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Author(s):   Richards, Andrew John, 1961-
Date   2002
Type   Working Paper
Series   Estudios = Working papers / Instituto Juan March de Estudios e Investigaciones, Centro de Estudios Avanzados en Ciencias Sociales 2001/175
City: Madrid
Publisher: Centro de Estudios Avanzados en Ciencias Sociales

**MOBILIZING THE POWERLESS: COLLECTIVE PROTEST ACTION OF
THE UNEMPLOYED IN THE INTERWAR PERIOD**

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Abstract

This paper examines the origins and evolution of collective protest action, and of organized movements, of the unemployed in Britain and the USA in the interwar period. It addresses three interrelated issues in the study of social movements: the problems of collective action amongst a relatively powerless sector of society; the role of external agents in the processes of mobilization and organization; and the effects of organization on levels of militancy and mobilization.

Examination of both cases confirms first, the importance of the mass nature of unemployment in fomenting initial protest action of the unemployed in the early 1920s and early 1930s; second, the critical role of external agents in developing and consolidating organizations of the unemployed; and third, that the allegedly deradicalizing effects of organization on the behaviour and objectives of poor people's movements are exaggerated.

However, sharp contrasts between the (more hostile) British and (more benign) American political contexts in the 1930s casts doubt on the ability of the so-called *political opportunity structure* to explain the emergence and evolution of collective protest action by the unemployed.

CONTENTS

List of Abbreviations

Britain:

AEU: Amalgamated Engineering Union
BUF: British Union of Fascists
CPGB: Communist Party of Great Britain
FUBW: Fascist Union of British Workers
IUX: International Union of Ex-Servicemen
JAC: Joint Advisory Committee (of NUWCM and TUC)
NUM: National Union of Mineworkers
NUWCM: National Unemployed Workers' Committee Movement (1921-1929)
NUWM: National Unemployed Workers' Movement (1929-1939)
NUX: National Union of Ex-Servicemen
SWMF: South Wales Miners' Federation
TUC: Trades Unions Congress

USA:

AFL: American Federation of Labor
CIO: Congress of Industrial Organizations
CP: Communist Party of the USA
IWW: Industrial Workers of the World
UAW: United Automobile Workers
WAA: Workers' Alliance of America
WPA: Works Progress Administration

Introduction

Rates of unemployment throughout the advanced capitalist countries in the 1980s and 1990s were significantly higher than those which had prevailed during the era of the so-called postwar consensus when the maintenance of full employment was a key objective of Western governments. The OECD forecast that by the end of 1999, registered unemployment in the industrialized world would stabilize at approximately 35 million people, or 7 per cent of the workforce. Within the European Union, an unemployment rate nearer 10 per cent would "remain a serious economic and social problem".[1] Not surprisingly, national electorates persist in identifying unemployment as one of the most serious scourges of contemporary capitalist society.

The high rates of unemployment characteristic of the 1980s and 1990s are not, of course, without historical precedent. As such, concern for, and protest against, unemployment are longstanding and recurring features of industrial society. However, the dynamics of collective protest action by the unemployed themselves, both historically and contemporarily, are not well understood. Indeed, there are relatively few studies of how and why, in conditions of economic and social distress, the unemployed themselves have emerged as a collective political entity in their own right. In this paper, I seek to develop a preliminary analysis of the possibilities for, and the obstacles to, collective action amongst the unemployed. I do so by focusing on movements, and collective protest, of the unemployed in Britain and the USA in the interwar period.

The guiding assumption of the study is that the unemployed are a relatively powerless and deprived sector of society – in the language of the social movements literature, they have few resources to mobilise – and that therefore the obstacles to collective action are severe. The assumption is not an unreasonable one. The AFL's declaration in Chicago in 1893 that "the right to work is the right to life" (Folsom 1991) was true at the time and has remained so ever since, regardless of developments and fluctuations in the scope of welfare provision for

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[1] The year-end average EU unemployment rate in 2000 was 6.76% (excluding France, Greece, Ireland and Italy), with unemployment at an average level of 11,368,464 (excluding Greece, Ireland and Italy) (*Supplement of the Bulletin of Labour Statistics 2001-4* [Geneva: International Labour Organisation]; pp.22-31).

the unemployed. Many studies have emphasized the deleterious effects of unemployment in terms of economic, material, physical and psychological well-being, social exclusion and political alienation (Angell 1995; Burnett 1994; Gallie 1999; Haataja 1999; Lawless, Martin and Hardy [eds.] 1998; Pappas 1989). In several Western countries, unemployment has, in the course of the 1980s and 1990s, sharply increased the risks of falling into poverty (Haataja 1999). Prolonged unemployment undermines the economic independence of the individual and may well severely damage his or her life-chances in general (Morris 1992). The observation of a British trade union leader that "we live in a society which penalises people who have no jobs"[2] is therefore well taken.

The paper is divided into four parts. In Part One, I examine some of the problems and ambiguities that characterize the relationship between "conditions of powerlessness"[3], deprivation and protest action. In Part Two, I examine the context in which collective protest action of the unemployed emerged and subsequently evolved in Britain and the USA. Though there is a basic similarity between the two cases, in that both represent examples of the eventual successful emergence of movements of the unemployed, there are significant differences with respect to the context in which they evolved. In Part Three, therefore, I examine the problems of the unemployed movements, in terms of their relationship with both their own constituencies and the external agents from whom they sought support. In particular, I assess the reaction of organized labour to the emergence of the movements and the nature of their demands. In Part Four, in the light of the two cases analysed, I reevaluate Piven and Cloward's (1979, 1977) influential thesis regarding the debilitating effects of increasing organization, and of the acceptance of assistance from without, on the mobilization of the poor. The paper concludes with some reflections on the relationship between organization and protest.

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[2] Arthur Scargill, inaugural Presidential address to 1982 NUM Conference (cited in Richards 1996:76).

[3] The phrase is that of Scott (1990:x).

1. Powerlessness, Deprivation and Protest

As many studies of the poor and powerless in general have emphasized, while the deprivation associated with such powerlessness undoubtedly generates discontent, the relationship between such discontent and the possibilities for overt protest action (let alone in the form of something akin to an organized social movement) is not at all clear (Piven and Cloward 1979:Ch.1). Aya (1979:42) notes that the argument that grievances will provide the political motive for collective protest action is a truism; on the other hand, the argument that wherever compelling grievances exist, angry people will rise to remedy them, is obviously false. As Scott (1976:4) has remarked, if anger born of exploitation and injustice were enough to spark rebellion, the Third World would be in flames (see also Davis 1999:613-614; Jenkins and Perrow 1979:250-251; Seligson 1979:135; Snyder and Tilly 1972:520).

