

# **Unemployment AND THE AMERICAN Working Class**

**By Arne Swabeck**

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## Unemployment and the Working Class

The third year of the most severe economic crisis so far known to capitalist society has passed into history. It leaves behind a picture of devastation. The scourge of unemployment ravages masses of working class families and leaves them out of jobs, homeless, hungry and destitute. Since the fateful signal of the Wall Street crash in October 1929 unemployment has mounted steadily and rapidly. And yet, this is but a forerunner of the much more gigantic working class problem of the future with its army of unemployed in permanence.

We do not at all mean to present this as the final crisis of American capitalism. We are perfectly aware of the special mobilization of capitalist resources now going on to restore confidence in capitalism, to "expand" credits and to restore a profit rate which will make possible an upturn in the cycle of production. But, as we shall endeavor to prove, such an upward economic movement, most likely of short duration, can only lead into more acute capitalist contradictions in the next historical stage, to deeper and more devastating crises.

As we enter the fourth crisis year, unemployment has reached unheard-of proportions. It is difficult to attempt to give exact figures for the United States, as such are not available. But even the

*Alvin C. Oberlin??*

conservative estimate made by the American Federation of Labor places the number of jobless at about 12,000,000. It is however, the statistics of production figures and of business turnover which speak louder than words, testifying to the extent of the present break-down of capitalist economy, of capitalist decay.

Production in the basic industries has fallen more than 50 percent. Steel has dipped as low as 17 percent of capacity and is, at the end of 1932, only a little above 20 percent. The automobile industry is also running slightly above 20 percent of capacity. Building is off more than 70 percent since 1928. Freight carloadings attained an index figure of about 55 representing a slight increase from its lowest dip in the summer months. At the end of the year the general business index registered below 60, a drop from 113 in August 1929. This is the lowest in American economic history, the nearest low to this being 72 in 1894.

Wholesale prices fell from 100 in 1926, for all commodities, to 62.5 at the end of 1932. New financing decreased several billions from its high point in 1929. The total national income fell from 89.5 billions in 1929 to 52.4 millions in 1931. Preliminary estimates indicate a considerably lower figure for 1932. These figures tell the story of an entirely unparalleled severity of the present crisis.

### **A WORLD WIDE CRISIS**

It is in the very heart of world capitalism; it is in the strongest imperialist power; the economically most advanced and richest nation—it is in the United States that the crisis has struck deepest. In

this country we behold a picture of appalling poverty and degradation. Here the most ruthless bourgeoisie flaunts the demands of the unemployed and trusts its own security to a well organized state force of coercion while continuing to depress the working class standard of living at a murderous pace.

But the economic crisis holds the whole of the capitalist world in its grip. In most of the nations unemployment has long since become accepted as a permanent phenomenon. Could there be any stronger evidence offered of the general decay of capitalism? Does this not bring into bolder relief the contrast of the Soviet Union busily engaged in industrial construction? The world crisis, of course, exerts its detrimental influence upon the development of the Soviet Union, that is, to the extent to which it depends upon the world market. Nevertheless it affords the contrast of the planned, socialized Soviet economy, growing and advancing despite its difficulties, within a declining world capitalism. This is the fundamental difference of a system in which capitalist ownership of industry and capitalist exploitation has been done away with, compared to a world in which the capitalist mode of production has become a reactionary fetter on the feet of humanity's advancement.

In order fully to comprehend the forces at work in this capitalist society, which causes the ravages of crisis, unemployment and the contradictions of the system itself, it is necessary to restate a few fundamentals.

## THE LAWS OF CAPITALIST PRODUCTION

The driving force in this system of production is the realization of surplus value. This surplus value represents the unpaid labor, or that part produced by the workers over and above what is required for their sustenance and paid to them in the form of wages. The surplus value is appropriated by the capitalists who own and control the means of production. It leaves an ever growing part to be turned into additional capital primarily in the form of means of production, and raw materials and labor power purchased. This is the process of accumulation of capital.

