic symbols, such as the Rattlesnake Flag and the slogan "Don't Tread on Me"; (3) utilizing aggressive, organizing techniques—much in the style of an evangelistic crusade; (4) relying on and developing local leadership and initiative; (5) appealing to the immediate needs of the unemployed for food, clothing and shelter; and (6) insuring that the demands of the Unemployed Leagues grew out of the experiences of the jobless themselves. Budenz believed that once the unemployed were organized both according to these guidelines and under the proper leadership, it would only be a matter of time before they would "learn out of their joint endeavors the necessity for marching forward to greater power"; they would then adopt militant mass action tactics and support the Musteite conception of a Farmer-Labor Party. While other unemployed groups condemned self-help as "organized picking in garbage cans," Budenz initially condemned this approach, calling it "a cement . . . to keep the organization together . . . [that would] push the members into further action." 

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With some local variations the Unemployed Leagues generally evolved into the image Budenz and the Musteites had envisioned. Ultimately most local groups renounced self-help in favor of militant protest since self-help never provided more than a fraction of their economic needs. One of the most popular kinds of protests employed by the Leagues was the eviction fight. A story in the Philadelphia Record illustrates how concerted action by League members stopped evictions:

Constable Dugel went into Kensington yesterday with papers, badge and everything necessary for an eviction. As Dugel drove up to the house in his car, something made him think of the sad fate of Constables Casey and Burns who preceded him in a Kensington eviction case and were rescued from a mob by a riot squad. In front of the home a man was standing on a soap box. Dugel paused to listen. "Are we going to stand by while the tools of capitalism throw us out of our homes?" the speaker shouted; a thundering "NO" answered him. . . . The crowd roared—husky men rolled up their sleeves—Constable Dugel shuddered and then continued on his way.

League members often would return the furniture of an evicted family or would even help them set up housekeeping in the street. Sometimes a sustained fight against evictions brought a temporary halt to all dispossessions in a locality, as was the case in Columbus, Ohio in the summer of 1933.9

Most of the Leagues developed a regular organizational structure and involved their members in a variety of day-to-day activities. League meetings were held weekly and usually consisted of officers' reports, a speech, a discussion of pressing issues, and a social activity. Each local had numerous committees, such as grievance, relief work, housing, education, entertainment, and gas and electric. The most important of these, the grievance committees functioned as the union representative of relief recipients. In response to complaints of inadequate relief ULers would confront local relief officials with successively larger delegations and ultimately, sit-ins or mass demonstrations in order to redress the grievances of one individual. When more state aid was needed the Leagues would lead a march on the State Capital. In August, 1933, 7,000 jobless led by Ohio Unemployed League officials marched on

the State House in Columbus.  

With the disappearance of self-help the Leagues utilized social and educational activities as a means of keeping the groups together. Picnics, dances, and other social gatherings frequently offered the only entertainment for penniless unemployed workers. Educational activities furnished an opportunity for the Musteites to try to indoctrinate the unemployed with more radical political and economic ideas. In Toledo and Columbus, Ohio and Hudnall, West Virginia, "Workers' Schools" were established by the Leagues. Yet, the overall orientation of the Leagues was toward concrete activity to better the living conditions of the jobless. Ernest McKinney, a Pittsburgh Musteite and unemployed leader, has recalled:

We knew . . . that when one is dealing with masses of people . . . something has to be done concretely that benefits the members. . . . Therefore, we had a very practical program in the unemployed league. We actually got them placed on relief, we actually kept them on relief. . . . We got food orders for them, we supplied them with concrete things, with food, clothing, and shelter, the basic demand of the masses of the people.  

The first half of 1933 was a turbulent period for America, the Musteites, and the Leagues. The American economy came to a near standstill in the weeks preceding Roosevelt's inauguration, and even after March 4th, radical revolution seemed as likely as liberal reform. The Musteites, believing that "the nation was in a state of civil war," began seriously to consider revolution as a viable prospect. Both Muste and his close followers left Brookwood after the Board of Directors rejected his proposal to enlist the labor college in the services of "a realistically revolutionary vanguard," i.e., the CPLA. For the Leagues, the spring of 1933 represented the apex of their existence, in numbers and influence. Although rank-and-file League members viewed Roosevelt less suspiciously than did the Musteites, in the interim rank-and-filers stood by the Leagues and the concrete gains they had won for them. The New Republic reported that, "One protest movement that continues to grow, despite the Roosevelt recovery program, is that of the Unemployed Leagues."  