1.1. Powerlessness and Quiescence

As such, many studies have linked deprivation and powerlessness to quiescence and apathy. In this account, the powerless have very few resources of their own to mobilize – they are "easy victims" (Wolf 1969:289).[4] That this is so is a reflection of the immense difficulties faced by the powerless in *emerging* as a collective entity. Many studies, in a diverse range of empirical settings – from farm labourers in the USA[5] to peasants in South-East Asia[6] to peasants and shantytown dwellers in Latin America[7] – have demonstrated how the most marginalised sectors of society are often isolated, scattered and fragmented. The structural foundations for the generation of collective action are either weak or non-existent.

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[4] See also Cress and Snow 1996:1091; Davis 1999:590,612; Hobsbawm 1984:289; Jenkins and Perrow 1977:249,251-252; Pereira 1997:103,114; Pinheiro 1997:270; Roberts 1997:139,142,148-151; Seligson 1979:141,143.

[5] See, for example, Adams 1997; Barger and Reza 1994; Jenkins 1985; Jenkins and Perrow 1977.

[6] See, for example, Scott 1977b; Wolf 1969.

[7] See, for example, Eckstein 1989; Pereira 1997; Roberts 1997.

And even where the structural base of the powerless and deprived *is* stronger – that is, when they form more concentrated communities – the implications for collective action are ambiguous. Piven and Cloward (1992:308-312), for example, argue that the link between the density of "lateral integration" and the possibilities for collective action is anything but clear (see below).[8] Historically, it is true that certain groups of workers – for example, miners and dockworkers – emerged as powerful collective actors on the basis of dense occupational communities (Lockwood 1975). But the error of the Kerr-Siegel "isolated mass" hypothesis, for instance, was to draw an *automatic* link between such density of community and radical collective action (Kerr and Siegel 1954). As subsequent studies rapidly pointed out, dense occupational communities were as likely to be associated with collective quiescence as they were with collective militancy and radicalism.[9]

In this context, Gaventa (1980) has made an invaluable contribution to the study of the relationship between the condition of powerlessness and the obstacles to collective action and rebellion. Even if the powerless derive certain limited resources by virtue of forming a cohesive community (in Gaventa's case, the mining settlements of Appalachia), they may still be vulnerable to the exercise of power's "third dimension", whereby "social legitimations are developed around the dominant, and instilled as beliefs or roles in the dominated" (Gaventa 1980:15). Over time, a sense of powerlessness "may manifest itself as extensive fatalism, self-deprecation, or undue apathy about one's situation .. [it] may also lead to a greater susceptibility to the internalization of the values, beliefs, or rules of the game of the powerful .." (Gaventa 1980:17).[10] As such, the relationship between the powerful and the powerless is self-reinforcing: "the power of A is also strengthened by the fact that the powerlessness of B is similarly

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[8] Indeed, Edelman (1971:137 cited in Scott 1977a:295) argues that "resort to violence as a form of militant protest is apparently stimulated by the absence of formal organization among the disaffected, though it is widely supposed that the converse is true: that the unorganized are likely to be docile or ineffective and the organized a threat". Scott (1977a:295) also argues that "the relative absence of organization among the peasantry may constitute .. a critical revolutionary advantage. In other words, the very fragmentation of peasant social structure that for Marx was the key to their nonexistence as a class *für sich* makes of them precisely the kind of volatile social dynamite that renders revolution possible".

[9] This was true, moreover, of the mining industry from which Kerr and Siegel had derived their initial hypothesis (Rimlinger 1959). For a fuller discussion of this issue, see Richards 1996:16-18.

[10] For a fuller discussion, see Abercrombie, Hill and Turner (1980).

accumulative, and that power and powerlessness may each re-enforce each other towards the generation of B's acquiescence" (Gaventa 1980:22). In such a scenario, hegemonic domination by the powerful ensures that discontent does not lead to overt protest action.[11] Indeed, it is notable that in Gaventa's study, it is the most powerless miners who are the most docile (Jenkins 1985:5-6), while in more general terms, Aya (1979:73-75) points out that the *most* deprived sectors of society have played a relatively *secondary* role in revolutions of the 20th century.[12]

1.2. Powerlessness and Protest

On the other hand, an equally substantial body of literature has argued that the "protesting poor" constitute a prominent actor in history, regardless of whether their protest has been dismissed as the irrational rioting of the mob (Smelser 1963) or, conversely, assigned a rationality - or "moral economy" - of its own.[13] In such accounts, both the hegemonic domination of the powerful, and the quiescence of the poor and powerless, are questioned. As is well known, Scott's analyses of the moral economy of the peasant in South-East Asia (1976; 1977a; 1977b; 1985) have been extremely influential in demonstrating the ability of the weak and deprived to resist the ideological domination of the powerful and, in certain circumstances, to provide the bedrock of open revolt. He is hardly alone. Many other studies have demonstrated the capacity of the poor to sustain and organize themselves in situations of severe depri-

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[11] See Howe 1994:316-318; Moore 1979:215-216; Piven and Cloward 1992:302; Vilas 1997:5.

[12] Piven and Cloward (1979:6) argue in similar fashion that "those for whom the rewards are most meager, who are the most oppressed by inequality, are also acquiescent. Sometimes they are the most acquiescent, for they have little defense against the penalties that can be imposed for defiance".

[13] See Aya 1979:71; Eckstein 1989:20; Hobsbawm and Rudé 1985: Rudé 1967; Scott 1977b:241; Thompson 1971; Walton 1989.

vation, to develop and maintain alternative worldviews and, on occasion, to mount, or participate in, insurgent movements.[14]

What, then, might account for the transformation of quiescence and apathy into overt protest and rebellion? Many empirical studies of collective protest have argued that protest emerges when prevailing discontent is significantly exacerbated, or when collectivities suffer a severe threat to, or actual decline in, their material well-being.[15] In peasant studies, for example, threats to subsistence and infringement of their moral economy are associated with peasant rebellion.[16] In Brazil and Chile, working-class militancy and rebellion in the 1980s have been linked to sharply deteriorating economic conditions (Drake and Jaksic 1995:10; Garretón 1989:274; Moreira Alves 1989:294) while Walton (1989) links austerity riots throughout Latin America to sharp IMF-imposed cuts in the material well-being of the poor. Other studies have emphasized the role of failed expectations in triggering and sustaining protest action. For example, Barger and Reza (1994:7,194) argue that the ability of poor farmworkers in the American midwest to sustain an eight-year long strike action was a function of a sharply increased gap between greater expectations and lower realizations in their standard of living.