But the capitalization of surplus value does not follow the line of an equal division between constant capital (means of production and raw materials) and variable capital (labor power). On the contrary. It is one of the laws of capitalist production, and which its development carries with it, that out of the total capital it sets into motion the constant part of capital increases more rapidly and conversely the relative decrease of variable capital is noticeable. In other words, compared to the growing mechanization of industry the need for labor power diminishes relatively. The same number of workers can in the same given time produce an ever growing amount of commodities. And the number of employed workers are continually on the decline compared to the mass of the means of production and the commodities produced. It follows that that portion of living labor which is unpaid and represents surplus value, is likewise on the decline compared to the value of total capital in-

vested. This results in the fall of the rate of profit. That is a problem affecting the relations of capital which was necessary to be mentioned without going further into it at this moment. Suffice to say, that on the other hand, the mass of the absolute surplus value appropriated by the capitalists, or the mass of profit, provides for the further growth of the total capital—an ever growing accumulation of capital.

Each step in accumulation signifies that the organic composition of capital has become higher. There is a greater disproportion between human labor power and crystallized labor (means of production, etc.). It carries with it, not only the displacement of laborers but also the constant overproduction of capital—an overproduction of the means of production to the extent that they serve as capital, that is, serve for the exploitation of labor.

This is the essence of the present crisis. "Excess here of the means of production and of products", mounting into staggering proportions, "excess there of laborers", mounting into millions, "without employment and without means of existence". Let it not be forgotten, that this is a direct outcome of the capitalist mode of production and inherent in the capitalist system itself. Let us remember that henceforth, and in an even more acute form, this will be the "normal" phase of capitalist society.

### **CYCLICAL CRISES AND CLASS RELATIONS**

The present crisis records the dip in the capitalist production cycle. It has proven fundamentally different from the crises of the "normal" cycles of capitalism obtaining prior to the world war. The

industrial depressions, or the crises, then were the incidental periods of readjustment for the **increase** of capitalist production as a whole. This capitalist system of production has now reached its period of decline and decay, and the emphasis is reversed. Now the upturns in the cycle herald deeper plunges into crises and **decreases** of capitalist production as a whole.

Each new cycle becomes a historical step in capitalism, bringing it nearer to its end. The increasingly planetary character of the conjunctures of capitalist economy has become particularly expressed in the more uniform and more universal phase of the business cycle in each crisis dip, though not so uniform in the rising "booms". This testifies to the growing intensity and scope of crisis as a part of capitalist economy. The cyclical movements represent today an essentially negative process; from crisis through revival and "prosperity" to crisis again. The crises are severe and protracted; the upward movements are weak and short lived—this is the general expression of capitalist decay. Such is the perspective of future economic developments.

Cyclical crises sharpen the major contradictions of capitalism—the antagonisms between the working class and the capitalist class. The existence of a growing unemployed army becomes the particular situation utilized by capitalism to reduce the standard of living of the workers. Unemployment and wage cuts go hand in hand.

When we examine the index figures made public by the Bureau of Labor Statistics of the Department

of Labor, the fact of the much greater drop in total payroll of the country compared to the drop in employment becomes clearly revealed. These index figures are based upon returns from eighty-nine industries since the end of 1930 and on fifty-four for earlier dates, with the full year of 1926 reckoned as 100. For the month of November 1932 the index remains still at practically its lowest on record and give, by comparative figures between 1932 and 1926 for employment and total payroll, the following result:

<b>Employment</b>		<b>Total Payroll</b>	
<b>Month</b>	<b>Index</b>	<b>Month</b>	<b>Index</b>
Nov. 1932	—59.0	Nov. 1932	— 38.0
Nov. 1931	—67.0	Nov. 1931	— 53.5
Nov. 1930	—77.5	Nov. 1930	— 70.0
Nov. 1929	—95.0	Nov. 1929	— 95.5
Nov. 1928	—96.0	Nov. 1928	— 97.0
Nov. 1927	—93.0	Nov. 1927	— 92.0
Nov. 1926	—99.0	Nov. 1926	—100.0

For the working class as a whole the drop from 100 to 36.3 represents its loss of purchasing power. But the 20 percent decrease of total payroll over and above the drop in employment, roughly speaking, represent the wage cuts suffered by the working class as a whole. The percentage is much greater when counting only those who are employed. In general it represents an enormous reduction of the workers' standard of living. In this lies the powerful incentive to future sharpened class antagonisms.