10 Interview with Arnold Johnson, New York City, March 15, 1973; Johnson, "Give Us Relief," 7; Reminiscences of McKinney, 22.  
Beginning in January, 1933, the Musteites concentrated on consolidating the local Leagues into state federations as a prelude to the establishment of a national body. By means of a series of conferences and conventions between October, 1932, and February, 1933, the Ohio Unemployed League was established as a permanent functioning body with Musteites in virtually all leadership positions. The Ohio Leagues committed themselves to a simple, pragmatic program of demands, which included a minimum relief budget of $18.35 per week for a family of five, a ban on cut-offs of gas, electric or water, and a minimum wage of forty cents per hour for relief work. Efforts to establish a statewide League in Pennsylvania were somewhat less successful because of factional conflicts with the SP. 13

However, with the exception of Ohio, where the Leagues claimed 100,000 members in 187 branches, and of Pennsylvania, where they claimed 40-50,000 adherents, the Leagues failed to garner broad national support. Although statewide organizations were set up in West Virginia, North Carolina, and New Jersey, these other Leagues barely totalled 10,000 members. In the spring of 1933, the Leagues remained basically a regional movement; nonetheless, the Musteites forged ahead with their plans for a nationwide unemployed movement.

In line with this determination the CPLA in March, 1933, officially endorsed the directions that the Leagues had taken in Ohio, and chose Columbus as the headquarters for the planned National Unemployed League (NUL) and the site of the forthcoming July 4th Founding Convention. Over 800 delegates from thirteen states convened in the Ohio State Fair Grounds at Columbus on July 3, 1933. The delegates represented a wide range of political persuasions, including Musteites, Socialists, Communists, some who were alleged to be Klu Klux Klanners, and many who combined a radical approach to the problems of the unemployed with extreme patriotism and anti-communism. A. J. Muste

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wrote of the latter group: "They believe that this country is essentially alright, the only trouble is that bankers and bosses are in control and misusing them."14

Unwilling to implement all of Budenz's Americanist rhetoric, the Musteites refused to open the convention with a prayer and the singing of the Star Spangled Banner. This act incensed many of the more conservative and patriotic delegates, and the discontent increased when delegates learned of plans for closer cooperation with the foundering Communist-led Unemployed Councils. Earlier in the year leaders of the Councils and the Leagues had met and tentatively agreed to work toward unity, but the Musteite leaders, "had not really prepared the membership of the Leagues politically or ideologically for this united front," as one of them has noted.17 Both the CPLA and the Leagues had been built partially on opposition to the Communists, but by mid-1933 the Musteite leadership saw practical and ideological justifications for a united front; however, the rank-and-file membership of the Leagues did not so quickly abandon their deepseated anti-communist sentiments.18

Soon after the opening of the convention, the patriotic delegates seized on a chance remark as "an insult to the flag," and a melee broke out. During the scuffle, the "Stars and Stripes" group took control of the podium. Afterwards numerous speakers denounced communism, praised the American way, and yet, at the same time, urged a militant fight for the rights of the jobless. The session closed with the singing of the Star Spangled Banner and, as one participant later reported, "a warning to all 'Reds' to stay away from the fairgrounds on the next day, July 4." In one brief day, the CPLA dream of an American revolutionary movement had turned into a nativist nightmare.16


The Musteites managed to regain control of the convention the very next day by a strong counterattack on their opposition. They discredited the patriotic group in the eyes of many uncommitted delegates by alleging that its leader was a professional strikebreaker. But they took no chance of a further revolt and "sugarcoated" the preamble to the NUL constitution, which originally called for the overthrow of the existing economic system. The Musteites then won enthusiastic support for their "Declaration of Workers and Farmers Rights." Apart from its radical ideas, the document was written in the patriotic language of the Declaration of Independence:

When, in a nation possessing unlimited resources, along with the greatest industrial and transportation equipment the world has ever known, there develops a condition wherein millions of citizens are forced into dire destitution and starvation through being denied . . . access to the tools of production, then it becomes necessary to change these conditions.

On the third and final day of the convention the Musteites reaffirmed their control over the NUL in electing CPLA members to six of the seven top positions in the NUL. The officers were: Anthony Ramuglia, President; Arnold Johnson, Secretary; Bill Truax, First Vice-President; Elmer Cope, Second Vice-President; Beulah Carter (North Carolina organizer of textile workers and jobless and a Brookwood graduate), Third Vice-President; A. D. Allen (a West Virginia unemployed organizer and the only non-Musteite), Fourth Vice-President; and Karl Lore, Treasurer.17

Despite the successful convention, the Leagues never expanded beyond the size they had attained by mid-1933. Lack of funding, political repression, the changing political climate, the peculiar nature of unemployed groups, and the shifting interests of the Musteites were, in effect, the causes for this arrested development.