However, as these and other authors have pointed out, deteriorating material conditions may well form the context, and even be a necessary condition, for collective protest action, but, as Snyder and Tilly (1972) long since noted in their critique of Gurr's relative deprivation theory of collective violence (Gurr 1969), they are evidently not a sufficient condition. Sudden adverse economic fluctuations have led to collective protest action in some cases, but not in others (Aya 1979:66; see also Walton 1984:29).

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[14] See, for example, Angell 1995; Barger and Reza 1994; Brockett 1991; Burt 1997; Chwe 1999; Drake and Jaksic 1995; Eckstein 1989; Hobsbawm 1984; Jenkins 1985; Kincaid 1987; Moore 1979; Piven and Cloward 1979; Piven and Cloward 1992; Roberts 1997; Seligson and Booth 1979; Stern 1987; Stokes 1991a; Wolf 1969; Vilas 1997; Yashar 1997.

[15] See Eckstein 1989:21; Hobsbawm 1984:289; Jenkins 1985:xii,2,3,27; Piven and Cloward 1992:308; Vilas 1997:23.

[16] See Brockett 1991:255,257,263; Eckstein 1989:15,16; McClintock 1989:65,67,68,84; Scott 1976; Scott 1977b:232; Wickham-Crowley 1989:150-151,153; Wolf 1969:290.

In attempting to explain and clarify the nature of the relationship between material conditions and grievances and the possibilities of collective protest, one contingent factor which has received considerable attention is that of identity-formation. It was noted above that the structural base of the powerless and deprived, as a *potential* collectivity, may be fragmented or even non-existent – clearly, a context of collective deprivation does not in and of itself guarantee that the deprived will therefore emerge as a collective actor. To the extent that such fragmentation and apathy can be overcome, the powerless may be able to engage in collective protest action. For this reason, many studies have emphasized the critical role and impact of identity formation in generating or enhancing the basis of collective solidarity amongst the powerless and deprived and, by extension, their possibilities for collective action.[17] However, while the importance of identity in underpinning collective action cannot be denied, two problems in particular arise. First, as already noted, a strong collective identity may be associated with collective quiescence rather than with collective protest. Second, identity, more often than not, is forged in the course of collective struggle, thereby begging the question of what initially generated the struggle: "identity is not a static, preexisting condition that can be seen as exerting a causal influence on collective action; at both personal and collective levels, it is a changeable product of collective action" (Calhoun 1991:59). For this reason, the tendency in certain parts of the literature on social movements to refer to the "strategic uses" of identity, thereby implying a definition of identity as a given, to be deployed as circumstances dictate, or as movement leaders desire, is problematic.[18]

In sum, in terms of the propensity and ability of the powerless to protest, the relationship between structural conditions, collective identity and collective action is by no means a deterministic one (Richards 1996:ch.1). On the contrary, many authors have emphasized the contingent and contextual nature of protest.[19] Yet a general conclusion of this

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[17] See, amongst many others, Adams 1997; Chwe 1999; Davis 1999; Eckstein 1989; Garretón 1989; Gunder Frank and Fuentes 1989; Jenkins 1985; Kincaid 1987; Roberts 1997; Scott 1977a; Selverston 1997; Vilas 1997.

[18] See, however, Selverston (1997), for a fine empirical analysis of the consequences (in her case, for the indigenous peoples of Ecuador) of just such a strategic change in the use of identity.

[19] Adams 1997:553,568; Alvarez and Escobar 1992:324-325; Eckstein 1989:3-7,9-10,13,33,55; Granovetter 1985:487,493,506; Kincaid 1987:493; Snyder and Tilly 1972:526.

nature would be unsatisfactory and even banal. For this reason, precisely because of the severe costs, obstacles, dilemmas and uncertainties faced by the powerless and deprived in mounting collective protest action,[20] a huge body of literature has emphasized the key role of *external agents* – whether in the form of political parties, trade unions, pressure groups, or charitable institutions - in providing the powerless with leadership and organizational resources, and lending coherence to what may well be a disparate set of grievances and demands.[21] To cite but one example, Jenkins (1985) and Jenkins and Perrow (1977) have demonstrated how the isolated, repressed and impoverished immigrant agricultural workers of southern California were forged during the 1960s into a powerful collective actor, with a strong sense of both ethnic and class identity, almost entirely as a result of organizing efforts of heroic proportions by the United Farm Workers led by César Chávez.

However, not all cases are as clear-cut as this, and the role and impact of external agency – particularly in the form of organizational resources – on collective action of the powerless and the deprived has been hotly debated, in both theoretical and empirical terms. For example, Piven and Cloward (1979; esp. Ch.1) argued, provocatively, that the impact of organization and leadership on poor people's movements was perverse. For these authors, the powerless were never wholly passive objects but, often enough, active subjects capable of mounting collective protest action in the absence of external assistance and leadership. Moreover, their objectives were effectively achieved to the extent that such action was of a spontaneous, disruptive and insurrectionary nature, and avoided the moderating effects of formal, bureaucratized organization. Subsequently, Hobsbwam (1984) strongly challenged such an interpretation, arguing that the poor and powerless could only achieve their demands

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[20] The bewilderment faced by potential insurgents was captured by Steinbeck, describing the predicament of interwar farm labourers about to enter into unemployment. While the impact of economic collapse is all too tangible – eviction, homelessness, and poverty – the question of at whom to direct their protests is far from clear: "But where does it stop? Who can we shoot?" (Steinbeck 1992:52).