### **A NEW "UPTURN"**

At this present moment there are at hand undeniable indications of efforts being made to bring



about an upturn in the business cycle. We shall not attempt here either to make an estimate of the prospects of these efforts, or of the particular relationship, in such a situation, of the various capitalist nations within the capitalist system as a whole. Such is not the purpose of this pamphlet. We therefore confine ourselves to this question in its specific relation to the unemployment problem.

Much ado is being made throughout the capitalist press today of an upturn assured to be actually at hand, of the downward trend of employment being checked, and so forth. It is yet too early, however, to ascribe any serious significance to these claims. Nevertheless, it is necessary to pay attention to the huge program of reorganization of industry and finance which is well under way, effecting "economies" everywhere, restoring profits and tending to restore "confidence". It is necessary to pay attention to the huge program of expansion of credits, not merely for payment of previously contracted obligations, but also for new capital investments. Some examples of restoration of profits, i. e. of increasing the mass of profits, were contained in a recent issue of "Bradstreets".

According to its tabulation "the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad in February 1932, nearly doubled its February 1931, net operating income despite a \$2,750,000 reduction in gross. The New York Central lowered its operating ratio to 74.5, the lowest for any month since 1929, and also increased its net with a smaller gross. Altogether some 20 railroads were able to report higher incomes. Mr. W. W. Colpitts, of Coverdale and Colpitts, railroad en-

gineers, has estimated that if railway carloadings return to but halfway between their present level and the 1929 figures, the net operating income for the roads in the United States, as a whole, would be greater than in 1929".

Here we have a practical example of "economies effected", which on the one hand will imply a greater accumulation and concentration of capital, and on the other, an increase in the intensity of exploitation; more profits with less men employed. But part of the reorganization "economies" are also the violent depression of the wage level. The general results can only be that the unemployed army, in its main composition, remains permanently unemployed, despite any upturn in the business cycle. Fundamentally, this is the way that American capitalism, aims to issue out of the crisis: wholly upon the backs of the working class.

### **UNEMPLOYMENT AND COMMUNIST POLICY**

This is the stage we are now entering. It presents an enormous problem to the American working class. With an ever-accelerating speed this situation helps in the process of separating the working class from its bourgeois ideology and allegiances. This situation drives its hard bargain in two directions: Firstly in the direction of further attacks upon the working class standard of living by means of wage cuts and intensified exploitation; and secondly in the direction of a permanent unemployed army. It tends to bring the immediate and most pressing needs of the working class as a whole down to a more general, a more common level for all sections concerned. This will serve to harmonize its

demands.

But by these very facts the problems of the crisis, the problems of unemployment, become even more distinctly problems of the working class as a whole. They are not at all confined to the unemployed alone.

Can this development imply anything but increasing resistance to the capitalist enemy? Obviously not. The unemployment situation is therefore intimately connected with the perspective of coming serious working class struggles. Moreover, the unemployment problem constitutes one of the important factors in our revolutionary perspectives.

It is from such considerations as these that the Communist movement must draw its conclusions. Communist policies, tactics and slogans must particularly take this into account. The tactics and slogans must be adapted to a situation rich in the prospect of mass struggles. The Communist policy is the means by which we aim to reach the specific revolutionary goal. But in each separate stage of development our tactics must lay the correct basis for preparation and direction of the next one. Wrong tactics lead away from it and strengthen the enemy. A correct approach to the fight for the working class needs of today—now so acutely pressing—prepares the rising labor movement for the battles of tomorrow.

## **THE CONDITIONS OF THE MOVEMENT**

How can the working class fight against the frightful menace of unemployment which has already inflicted such deep wounds of suffering and misery? Is it not compelled to meet the enemy face

to face? The course of the capitalist rulers is clearly marked out. It is dotted with brutal assaults upon the unemployment demonstrations. It is filled with ruthless suppression of all manifestations of discontent, weeding out of "agitators", and cynical disregard for the needs of the destitute. Save for the miserable charity rations apportioned none of the needs and demands of the unemployed have been met.