The new national officers of the NUL faced an empty treasury and even lacked funds to buy office supplies or meals for themselves. "Letters of appeal to friends," they later reported, "remained on the desk for days because we did not have postage stamps." The financial crisis sharply curtailed plans to hold regional conventions to expand the NUL. In September, Budenz, who had taken the post of director of organization for the NUL, and Munsey Gleaton, a recent college grad-

uate working as a CPLA organizer, went to Illinois to prepare for a Mississippi Valley Area Conference of Unemployed Leagues. They made some initial progress but, "financial burdens brought the campaign to a standstill." Requests by unemployed associations in California, Colorado, Idaho, and Wyoming to the NUL for special organizers to help transform self-help enterprises into mass pressure organizations went unanswered. The NUL lacked not only sufficient organizers, but also the funds to pay the marginal expenses of those available. Bill Presswood, a North Carolina organizer of the unemployed, noted the difficulty of expanding the Leagues: "We don't have any way of getting around and all of us are so poor that we can't buy gas even when we have a car."18

Hostility from local officials also hampered NUL organizing efforts in some areas. For example, a relief-work strike resulted in the arrests of seventeen members of the High Point, North Carolina Unemployed League on a variety of spurious charges, including inciting to riot and assault with intent to kill. In Pittsburgh ten to twenty-five mounted police assembled before demonstrations to intimidate workers to stay away. However, it was fear of repression, not repression itself, that deterred the unemployed from joining the Leagues in the first place. Sociologist E. W. Bakke learned in talking to New Haven jobless that they had discovered in their working days that radicalism was a "sure-fire demoter," and "cannot forget it now."19

The impact of the New Deal on the success of the ULs is difficult to assess. Probably by the latter half of 1933 New Deal welfare programs had begun to erode the membership base of the Leagues. The Federal Emergency Relief Administration slightly improved local relief, and thus cut into one source of jobless discontent. Of much greater importance was the Civil Works Administration, which employed over four million at its peak in mid-January, 1934. The New Deal did not wipe out the problems of the unemployed, but the small gains and the more optimistic tone of Roosevelt's administration, as compared to Hoover's "interregnum of despair," probably helped to pacify some jobless and made them less likely recruits for the Leagues.20

19 *Federated Press, July 26, 1933; Labor Action, August 23, 1933, 1; Sept. 15, 1933, 1; Reminiscences of McKinney, 39. For other instances of conflict with authorities see: *Federated Press, July 17, 1933, August 27, 1933. E. W. Bakke, *Citizen Without Work* (New Haven, 1940), 65.
Another problem that the Leagues faced was the inherent difficulty of organizing the unemployed. The data from numerous psychological and sociological studies of the thirties' jobless indicate that the unemployed offered fertile ground neither to radical agitation nor to organizational efforts of any sort. The jobless worker's loss of morale and self confidence, development of feelings of inferiority and withdrawal from outside contacts with society, acted as a major barrier to the success of all radical jobless groups. Lazarfeld, Jahoda, and Zeisel, in their classic study of the unemployed of Marienthal, Austria, classified the jobless in three general categories—the resigned, 70%; the broken, 7%; and the unbroken, 23%. But, even among those American unemployed "unbroken" by the pressures of unemployment many expressed their discontent in ways other than organized political protest: forming self-help groups; becoming tramps; and stealing (either individually or in organized groups as in the coal bootlegging industry). Finally, most unemployed groups were short-lived and unstable due to a continual churning of members and leaders.21

Despite these handicaps, the Leagues continued to achieve in limited local ways some of the immediate needs of members: securing better wages, hours, and conditions on work relief projects; halting hundreds of evictions; obtaining more for those on relief; fighting corruption in relief administration; demonstrating for more state assistance to the unemployed; and propagandizing for unemployment insurance. Wide variations in the political orientations of the local groups complemented the diversity of activities that the Leagues pursued. As NUL President Anthony Ramuglia (a Brookwood graduate and a former business agent for the Amalgamated Clothing Workers) commented: "It is a strag-

gling army, but it is moving forward all the time.”

At the same time that the Leagues were straggling forward, the Musteities, believing that revolution was imminent, were undergoing important changes. In his autobiography A. J. Muste explained that “under the pressure of the economic collapse and other national and international developments, in the early 30s, the elements which had composed the CPLA . . . were driven to a more radical theoretical position,” and had decided to transform it into a revolutionary political party. In December, 1933, the CPLA was dissolved, and in its place was launched the American Workers Party (AWP). Unlike the CPLA, which lacked a clear ideology, the AWP was unquestionably Marxist and in its detailed program set out a definite scenario of the road to socialism through the establishment of democratic workers councils.

Because of its revolutionary orientation, the AWP had different views of the Unemployed Leagues than did its predecessor. The AWP’s program declared that all Party activities “must have a political orientation.” Consequently, those Musteites active in the Leagues were instructed to insure that all demands be “ultimately connected with the question of who holds state power,” and directed “against the property relations peculiar to the present form of society.” Moreover, League Musteites were urged to recruit aggressively the jobless for membership in the AWP.