[21] Jenkins (1985:22) notes that "because there are always multiple targets, insurgents frequently confront conflicting priorities and dilemmas". See Adams 1997; Angell 1995; Alvarez and Escobar 1992; Barger and Reza 1994; Brockett 1991; Burt 1997; Cress and Snow 1996, 2000; Drake and Jaksic 1995; Eckstein 1989; Ganz 2000; Hobsbawm 1984; Jenkins 1985; Jenkins and Perrow 1979; Kincaid 1987; Leggett 1964; McClintock 1989; Moreira Alves 1989; Neal and Seeman 1964; Pereira 1997; Pinheiro 1997; Piven and Cloward 1992; Roberts 1997; Schneider 1992; Seligson 1979; Stokes 1991b; Torigian 1999; Wickham-Crowley 1989; Wolf 1969; Zamosc 1989.

on a lasting basis through organization. More recently, Cress and Snow, in their study of organizations of the homeless, underscore the importance of external resources for what may be the most powerless group of all, and rebut the central thesis of Piven and Cloward that the acceptance of such resources necessarily implies cooptation and the moderation of demands (Cress and Snow 1996:1091,1106-1107; see also Cress and Snow 2000).[22]

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In the remainder of the paper, I analyse the emergence and subsequent evolution of collective protest action by the unemployed in terms of the debates outlined thus far. On the one hand, several insights gained from studies of the powerless in general may be useful for understanding the quiescence of the unemployed. The material and organizational resources of the unemployed will be generally inferior to those in work, especially if the exit into unemployment has entailed the loss of union membership. In addition, as Morris (1992) has demonstrated, the social segregation to which the unemployed (especially the long-term unemployed) are vulnerable can undermine possible access to the various resources provided by networks of those in work. In terms of attitudes, Howe (1994:326-327;333-334) has described how the stigma attached to being unemployed tends to generate feelings of shame, helplessness and apathy, none of which are conducive to the generation of collective identity (let alone action) amongst the unemployed themselves.[23] Finally, changes over time in the structure of employment have tended to disperse the unemployed, thereby increasing further barriers to collective identity and action (Croucher 1987).

On the other hand, studies of the unemployed have also linked unemployment to the radicalization of attitudes and behaviour. In his classic study of working-class Detroit in 1960, Leggett argued that economic insecurity was linked to working class consciousness, and found that unemployed workers, economically less secure than those in work, were

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[22] I return to this issue in the Conclusions.

[23] See also De Witte 1992; Gallie 1993; Jahoda, Lazarsfeld and Zeisel 1972; Marshall, Rose, Newby and Vogler 1988; Polavieja 1999; Schlozman and Verba 1979. I am grateful to Javier García de Polavieja for bringing several of these references to my attention.

significantly more militant and class conscious than the employed (Leggett 1964:227,229,231-232,234). His study, which was restricted to an analysis of attitudes of the unemployed, has been complemented by several studies of collective protest action and movements which have demonstrated the capacity of the unemployed, on occasion, to mobilize as active political agents in their own right, rather than as the passive objects of cycles of economic decline and recovery (Bagguley 1991; Croucher 1987; Flanagan 1991; Folsom 1991; Lorence 1996; Piven and Cloward 1979; Schwantes 1994; Ramondino 1998).[24]

In terms of explaining the transformation of quiescence into protest, the history of unemployed action in Britain and the USA in the interwar period demonstrates the complex interplay between, on the one hand, insurgent activity at the grass roots level and, on the other, the resources and leadership offered by external agents. At times, unemployed workers demonstrated a remarkable ability to engage in collective action very much of their own making. Yet equally, the presence or absence of external agents, and their attitude and behaviour towards the unemployed, were critical in shaping both the possibilities for collective action, and the form that collective action subsequently took.

2. Collective Action Problems of the Unemployed

2.1. The Context of Protest: Historical Precedents

The ambiguous links between deprivation, powerlessness and collective protest that I have outlined in general terms in Part One may be applied to the unemployed in particular.[25]

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[24] Both Pappas (1989:181-189) and Richards (1996:205-240) have also demonstrated the resilience of working class militancy, and the vitality of grass roots action on the part of the unemployed themselves, even in the aftermath of plant closings and the onset of high rates of unemployment.

[25] Interestingly, a parallel debate exists with respect to the effects of rising unemployment on the behaviour of employed workers. Some authors have argued that the fear of job loss promotes passivity and acquiescence on the part of employed workers (Garretón 1989; Winson 1997). In contrast, others have argued that the insecurity produced by rising unemployment promotes militancy on the part of those in fear of losing their own jobs. For example, in his analysis of factory occupations in Paris and Flint, Michigan, in 1936 and

As Flanagan (1991:223) notes, "man has an infinite capacity for suffering, and suffering alone is never a sufficient spur to action, so no catalogue of the inhumanity of unemployment can explain the activity of the unemployed". Yet in terms of necessary (but clearly not sufficient) conditions for collective action, the historical record in Britain and the United States demonstrates that to the extent that the unemployed have engaged in collective protest, they have done so during times of high and/or rapidly rising unemployment.[26]

Thus Piven and Cloward (1979:43) have noted that while for the most part the unemployed have endured their fate in silence, at times, "unemployment reached calamitous levels and the jobless rebelled". In the depths of the recurrent depressions of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the unemployed protested on a collective basis. In the slump of 1837, 20,000 unemployed assembled in Philadelphia to demand relief by means of a public works program; protests of the unemployed erupted in several large American cities in the panic of 1857; the depression of 1873 provoked violent demonstrations in New York and Chicago, involving tens of thousands of unemployed workers (Piven and Cloward 1979:43). The economic crisis of the 1880s and 1890s produced further waves of protest by the unemployed. In the USA, 1893 marked the beginning of a four-year long depression which saw wages cut by between one fifth and one quarter, and hundreds of thousands thrown into unemployment. By January 1894, the unemployment rate in Montana and Utah stood at 25%; 50,000 were unemployed in California; 100,000 in Chicago, and between 100,000 and 200,000 in New York. When dependents of the unemployed were taken into account (in

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1937, Torigian (1999:339-340) argues that the militancy of French workers in the Paris metal industry was a product of the heightened grievances and insecurity caused by the world depression which had not only taken a severe toll on their wages and conditions, but had permanently eliminated one third of the workforce between 1931 and 1935, and reduced a further one third to short time working. Richards (1996) makes a similar case for the pervasive effects of employment insecurity on the militancy of British miners in the first half of the 1980s.

[26] My analysis draws heavily on the relatively few major studies of the unemployed as a collective actor. For Britain, I have drawn on Flanagan's study of the politics of the unemployed for the 1884-1939 period (Flanagan 1991) and Croucher's study of the National Unemployed Workers' Movement in the 1920s and 1930s (Croucher 1987). The semi-autobiographical account of the latter's longtime leader, Wal Hannington (Hannington 1977 [1936]) has provided useful background reading. For the USA, I have drawn on Folsom's study of collective action of the unemployed for the 1808-1942 period (Folsom 1991), Schwantes' study of the celebrated Coxeyite rebellion during the last decade of the 19th century (Schwantes 1994), and the studies of the Unemployed Workers' Movement during the Great Depression by Lorence (1996) and Piven and Cloward (1979).