Yet there is not today in the United States a serious unemployment movement of a national character. To set the workers into motion around this issue still remains the task. It imposes a serious duty upon the Communists. But it is precisely in this respect that the official Communist party has been deficient. Its wrong tactics have served to strengthen the enemy forces. Where the revolutionary party fell short of the mark the social reformists have picked up the threads and made gains. The party failure to utilize the opportunity to arouse working masses on a broad scale has only made more arrogant and unchallenged the power of American capitalism despite the cancer of decay which is eating into its vitals.

The American working class is confronted today with a situation of gigantic proportions and seriousness, but it is also one which requires a broad vision of the objectives and a bold strategy by the revolutionary party. This, however, is entirely missing in the unemployment policy pursued by the official party leadership. On the contrary its course has been so much in the opposite direction that it now centers the main attention of the Unemployed

Councils under its leadership almost exclusively in struggle against the petty cheating and thieving of the local relief agencies. In this—to be sure—it has scored some successes, but thereby the larger objectives have been obscured. There have been isolated attempts in the direction of a genuinely broad and revolutionary policy as, for example, in Chicago in the Summer of 1932, but such have been only exceptions and not yet as a part of a conscious and systematic policy.

The root cause of this we will find in the policy and approach of Centrism. Its approach dates back to the "Third Period" lunacy which was predicated upon a "revolutionary upsurge of the American workers." The party policy mistakenly led to vanguard actions for the "conquest of the streets." This, of course, only isolated the Communist vanguard and left the workers disinterested in the party appeals. But the party leadership has since swung to the opposite extreme, to opportunist methods of fighting for unemployment relief.

The arbitrary and bureaucratic methods of the party leadership has almost choked the Unemployed Councils. Despite the fact that the Unemployed Councils from their inception had the advantages of a national scope, a centralized form of organization and a militant program; despite the fact that large masses at that time responded to the party appeals and demonstrations—despite all this today, in the fourth year of the crisis, workers who were at first attracted to Communism have been repelled by the thousands. In many important cities the Unemployed Councils are non-function-

ing and some are in the process of dissolution. Since the party leadership did not conceive of the unemployment movement as one founded upon a united front of the whole working class, it is only natural that its general policy did not provide for any practical steps in that direction. Its whole method led to the limiting of the movement to the "red" organizations which are under its own immediate direction. To this extent the very efforts of the party leadership militated against the larger and the revolutionary objectives which, of necessity, must become part of a serious unemployment movement. Such is the debacle recorded against its stewardship.

With the decline of the party-controlled Unemployed Councils other unemployment organizations have arisen, mainly on a local scale, under the leadership of the social reformists. There are the various Citizens' Unemployment Leagues developed under the direction of the Conference for Progressive Labor Action. There are also the unemployment Leagues organized by the Socialist party in some cities. The first mentioned have at times attracted broad masses on a local scale because of their "practical" policy of securing some measure of relief, largely by the methods of self-help. These movements reflect the pressure of the working class. But, being essentially reformist in character, they are taking the futile direction, either of practical parliamentary (reformist) politics, or purely mutual self-help societies. In some instances they promulgate the illusion of the workers' running the industries for capitalism in order to create jobs—an impossibility and a dangerous deception, while the

political power remains firmly in the hands of the capitalists.

While it is perfectly clear that neither direction will lead to a serious fight for relief at the expense of capitalism, and not at all show the way out of the unemployment situation, nevertheless these movements are becoming effective instruments in the hands of the reformists to attract the workers and to contest the Communist party for mass leadership. In this sense they are becoming serious contenders. The headway they have made so far is in no small measure due to the false policies and the bureaucratic blunders of the party leadership.

From these facts—and from many others—we cannot escape the conclusion that the course of the American working class movement, even its unemployed section, is not at all yet decided in favor of Communism. It flows in both directions, in the revolutionary and in the reformist direction. But it is well to add at this point, that with the increasing pressure of working masses, driven by economic necessity into more severe struggles, the impotence of the reformist program and the deception of the reformist leaders will become more apparent. The workers will then learn by actual experience, and the opportunities for the Communist movement will increase, provided it will be capable of advancing correctly the demands and slogans which will attract masses to its banner, set them into motion and lead in a revolutionary direction.

### **AN UNEMPLOYMENT PROGRAM OF RELIEF**

Meanwhile the growth of the social reformist movement, must command the most serious atten-

tion from the Communists. How can we win the workers who are attracted to this movement and who are under its influence? This question brings us face to face with the important problem of program and policy to be pursued.