Although the NUL and the AWP were theoretically two distinct and independent organizations, in practice they were almost identical, especially at the top levels. Ten of the twenty-five members of the Provisional Organizing Committee of the AWP led and organized Leagues on a full-time basis. Thus, given the AWP statements on the proper conduct for Musteites active in the Leagues and the substantial ties

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22 See, for example, Labor Action, Sept. 15, 1933; “Relief Workers Strike,” Voice of the Unemployed, August 1, 1933 (on a Toledo strike); and Federated Press, March 31, 1933, April 17, 1933 (on a North Carolina strike); Federated Press, February 10, 1933 (Philadelphia); Federated Press, June 13, 1932 (West Virginia); “Proceedings of Second Convention,” 25 (West Virginia); Federated Press, July 24, 1933 (Pittsburgh); “Proceedings of Second Convention,” 17 (Indiana); Federated Press, July 12, 1932 (Pennsylvania); Reminiscences of McKinney, 22 (Ohio); Muste, “Columbus Convention,” 3; Anthony Ramuglia, “The Unemployed Incorporate,” New Republic, LXXVII (January 10, 1934), 244-6.

23 Muste, “Sketches,” 162; “Minutes of the NEC of the CPLA, December 3, 1933,” Hardman Papers, NYU; Provisional Organizing Committee of the AWP, Toward an American Revolutionary Movement (New York, 1934), available at Tamiment Institute Library, NYU. Muste has written that the new AWP program was "based on the Marxist philosophy of class struggle though not on Marxism-Leninism as a metaphysical doctrine." Muste, "Sketches." See also J. B. S. Hardman, "What Kind of Party," Labor Action, December 20, 1933.

24 Towards an American Revolutionary Movement, 35-6, 40.
between the two groups, the creation of the AWP altered, at the very minimum, the rhetoric of the League. For example, at the founding convention of the Pennsylvania Unemployed League in January, 1934, Musteites, such as Larry Heimbach and Louis Budenz, openly propagandized on behalf of the AWP’s program and won passage of a resolution instructing the Leagues to “carry on education toward the abolition of the entire capitalist system.” At a June gathering of the same group, President Ramuglia told the delegates: “We are no longer fighting for food only, we are fighting to abolish the system of big shots which has forced all of us into a permanent state of unemployment.”

Nevertheless, the transformation from the CPLA to the AWP did not alter the Leagues in the manner that the Musteites had anticipated. They neither quickly moved the rank-and-file League members past a concern with limited immediate needs, nor recruited them into the revolutionary American Workers Party. Instead the newly reorganized Musteites diverted the energies of many of their organizers away from the Leagues (toward the building of the AWP), and alienated some of the more conservative unemployed. The formation of the AWP further exacerbated the difficulties facing the Leagues, such as lack of funding, the appeal of the New Deal, and the reluctance of the unemployed to work through organizations. Opportunities to organize new Leagues or gain affiliation from existing groups in Michigan, Minnesota, Alabama, Wisconsin, Tennessee and Texas were lost because of a lack of organizers and funds.

Because the Musteites realized that the Leagues would not provide a broad enough base for the revolution they expected to foster, they sought to use them as a means by which to win influence over employed workers. In fact, both the Unemployed Leagues and the Unemployed Councils always had urged the jobless to join in strike activities, especially to prevent scabbing by other workers. In most cases their efforts were wasted as the unemployed showed little interest in fighting for anything other than relief and jobs. But in the Spring of 1934 some members of the Unemployed Leagues moved beyond this “relief consciousness” and played a crucial role in the Toledo Auto-Lite strike, one of the most important strikes of the thirties.

In April, 1934, for the second time in three months, AFL Federal Local Union #18384 struck the Toledo Electric Auto-Lite Company,

25 Labor Action, March 1, 1934, 2, June 15, 1934, 1.
a major auto parts manufacturer, and two of its affiliates. Since the local lacked unanimous support, its leadership understood that only mass picketing would prevent strikebreaking and the loss of the strike. However, a restraining order, issued on April 18th limited picketing to twenty-five at each of the two gates, and also prohibited any picketing by the Lucas County Unemployed League, which had been helping the union block the gates. While the union contested the restraining order in the courts, the owners openly brought in scabs and the strike faltered.27

The Lucas County League decided to take immediate action. On May 7th, at the urging of the top AWP leadership two young leaders of the League (Ted Selander and Sam Pollock) and members of the AWP defied the injunction, were arrested together with two members of the union, and were charged with contempt of court. Released on a suspended sentence, after being warned not to resume picketing, they marched directly from the courthouse to the picket line. More arrests were made a few days later and Selander and Pollock were joined in jail by 44 others, mostly from the Unemployed League. During their trial, cheering and singing League members packed the courtroom. The judge attempted to sentence just five of the leaders, but the other forty-one prisoners refused, demanding “forty-six or none!” The judge consequently issued no decision and Selander and Pollock led the crowd back to the picket line.28

This was the turning point of the strike. “From this point forward,” according to labor historian Sidney Fine, “the strike which had appeared lost was aggressively pursued.” The strike soon moved into a new and bloody stage and two were killed (including one jobless worker) in the ensuing six days of intense fighting with police and national guardsmen.