Philadelphia, for example, 62,500 unemployed had 187,000 dependents), severe deprivation was widespread. Not for nothing was "Bread or Blood" a popular cry in these and other cities at the time. Twenty-five thousand people demonstrated against unemployment in Chicago in August 1893, though the most remarkable protest of all was that of the Coxeyite "industrial armies" of unemployed workers (largely, though not exclusively, from the American West) which converged, under the leadership of the indefatigable Jacob S. Coxey, on Washington, DC, in the course of 1894 (Schwantes 1994:1,12,13,29).

Similarly in Britain, economic crisis at the end of the 19th century generated significant unemployed protest. In 1886, the trough of the Great Depression, the unemployment rate stood at 10.2% (compared to 2.6% in 1883). Joblessness hit not only the ranks of casual workers, but those of the labour aristocracy of unionized engineers, metalworkers, and shipbuilders. In February 1886, a demonstration of 30,000 unemployed workers in Trafalgar Square was met with severe police repression, while a year later, on 13 March 1897 ("Bloody Sunday"), three died as the attempt of between 75,000 and 100,000 unemployed workers to march on Trafalgar Square was again beaten back violently by the police (Flanagan 1991:25,27-29,35).

In the case of Britain, running battles between the state and the unemployed spilled over into the pre-World War One era, even though unemployment levels were not to reach those of the worst years of the 1880s or, later, of the 1920s and 1930s. Still, despite the worldwide economic boom of the Edwardian *belle époque*, the plight of the working-class poor deteriorated significantly between 1900 and 1913. National income rose 20% for the period, but wages fell by approximately 5%, while prices of food and clothing increased, creating "conditions pregnant with unrest" (Flanagan 1991:56). In June 1905, the first ever "hunger march" of the unemployed, from Leicester to London, took place, while later in the year between 3,000 and 6,000 unemployed women marched through London's West End demanding work. In November 1905, in the largest demonstration of the unemployed then seen in Britain, a procession of between 15,000 and 25,000 unemployed workers through the West End had grown to 100,000 upon arrival in Hyde Park. In September 1908, more than 10,000 unemployed workers demonstrated in Glasgow, while the following month, with the

unemployment rate at 9.5% (the highest since the 1880s), demonstrations of more than 10,000 unemployed workers took place in both Sheffield and London (Flanagan 1991:60-61,68,71,76-77).

2.2. *The Context of Protest in the Interwar Period*

The collective protest action and, later, the organizations,[27] of the unemployed which became a prominent feature of the interwar period in Britain and the USA were therefore not without historical precedent. However, the context for protest action in the interwar period differed radically from that of the pre-World War One era – it was, above all, one of "mass joblessness" (Flanagan 1991:119). In Britain, with the collapse of the post-World War One boom, the rate of unemployment rose from 0.8% in April 1920 to a staggering 23.0% in May 1921. With 1.5 million out of work in the Spring of 1921, unemployment did not fall below one million until the onset of World War Two. As such, even though unemployment rates for the 1930s were subsequently to exceed those of the 1920s,[28] the interwar period as a whole was characterized by levels of unemployment consistently higher than for the first two decades of the 20th century. (See Figures 1 and 2 and Appendices 1 and 2). In Britain, by the depths of the Great Depression, when some three million were officially unemployed, it is estimated that approximately one half of the national workforce was personally touched by unemployment: "being out of work was an experience common to a large part of the British working class in the inter-war years" (Croucher 1987:13-14; Flanagan 1991:117,118).[29]

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[27] In Britain, in the form, eventually, of the National Unemployed Workers' Movement; in the USA, in the form, eventually, of the Workers' Alliance of America (see below).

[28] In the case of the USA, Lorence (1996:15) notes that "the precipitous decline of 1929-1930 has sometimes obscured the fact that even in the relatively prosperous 1920s, the national army of the unemployed had grown substantially". Piven and Cloward (1979:45) also note that the relative prosperity of the 1920s was accompanied by continuing high unemployment throughout the decade. This is also true of Britain, where unemployment had reached almost two million even before the onset of the Great Depression (Croucher 1987:13).

[29] Flanagan (1991:182) describes how during 1932, the worst year for unemployment during the Depression, 46% of the insured working population experienced unemployment at some time during the year.