A program of unemployment relief must, of necessity, be in harmony with the elementary needs of the situation. As such it must present immediate demands and agitation slogans which appeal to the broad masses by offering means of temporary amelioration. They cannot offer a solution in themselves and should not be so designed. They are by the very nature of the class struggle strictly limited to the character of a partial help. But they must also become a help to unite the workers on the basis of their common interests and set them into motion against their class enemy. These demands and slogans cannot solve the problem. There can be no solution to the unemployment problem under capitalism. Its solution can be found only in the proletarian revolution. In our agitation and struggles we must always make this clear. Otherwise a reformist degeneration of the movement cannot be avoided.

In this sense we of the Left Opposition stress the fact that the principal class objective, the proletarian revolution, remains basic in our unemployment program; the immediate needs of the class are the starting point. The existing unemployment situation can therefore be viewed correctly only in the light of its revolutionary perspective. The demands advanced today and the struggle for their attainment must become stepping-stones toward the rev-



olutionary goal. Hence it is necessary, above all, to preserve their class content and organize the fight for their realization on a class basis. This can be the case only when the Communist forces thoroughly understand and practice in action the tactics which enable them to become the leading force of ever broader masses; and when they establish the logical unity between the struggles of today and the solutions of tomorrow.

The fact that we have entered the fourth year of the economic crisis without any actual relief measures having been obtained and without any material change as yet toward an upturn; that we have in this country an army of unemployed as a permanent phenomenon; and the additional fact that the working class is inevitably developing toward serious struggles against the general lowering of their standard of living—all these must be taken into account and influence the formulation of our unemployment program of relief.

Today the growing hunger and want, following in the wake of unemployment, has reached appalling proportions and the question of immediate relief has become a matter of life and death necessity to the American workers. The miserable and debasing charity rations have in no way satisfied their needs. That only makes so much more essential the demand for immediate governmental relief—federal, state and municipal. By virtue of its necessity it stands in the very forefront of the program. The fight for its attainment brooks no delay.

But immediate relief, if and when granted, can at best be conceived of only as a very temporary

measure, not at all sufficient to cover a situation of permanent unemployment. It would still necessitate concentration upon the demand for a system of unemployment insurance paid for by the state and the employers. That it can be obtained only by mass pressure, by tenacious struggle against the capitalist rulers, has been made amply clear by all experiences so far. The capitalist way out of the crisis is the opposite one. It is the way of forcing the working class to shoulder the whole burden, of keeping them on a level of destitution, an easy prey for their wage-cutting onslaughts. The reformist way of unemployment insurance is the one of all classes alike carrying the cost and awaiting their mutual consent; something which cannot be expected from capitalism. But this is only so much more a reason for the Communists to give this demand class content by making it a fighting slogan, one which will bring the broad masses within its scope.

This, however, leads up to one demand which in many respects is of even greater potentiality from the point of view of class relations. This is the demand for the shorter workday. Concretely as a slogan it should be formulated: "The six-hour workday, the five-day week, without reduction of pay."

A struggle for the shorter workday flows from the contradiction between the constantly developing productive forces and the enormous surplus labor power. The employers and the government are now endeavoring to reorganize this relationship at the workers' expense. It is contained in the stagger plan proposals of the shorter workweek with a cor-

responding reduction of the standard of living. This the Communist forces must counteract correctly.

The demand for the six-hour workday, the five-day week, without reduction of pay is today a propaganda slogan. The workers must make it a slogan for action. More than any other demand it holds out the prospect of real and tangible improvement of the workers' conditions. It will, of course, meet with the most serious opposition from the employers. That is to be expected. And it is therefore important to remember that its advancement today as a propaganda slogan will prepare the way for the struggles of tomorrow. By virtue of this it can become an effective slogan of the working class offensive. It is in this sense that the demand for the shorter workday is the most fundamental of our immediate demands from the standpoint of class relations. When actually adopted it will tend to unite the employed and unemployed workers more firmly and move them into action for its attainment and for the advancement of their struggle on a class basis. The Communist forces must arouse the existing labor unions and workers' organizations and unite them into a powerful movement for the shorter workday.