28 Muste, "Toledo," 640; Bernstein, Turbulent Years, 22.
Ultimately a settlement was reached which marked a major victory for the strikers.\textsuperscript{29}

According to most accounts, the Unemployed League played a central role in the strike. The unemployed of Toledo courageously fought not for higher relief and jobs, but to aid the struggle of their "employed brothers." Publisher Roy Howard summarized the significance of the strike in a letter to FDR's Secretary, Louis Howe:

The point about Toledo was this: that it was nothing new to see organized unemployed appear in the streets, fight police and raise hell in general. But usually they do this for their own ends, to protest unemployment or relief conditions. At Toledo they appeared on the picket line to help striking employees win a strike, tho you would expect their interest would lie the other way—that is going in and getting the jobs the other men had laid down.\textsuperscript{30}

The bloody strike rekindled the Musteites' hope for imminent revolution and reinforced the revolutionary stance that they had taken in forming the AWP. As a result, they continued their fervent efforts to transform the NUL into an openly revolutionary movement, and at the second NUL convention, held in the summer of 1934, called for "the abolition of the Capitalist system," and won endorsement of "a cooperative commonwealth based on a workers' and farmers democracy." These resolutions were passed without dispute since most of those who had "revolted" at the 1933 convention had left the Leagues and only the most politically committed members were present.\textsuperscript{31}

Many in the AWP complained that the Leagues remained insufficiently radical and class conscious, in spite of the leftist pronouncements endorsed at the convention. Muste, for example, exhorted AWP members to exert greater ideological influence on the Leagues, so as to combat the tendency of unemployed groups to become "devoted to mere self preservation; [and] to become 'pure and simple' unions of the unemployed, bargaining for favors with relief authorities." He urged that the Leagues follow the example of Toledo and serve as "the shock troops in today's struggles." Muste and his followers had lost interest in winning small, specific gains for the jobless; they wanted to transform the Unemployed League into the vanguard of a revolutionary upheaval.\textsuperscript{32}

\textsuperscript{29} Fine, \textit{Automobile}, 282; Bernstein, \textit{Turbulent Years}, 228.
\textsuperscript{30} Haskell, "Ideological Radicals," 169.
\textsuperscript{31} "Proceedings of the Second NUL Convention," 6, 29, 34, passim.
This new and more revolutionary view was reflected in the merger of the AWP with the American Trotskyist Communist League of America (CLA) in December, 1934—the final stage in the gradual evolution of the Musteites from the reformist concerns of early CPLA days to revolutionary preoccupations.

The Trotskyists, a small theoretically oriented group, had decided to merge with the Musteites, in order to expand their influence among the masses, especially among the unemployed. Most Musteites in early 1934 were hostile to the Trotskyist overtures because they suspected the Trotskyists of "theoretical dogmatism." Still the amalgamation was achieved within the year, primarily due to the support of Muste and intellectuals, such as NYU Professors Sidney Hook and James Burnham, who dominated the New York branch of the AWP which conducted the merger negotiations. In areas outside of New York City and among those active in the unemployed movement, there was "opposition and plenty of it," according to Louis Breier, a leader of the Allentown League. But the opponents of the merger lacked organization and acquiesced to the wishes of Muste and the New York intellectuals to form the Workers Party (WP) out of the existing Musteite and Trotskyist groups.33

In reality the formation of the Workers Party represented more of an absorption of the AWP than a merger of that group with the Trotskyists. The WP's declaration of principles reveals the Musteites had abandoned their independent Marxism for a more orthodox Marxist-Leninist-Trotskyist position. Laden with the radical jargon that the Musteites had previously tried to avoid, the Declaration makes no use of Budenz's "American Approach." Moreover, it endorses the dictatorship of the proletariat through the revolutionary party—a position the AWP had previously shunned in its call for "Workers Democracy."34

The Workers Party viewed itself as a Bolshevik party, and as such,
was patently much more concerned with preparations for revolutionary struggle than with the day to day needs of the jobless. The latter, it was thought, would be met when the former was achieved. The new party's preoccupation with intense factional fighting testifies to its overriding concern with revolutionary strategy. The Oehlerite faction, led by Trotskyists Hugo Oehler and Tom Stamm embarked on a "Bolshevization" program to prevent the Musterites, whom they dubbed "right reformists," from corrupting the revolutionary purity of American Trotskyism. Even after the expulsion of the Oehlerites in October, 1935, sectarian warfare continued between Musterites, Cannonites, Weberites, Abernites, and various other factional groups. The Musterites were charged with "warming over the cold and soggy potatoes of Oehlerism." The burning issue that divided the WP was not how to organize the unemployed, but rather "The International Question:" how to interpret the "French Turn." The "French Turn" took its name from the maneuver in which the French Trotskyists, in 1934, with the advice and consent of Trotsky, dissolved their organization and joined the French Socialist Party (SFIO). Disagreement over the value of this maneuver in America was at the root of much of the factionalism in the WP. Oehler, Muste, Weber, among others opposed the "French Turn," while Cannon and Schachtman (the founders of American Trotskyism) vigorously supported it.35