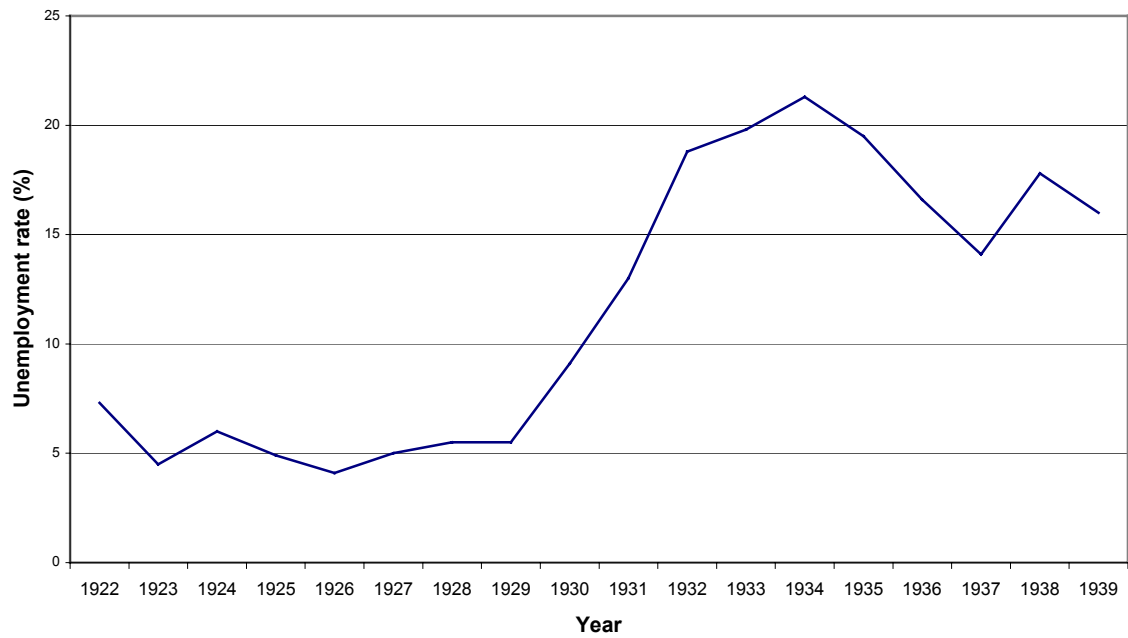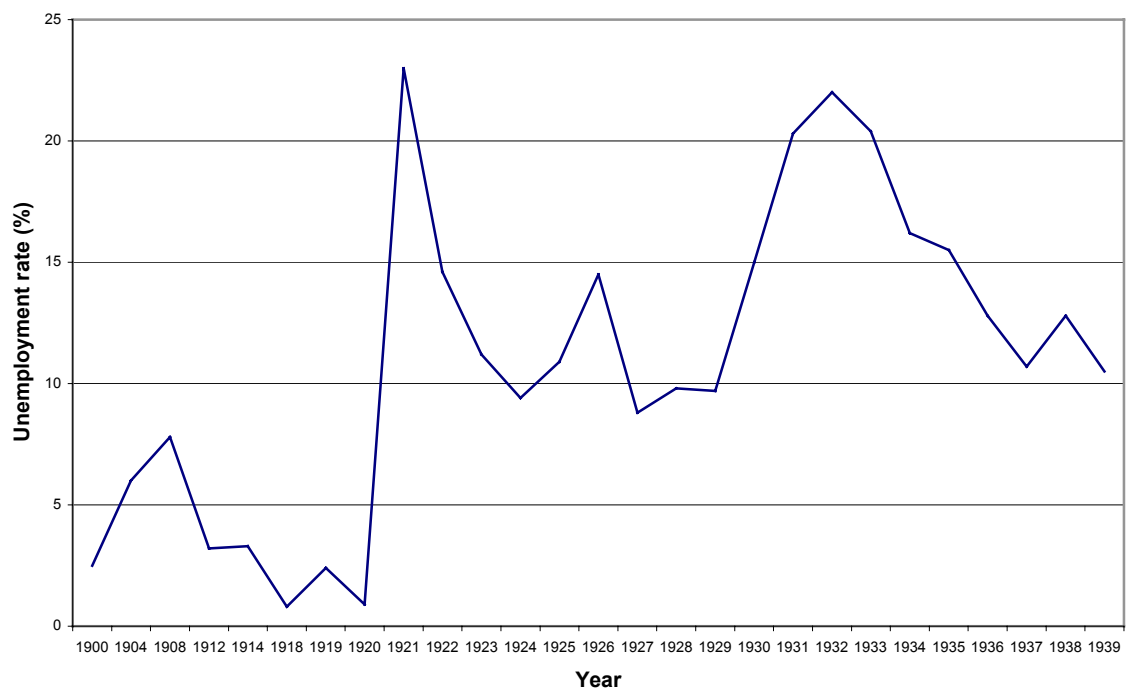**Figure 1. Unemployment in the USA, 1922-1939**

Figure 2. Unemployment in Britain, 1900-1939

Mass unemployment in the interwar period also emerged in a situation of totally inadequate welfare provision. In Britain, the system of relief existing in 1919 was basically that established by the 1834 Poor Law. Benefit levels were such that the loss of one's job entailed a sharp drop in living standards.[30] When unemployment rose steadily in 1920, the situation was increasingly desperate for those affected; eviction and starvation were imminent prospects. As many social and economic historians have emphasized, the majority of the unemployed and their dependents lived in absolute poverty in the interwar period. A strong link existed between unemployment and poor housing, inadequate diets, and ill health (Croucher 1987:17,27,106).

Mass unemployment and severe material deprivation therefore defined the context in which collective protest action of the unemployed was subsequently to emerge. They also determined the nature of the unemployed's demands: it is notable that while the unemployed persistently called for bold programmes of job creation, they were, for the most part, concerned with the alleviation of immediate hardship. To this extent, the battles of the unemployed centred largely on ameliorating, rather than escaping from, the condition of unemployment.

2.3. Protest Action of the Unemployed in the Interwar Period

In both Britain and the USA, two major waves of protest marked the interwar period, both in contexts of rapidly rising unemployment and clear and unambiguous threats to the material well being of the unemployed. The first occurred during the recession that followed World War One; the second in the immediate aftermath of the stock market crash of 1929 and the onset of the Great Depression. Conversely, in the late 1920s, and the mid/late 1930s, when rates of unemployment were falling, levels of protest declined significantly. In this sense, protest did indeed ebb and flow with fluctuations in the level of unemployment.

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[30] As for the USA, as late as 1931, unemployment insurance and social security benefits were non-existent, and state-level and federal welfare programs were minimal (Norrell 1993:38).

Thus between 1919 and 1922, in a context of rapidly rising unemployment, Britain was engulfed by a wave of protest. By February 1919, in the midst of post-war demobilization, unemployment was rising by 70,000 per week. While prices had risen between 1913 and 1920 by more than 200%, unemployment rates remained at the 1913 level of 7 shillings per week, until being raised to 11 shillings in December 1919. Much of the discontent centred on ex-servicemen, disgruntled by the Lloyd George government's highly conspicuous failure to build, as it had promised, "homes fit for heroes", and of whom 408,000 were unemployed by May 1919. In April 1919, most industrial centers in Britain witnessed mass demonstrations by ex-servicemen campaigning for the right to work; a meeting of 10,000 ex-servicemen in Parliament Square in May 1919 was violently repressed by the police. In July 1919, 20,000 unemployed ex-servicemen marched in Sheffield. In March 1920, the violent repression of an unemployed ex-servicemen's march on Downing Street provoked a demonstration of between 10,000 and 50,000 in Hyde Park the following month which condemned police violence and, in the spirit of the times, called for the formation of a "Red Army" (Flanagan 1991:93,95,101,106).