The Left Opposition has also proposed, a long time ago, that the American labor movement adopt the slogan for the extension of large scale credits to the Soviet Union. That proposal remains as valid and as correct as when it was first advanced. The enormous contrast of the industrial development in the Soviet Union with the unemployment crisis of the capitalist world is indisputable. But this con-

struction is seriously hampered by the inability of the Soviets to obtain sufficient credits from the capitalist countries with which to buy the machinery and material on the world market. This demand for these credits is a decisive issue before the Communist movement. It involves essentially the question of the international working class objective. It offers the opportunity of definitely uniting the needs of the Soviet Union with the immediate aims and demands of the proletariat in the capitalist countries through the proposal for extension of long term credits.

In the United States this is a particularly potent demand. Here a superabundance of credits is available. The further success of the great industrialization progress of the Soviet Union is bound up with the facilitation of an increased supply of machinery and material for the immediate future. The placing of new orders for machinery in this country will help give work to our unemployed. It would make the American workers real participants in the struggle toward socialism in the Soviet Union.

The American Communist movement must unequivocally take up the slogan for the extension of large scale credits to the Soviet Union. It should work out definite plans for the promulgation of this demand on a practical concrete basis.

### **ORGANIZING THE MOVEMENT**

We said at the outset that the unemployment situation cannot be considered as an isolated problem separate and apart from the general working class problems, nor can the unemployment movement succeed as a separate and isolated movement. It can

remain so only on penalty of degeneration and impotence. Its objectives must be general working class objectives, its struggles part of the general working class struggles for the revolution. The potentialities for advance on this basis are growing daily. When the Communist movement begins to employ the united front policy seriously and genuinely, the first steps will have been taken to unify the workers, employed and unemployed, in common struggle for their common interests of today as well as toward their ultimate objective.

It is in this respect that we have had our greatest differences with the unemployment policy of the official party leadership. We must record the fact that after three years of an acute unemployment crisis the movement under its direction has not been strengthened in proportion to the opportunities offered. On the contrary. Demonstrations have become smaller. The organizations in many instances show decline. The party leadership did not pursue a united front policy. In all of the vital questions of the day, particularly those of unemployment relief, this leadership fails to connect the demands with the revolutionary objectives in such a way that the movement will advance in that direction.

The mere demands for unemployment relief, for a system of unemployment insurance and for the shorter workday without reduction of pay, in their formulation, may become entirely indistinguishable from those of the social reformist leaders. Even the A. F. of L. hierarchy, the purveyors of capitalist ideology within the working class, have recorded themselves in favor of a system of unemployment

insurance and the six-hour workday. The distinction lies in the problem of actual struggle to obtain these demands, in the class character of the struggle, and above all in the objectives—the objectives of reform or revolution. In this respect we know that these elements are bitterly hostile to any fighting demonstration, to any actual struggle even for the mere reform demands. Particularly are they hostile to the working class aims of the struggle. The aims of the reformist leaders and of the reactionary trade union bureaucrats in every serious class conflict run counter to those of the workers. But this is precisely the reason why they must, at every opportunity, be put to the test in action to enable us to separate the workers from their deceptive and traitorous influence. The instrument for this is the united front policy. By the united front policy the Communist party proposes joint action to the trade unions and other working class organizations, including the reformist parties. Unity of action of workers' organizations for the immediate, specific and limited objectives of unemployment relief—this is the proposal and demand of the Communist united front policy. A united front of the organizations, formally and in reality, attained by the pressure of necessity and by the logic of argumentation, in short a genuine united front—this is the aim. This is the way to build a powerful unemployment movement and free the workers from reformist influences and leadership. The degree of its success will depend upon the degree with which the working class as a whole is set into motion for the attainment of its objectives. In the struggle

it will inevitably encounter the most serious and brutal capitalist opposition and repression. This will itself help to push the movement leftward, clarify its objectives and point it toward the proletarian revolution.

The Communists assume the role of the Left wing in this movement, maintain their independent position and constantly fight for their revolutionary goal. This is how the Left Opposition sees revolutionary tasks in the unemployment situation. We dedicate ourselves to the objectives set forth here. Every working class need is our need. Every working class struggle is our struggle. But we will always fight, as clearly and as definitely as we are able, toward the revolutionary direction.

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