Musterite organizers, who came to the March, 1935, Active Workers Conference of the WP, and who expected to discuss organization of the unemployed, instead were subjected to what Trotskyist leader James Cannon remembers as "an unrestrained free-for-all factional fight":

It was a factional shambles such as I had never seen before in such a setting. Forty or fifty innocent field workers, with little or no experience in party politics or caucuses, who had come there looking for a little guidance in their practical work, were treated to discussions and arguments and factional denunciations, lasting all day and all night.

Such factionalism was not compatible with organizing efforts. Arnold Johnson, and two other active unemployed organizers, Bill Reich and Winslow Hallett, who quit the WP in 1936 to join the CP, charged

that "the once militant growing and effective National Unemployed League lies handicapped. . . . There is not one section of the mass movement that has not been injured by these recriminations."  

In the early days of the CPLA the Musteites sought to rally unemployed workers in the hope that they eventually might support militant labor action and perhaps a Farmer-Labor Party. With the formation of the WP, they began to see ULs predominantly as revolutionary instruments of their Party. A resolution of the WP Political Committee urged the establishment of "systematically" functioning party factions within the ULs, "so as to advance the class consciousness of the unemployed workers . . . to politicalize their activities . . . [and to] educate them in the historic, political tasks of the proletariat." More specifically, the October, 1935, WP Plenum, the only conference to even discuss the unemployed, attacked the Leagues for their narrow focus on immediate demands and held that:

The next step in the development of the unemployed movement must be an increased educational and agitational campaign throughout to root the organizations solidly in the principles of the class struggle.

Party organizers must be sent into the organizations to propagate the WP mass organization line and raise the political level in an organized way. The unemployed movement today is one of the most fruitful fields for recruiting members into the WP.  

The WP leaders never had a serious basis for transforming the Leagues into revolutionary organizations. The attempt to do so served only to alienate many of the remaining members and to dissipate the energies of the leaders. Those ULs that did continue to function still retained the same immediate demands orientation, but the types of activities that they pursued shifted slightly. Relief payments were now fairly steady and evictions were much less frequent. Unemployed activities concentrated chiefly on the jobless worker as government employee. In late 1935 and early 1936 the NUL took part in many of the strikes that were called against WPA projects over demands for union wage scales. A few local Leagues participated in strikes, such as one against the Premier Pajama Company of New Haven, but neither

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57 "Political Committee Resolution on Building the American Section of the Fourth International, October, 1935," SWP Papers, SHSW; "The Internal Situation on the WP—Resolution on Unemployment," (mimeographed), WP File, Tamiment Institute Library, NYU.
the strikes nor the League participation was of much consequence. At the national level, the only activities were sending a letter to Roosevelt condemning the proposed WPA bill and dispatching a meager picket line of ten to the White House over the same issue. A march on Washington, D.C. never materialized, although it had been officially announced. Many of the local Leagues in Ohio, Pennsylvania, West Virginia, North Carolina and elsewhere persisted, but at a much diminished level—membership was probably less than one-third of the peak reached in mid-1933.  

Nevertheless, the decline in the ULs can probably be blamed more on external factors than on changes within the Musteite movement. Local relief administration had improved substantially due to federal government assistance. According to one contemporary observer: "As social responsibility for the care of the unemployed began to be accepted, the unemployed organizations tended to become superfluous." The reduction in joblessness from 15.1 million in March, 1933 to about 10 million in 1934 and 1935 and the federal work relief programs (the WPA employed about three million) reduced the potential constituency for the Leagues. The organization of WPA workers required a national body that could deal with officials in Washington, not a regional group such as the NUL. The League lacked the clout of the Workers Alliance, the Socialists’ unemployed movement, and the Communist Unemployed Councils, both of which had affiliates throughout the country. Finally, other longstanding difficulties, such as lack of funding, repression, and the instability of jobless groups, also hastened the decline of the NUL.  