A continuing and steady increase in the rate of unemployment during 1920 and 1921 provoked further unemployed protest. Croucher (1987:29) refers to the "ferocious repression" of demonstrators in London, where the unemployment rate doubled between September and November 1920. Police brutality in the notorious "Battle of Downing Street" in October 1920 was particularly shocking and proved to be an important catalyst in the increasingly organized nature of unemployed protest. In February 1921, a motion at the Labour Party's annual conference preventing an address by the unemployed led to 10,000 jobless workers leaving the conference, amidst scenes of uproar, to march on Hyde Park. A government decision in July 1921 to cut both the level and period of eligibility of unemployment benefit provoked widespread protests, demanding "work or full maintenance". By September 1921, 380,000 unemployed workers had exhausted their benefits; by November 1921, approximately 500,000 were without any form of benefit. In these conditions, the summer of 1921 was marked, throughout Britain, by sporadic, massive and violent clashes between the unemployed and the police. The period of post-World War One protest by the unemployed culminated a year later in the first organized "Hunger March"

of the interwar period, in which some 2,000 workers descended on London in October 1922, subsequently forming the backbone of a 70,000-strong demonstration in the capital the following month (Croucher 1987:27,29,39,43,54; Flanagan 1991:112,128,138-9,154-5).

Similarly, the staggering increase in unemployment following the stock market collapse of October 1929 provoked the second major wave of unemployed protest of the interwar period. In the USA, it is estimated that *2.5 million* people were thrown out of work within two weeks of the crash. The number of unemployed rose nearly ten-fold from 429,000 in October 1929 to 4,065,000 in January 1930, subsequently climbing to 8 million in January 1931 and 9 million in October 1931. By early 1930, unemployed demonstrations in the tens of thousands, often under Communist banners of "Work or Wages" and "Fight - Don't Starve", were taking place in all of the major American cities. The Comintern's declaration of March 6, 1930, as International Unemployment Day (subsequently known as "Red Thursday") gained surprisingly strong support across the USA, with demonstrations of 100,000 or more in New York and Detroit, 50,000 in Boston and Chicago, 30,000 in Philadelphia, 25,000 in Cleveland, and 20,000 in Pittsburgh. Particularly bloody battles ensued between police and demonstrators in Detroit, New York, Cleveland, Milwaukee and Boston. In early 1932, 60,000 demonstrated against unemployment in Pittsburgh, while in the Spring of 1932, thousands of unemployed veterans and their families marched on Washington (Folsom 1991:255; Lorence 1996:23,24-5; Piven and Cloward 1979:45-6,50-52,51n5).

In Britain, too, unemployment increased steadily after the stock market collapse, from a rate of 10.3% in October 1929 to 18.5% in October 1930, 21.7% in October 1931, and an interwar peak of 23.0% in August 1932. As in the USA, such dramatic economic collapse generated widespread protest. In March 1929, almost 1,000 unemployed workers from all over the country took part in the second National Hunger March; a third took place in late 1930. The period from late 1931 to 1932, with the unemployment rate approaching an historic peak, was marked by considerable social upheaval and violence, the worst in Britain for the interwar period, though less so than in the USA. Large demonstrations were common in all major towns in October 1931; in Manchester, for example, 20,000 unemployed workers

clashed violently with police in one of the worst episodes of the interwar period. The National government's reduction of unemployment benefit levels and introduction of the hated means test caused popular outrage in 1932, a "year of bloody violence" (Flanagan 1991:186). A National Day of Struggle in February 1932 saw especially large demonstrations in Manchester and Bristol, while a further wave of revolt swept through numerous towns in September 1932, including the violent repression of a demonstration of 10,000 in Birkenhead, and culminating in the fourth National Hunger March in which a contingent of 1,500 delivered a petition to London of more than one million signatures protesting unemployment. The marchers suffered particularly brutal treatment at the hands of the police (Croucher 1987:95,100,112,121,124,129,133-4,139,140; Flanagan 1991:171,184,185,188).

While collective protest of the unemployed was most intense, in both Britain and the USA, during the three years following World War One and the three years following the stock market collapse of 1929, it was to remain a recurrent feature of the 1930s. In the USA, by the time of Roosevelt's inauguration in January 1933, unemployment was increasing at a rate of approximately 200,000 per month, to reach 12 million by March 1933 and 20 million by the winter of 1934, an estimated 6 million of whom had been out of work for more than one year. In these conditions, unemployed agitation was commonplace in most major cities during 1933, 1934 and 1935 (Piven and Cloward 1979:66-67). In Britain also, even though the annual national unemployment rate had peaked by 1932 (at 22.5%),[31] further National Hunger Marches took place in 1934 (with unemployment at 17.7%) and in 1936 (with unemployment at 14.3%). The latter, with 1,500 marchers, was, in fact, the largest of the interwar period. Moreover, the introduction of the notorious Unemployment Insurance Act in June 1934 and January 1935, which established compulsory "training camps" for benefit claimants and further complicated and restricted eligibility for means-tested benefits, provoked the most massive protests of the entire interwar period. On 13 January, 1935, 100,000 marched against the Act in the Rhondda Valley, in the heart of the South Wales coalfield, while later in the month, 150,000 marched in various demonstrations throughout

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[31] The highest monthly figure for unemployment was August 1932, at 23.0% (Flanagan 1991:171).

Britain. On 3 February, 1935, 300,000 again demonstrated in South Wales (Croucher 1987:160,169,170,179; Flanagan 1991:26).

In general, though, just as unemployed protest emerged in conditions of high and rising unemployment, so it receded with declining unemployment. In Britain, economic recovery in 1922, which saw unemployment rates fall from 17.7% to 12.8% in the course of the year, marked the start of five years of quiescence on the part of the unemployed. (The unemployment rate subsequently fell to an interwar low-point of 9.3% in June 1924). Similarly, generally declining rates of unemployment from 1934 onwards were associated with much lower levels of collective protest by the unemployed (Croucher 1987:58-59,183; Flanagan 1991:148-149,157-158,160,177). To this extent, the collective protest I have described here did indeed ebb and flow with corresponding fluctuations in the rate of unemployment.