In April, 1936, the weakened NUL merged with the Socialist-led Workers Alliance and Communist Unemployed Councils to form a new, unified unemployed movement, known as the Workers Alliance of America. From the viewpoint of the Workers Party, the basic reason for the merger was not to strengthen the unemployed movement, but to facilitate the entrance of the WP into the SP under the worldwide Trotskyist policy of the "French Turn." The merger also reflected com-

39 Eleanor Kahn, "Organizations of Unemployed Workers as a Factor in the American Labor Movement" (unpublished M.A. Thesis, University of Wisconsin, 1934), 110; Bernstein, "Unemployment in the Great Depression," 41; Leuchtenberg, FDR, 130.
plex changes in SP and CP policies. The CP had by this time shifted
to its popular front policy and it sought all forms of unity with the
Socialists, particularly with the Workers Alliance. The Socialist position
on cooperation with the Communists was in a state of flux at the time
and while the SP National Executive Committee did not officially san-
tion united fronts with the CP, some Socialist groups were moving in
that direction. Given this context, the Workers Alliance could follow
its own inclinations toward unity. Moreover, when the "Old Guard" split from the SP in June, 1936, there was no longer any organized
opposition to a Socialist-Communist coalition in the Workers Alli-
ance.40
To the disillusionment of the rank-and-file and the local leadership,
the merger was accompanied by intense infighting between Ernest Mc-
Kinney who wanted to maintain a separate, independent unemployed
movement, Tony Ramuglia and Ted Selander who favored the amalga-
mation strategy, and Arnold Johnson who had come to support the
Communist position and wanted the merger to be accomplished in
a manner that would not injure the standing of the Unemployed Coun-
cils.41
The NUL entered the Workers Alliance in a state of confusion
and disarray; as a result the Muste group was allotted only two seats on
an executive board of 27. When the Unemployed Councils joined a few
weeks later, they got seven seats and some independent groups got
three. In fact, the small representation given to the NUL was justifiable
in terms of the negligible role it played in the Workers Alliance. Labor
historian and activist Sidney Lens comments that after the merger, the
Leagues "for all practical purposes were never heard of again." By
1936 the NUL had lost most of its former adherents, and even those
that remained were never really integrated into the Workers Alliance.
Furthermore, the majority of the effective organizers who had started
the League in 1932 and 1933 had dropped out of organizing the un-
employed by the end of 1936, because of disenchantment with fac-
tionalism, involvement with new political activities, and a shift to new

40 Interview with McKinney, Dec. 15, 1972; Bernard Johnpoll, Pacifist's Progress
(Chicago, 1970), 142, 161-2; Murray Seidler, Norman Thomas—Respectable Rebel
(Syracuse, 1961), 154-6; Bell, Marxist Socialism, 170.
41 Arnold Johnson to Bill Truax, March 11, 1936; Johnson, "Statement to the Locals
and Membership of the NUL, March 30, 1936; Ramuglia, Selander, and McKinney;
"Letter to Members of the National Committee of the NUL, March 5, 1936,"
Johnson to Benjamin, March 11, 1936, March 12, 1936, March 19, 1936, March 31,
1936, April 1, 1936; all in Personal Papers of Herbert Benjamin (in Mr. Benjamin's
possession).
tasks, such as helping to organize for the Committee for Industrial Organization. This development spelled the end of the Musteite unemployed movement. Soon after the WP entry into the SP under the "French Turn" policy, Muste experienced a revelation in a Parisian church and returned to Christian pacifism. In 1935, Budenz left the Musteites and joined the Communist Party (where the popular front allowed him to again promote his "American Approach"). After ten years of prominence in the CP, he returned to his boyhood Catholicism. A few years later he returned to the limelight as a top informer for HUAC. Ernest McKinney became an organizer for the Steel Workers Organizing Committee almost immediately after the merger. Elmer Cope took a Masters Degree at Western Reserve between 1935 and 1936, but soon returned to trade union work and eventually became a top Steel Workers official. Sam Pollock of Toledo also turned to trade union work and became a top official of the Butchers Union. Arnold Johnson was one of the few to continue organizing the unemployed; he became head of the Ohio Workers Alliance. Numerous other League activists played important roles in the labor movement.42

Much of the history of the NUL revolved around the complex interplay between a committed and talented group of radical activists and their rank-and-file unemployed constituency. The Musteite leaders continually grappled with the question of how revolutionaries should build an unemployed movement or any other mass organization—should they attempt to win support by focusing on "reformist," immediate demands or by propagandizing around ultimate, revolutionary goals? Should they tell the jobless that they could unite and win adequate relief and unemployment insurance or should they insist that better conditions were only possible through the overthrow of capitalism?

Initially, the Musteites concentrated principally on immediate demands in their attempts to mobilize the jobless. Since they lacked an explicit revolutionary ideology of their own there seemed to be little point in attempting to impose one on the jobless. Moreover, the ideologists of the Musteite movement, particularly Budenz, saw this flexible, undogmatic, reformist approach as the only correct road to socialism. Unlike trade unionists, middle-class reformers, and right-wing socialists who saw immediate demands as an end unto themselves, the Musteites

42 "Internal Memo on Unemployed Unity Convention;" "Discussion on Unemployed Convention," both in Benjamin Papers; Sidney Lens, Left, Right and Center (Hinsdale, Ill., 1949), 263; Robinson, "Traveler"; Herbert Packer, Ex-Communist Witnesses (Standford, 1962), Reminiscences of McKinney, 19.
perceived these reformist demands as a means of achieving their ultimate goal of socialist revolution. They believed that if they approached the jobless on a broad, non-sectarian basis and spoke to them in their own language, they would win widespread support. Once in the unemployed organizations, the Musteites theorized, the jobless would be "educated" into the more radical thinking of the leadership. They felt that it was acceptable to submerge their own radicalism to attract a wider mass following, since this following would inevitably acquire the radical coloration of the leadership.

The willingness of the Musteites to meet the unemployed on the common ground of immediate demands enabled them to build a strong and effective unemployed movement under their own auspices. The Leagues helped to improve concretely the living conditions of the jobless—relief was increased, the relief structure was made more humane and just, work relief jobs were created, and evictions were halted. They also helped to preserve the self-respect and morale of their idle members. Through membership in the ULs, the jobless realized that they were not alone and were not to blame for their condition. In addition, the educational, social, and political activities of the Leagues helped to fill the empty days of many unemployed workers. Finally, the NUL provided a school for training in the labor movement. The hundreds of League locals all had presidents, secretaries, treasurers, and committee chairpersons. The men and women who took these posts acquired valuable practice in the arts of leadership, speaking and organizing. When they returned to work, many of these same people took up posts as local or even national union leaders. Even among the rank-and-file in the NUL, many for the first time saw the possibilities of organized action. In the opinion of one pair of historians the "left wingers, through their unemployed unions, introduced to vast numbers of workers the concept of organization as a strategic weapon for the solution of economic and social problems."43

None of these achievements can be properly classified as "revolutionary." Basically, the NUL had forced the system to make accommodations to the immediate needs of the unemployed; it had not overthrown the system itself. However, beginning in 1934 the Musteites defined themselves as revolutionaries, though the only mass movement that they led could be best described as reformist. To be sure, the un-

employed had moved from self-help to involvement in many militant mass actions. But the jobless had not adopted the kind of class conscious radicalism that the Musteites had expected them to embrace. Most unemployed showed themselves to be more interested in jobs and relief than in social revolution.

The expectation that the jobless would move from immediate demands to ultimate revolution was based on the mistaken assumption that American society was headed for a total collapse, and the demands of the unemployed would be completely ignored. Although the gains won under the New Deal were often pitifully small and excluded large numbers of workers, they were substantial enough to avert a total rejection of the capitalist system. As Joseph Starobin, former Daily Worker foreign editor turned political scientist, has pointed out in a different context, "the struggle for immediate demands had its perils. It could lead to the reform of the system and not necessarily its revolutionary overthrow."

The one major exception to the "pure and simple NULism" that permeated the Leagues was the Toledo strike. There the unemployed had struggled, not on behalf of their own immediate needs, but in the larger interests of work class solidarity. Toledo, for the Musteites, signified the possibilities for transforming the Leagues into revolutionary cadres. But the militant class consciousness of the Toledo unemployed was not reproduced elsewhere.

Between 1934 and 1936 the Musteites sought to resolve the tensions and contradictions of revolutionary leadership in a mass reformist movement by trying to turn that mass movement into an explicitly revolutionary body. They abandoned their previous undogmatic appeal and flexible approach, because they believed that as revolutionaries the mass movements that they led must also be clearly revolutionary in orientation. Revolutionary purity became more important than mass influence. Thus, they devoted their energies to raising the "political level" of the Leagues, rather than signing up new members. However, in attempting to make the ULs the shock troops of revolution, they ignored the fact that most of the unemployed of the thirties were not prepared to enlist in a revolutionary movement.

Confronted with the vexing question of how revolutionaries should act in mass movements, the Musteites tried out two different approaches: (1) organizing on a broad, non-political, "immediate de-

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mands' basis, (2) attempting to make their mass movement precisely mirror the views of its leading members. Using the first approach they built an unemployed movement, but not a revolution. Using the second, they built neither. Obviously, this strategic and ideological shift was not the sole cause of the decline of the Leagues. Factionalism, the coming of the second New Deal, governmental repression, and the growing apathy of the long-term unemployed also contributed to their demise. Basically, the "failure" of the Musteites must be viewed in terms of the larger dilemma of being revolutionaries in a non-revolutionary period.

The Musteites did not bring about the new American revolution that they had hoped for, but they did help to improve the lot of the unemployed worker. Their failure at the first in no way diminishes the solid and resolute fight they led on behalf of the second. In the thirties, American radicals—Musteites, Communists, Socialists, Trotskyists, etc. —fought beside and for the "forgotten man," while others merely talked about him. As A. J. Muste later recalled: "When you looked out on the scene of misery and desperation during the depression, you saw it was the radicals, the left-wingers, the people who had adopted some form of Marxist philosophy, who were doing something about the situation, who were banding together for action, who were putting up a fight."45