2.4. The Emergence of Movements of the Unemployed

Who were the protesting unemployed? In both Britain and the USA, high unemployment in the interwar period was concentrated heavily in certain sectors and regions. In Britain, the majority of the unemployed were manual workers in the old staple industries of coal, shipbuilding, iron and steel, engineering and textiles. And while the economic slump was national, the concentration of such staple industries in certain regions ensured that the latter, normally entirely dependent on the given staple industry, were devastated in a manner not experienced elsewhere. In fact, the geographical pattern of unemployment in Britain was reversed in the interwar period – while before 1914, it had tended to be short-term, at its worst during cyclical troughs in London, the Midlands and the South, from 1920 onwards, a "new phenomenon of long-term, heavy, structural unemployment persisting through all stages of the trade cycle emerged in the traditional industrial areas, particularly in industrial Scotland, the north, and south Wales" (Flanagan 1991:119;117-119).[32] The paradigmatic case

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[32] For example, in 1929, the unemployment rate for South-East England was 3.8%, compared to 18.8% in Wales. This sharp disparity persisted for the remainder of the interwar period: in 1932, 13.1% versus 38.1%;

was that of coal mining, where employment levels fell from 1.14 million in 1921 to 0.75 million in 1936 and where the unemployment rate rose from 3% in 1923 to 29.7% in 1934. Even then, the effective unemployment rate was much higher in some coalfield areas, such as South Wales, where many communities, by the mid-1930s suffered near-*total* unemployment: "*mining* communities were becoming or had become *unemployed* communities"[33]

A similar pattern of sectorally and regionally concentrated unemployment emerged in the USA where, at the onset of the Great Depression, "particular industries were devastated, as were the towns where they were located" (Piven and Cloward 1979:46). As in Britain, unemployment in the coal regions was "endemic" (Piven and Cloward 1979:71), while in textiles, almost half of New England's workers were unemployed by the end of 1930, and *ninety* per cent of New York's garment workers by January 1932. Industrial cities and states suffered notably in the interwar period: the unemployment rate stood at between 30% and 40% in Toledo, Ohio, in January 1930, and at 40% in Chicago in October 1931. Severe economic distress persisted into the mid/late 1930s in industrial states such as New Jersey, Ohio, Pennsylvania and Illinois. In the US context, the counterpart to the catastrophic case of mining in Britain was that of the automobile industry. The number of workers for Ford fell from 130,000 in the spring of 1929 to only 37,000 in the summer of 1931; by this time, 40% of Detroit's unemployed were ex-Ford workers. In the industry's heartland, Michigan, unemployment levels were unmatched in any other state during the depression years. In 1930, the unemployment rate in Detroit was the highest of the USA's twelve largest cities, while the average unemployment rate in Michigan between 1930 and 1933 of 34% was significantly higher than the national average of 26%; in 1933, the state suffered an unemployment rate of 46%. By January 1935, 45% of the state's urban jobless were located in the manufacturing and mechanical industries; of these, almost half had worked in the automobile industry (Folsom 1991:303; Lorence 1996:4,5; Piven and Cloward 1979:46,60,61,71,83).

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in 1936, 5.6% versus 28.5% (Flanagan 1991:118).

[33] Francis 1985:13 cited in Richards 1996:28 (original emphasis); Croucher 1987:14,15,87; Flanagan 1991:117-119,160; Richards 1996:11.

This particularly concentrated profile of unemployment lent the unemployed certain resources. The displaced workforces of the hardest hit regions were often able to draw on pre-existing traditions of trade unionism or, at a minimum, strong occupational identities, essential to the forging of a militant collective identity. In the USA, unemployed autoworkers and miners were especially prominent protesters throughout the interwar period, and key components of an emerging movement of the unemployed (Lorence 1996:42,67,68; Folsom 1991:272; Piven and Cloward 1979:71).[34] Similarly in Britain,

> it was .. the traditional industrial proletariat, with its high degree of community solidarity, homogeneity of outlook, and a history of class-conscious activity, that was to be the group who bore the brunt of unemployment in this period, and who accordingly was to shape the politics of the unemployed in this era .. Befittingly it was the denuded pit village, the quiet mill town, and the smokeless heavy industrial city, that were to provide both the physical and social basis of the politics of the unemployed during the inter-war period (Flanagan 1991:119).

Croucher (1987:15) notes that the overwhelming majority of the unemployed had some experience of the "disciplines, routines and benefits of collective organization through their trade unions".[35] Jobless engineers, boilermakers and, above all, miners[36] formed the mainstay of unemployed protest in the 1920s and 1930s; it was from their ranks that the typical militant emerged to lead the unemployed at local and national levels (Flanagan 1991:119,149; Croucher 1987:15,16,26,92,148,198-9).

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[34] Schwantes (1994:101,140,150) also notes the prominent role of unemployed metal miners in the Western contingent of the Coxeyite rebellion of the late 19th century.

[35] The basis of the collective identity of unemployed ex-servicemen, in the forefront of protest immediately after World War One, was somewhat different, though no less important for that. In any case, as general levels of unemployment rose rapidly in the early 1920s, the initially sharp distinction between jobless ex-servicemen and jobless workers in the heavily unionized staple industries blurred (see Flanagan 1991:ch.4; Croucher 1987:16,26).

[36] Unemployed miners continued to protest even in the mid-1920s and late 1930s, periods when general levels of unemployed protest were declining in Britain. The most notable example is that of the 1927 Hunger March from South Wales to London (Croucher 1987:76,87,150,183; Flanagan 1991:160,202).

In addition, the concentrated nature of mass unemployment in the interwar period meant that it was experienced collectively and not in individual isolation.[37] And while the identity generated by such collective experience was a peculiar one – being unemployed was an "identity" that workers wished to shed rather than proclaim – it did promote the laying of blame for unemployment at the feet of wider, uncontrollable forces, rather than individual shortcomings. As such, a critical feature of the interwar period was the increasing demands made on the state to, if not resolve the unemployment crisis, then at least to ameliorate the conditions of the unemployed themselves, and a concomitant, though extremely grudging, recognition on the part of the state that it indeed bore some responsibility in the matter.

In Britain, this was not without historical precedent. In 1895, after widespread agitation by the unemployed, the establishment in parliament of a Select Committee on Distress from Want of Employment was an implicit admission of state responsibility for the unemployed. By 1904, Keir Hardie's declaration that unemployment was a national problem meriting a national solution gained a credibility unthinkable a few decades earlier. The subsequent Unemployed Workmen Act (1905) and National Insurance Act (1911) reflected growing recognition on the part of the state that the problem of unemployment was one for which it bore some responsibility. Yet it was not until the emergence of mass unemployment in the interwar period that the unemployed, demanding "Work or Full Maintenance", placed the responsibility for their plight squarely and unambiguously on the authorities rather than on themselves (Croucher 1987:29; Flanagan 1991:44,56-7,59,84-5,224-5).

In the USA, this shift in thinking was perhaps even more dramatic. Prior to World War One, the jobless had looked to, and demanded, federal government relief for the unemployed and federal solutions to unemployment – in 1894, Coxey's army of unemployed had, after all, descended on Washington, DC, calling for job creation via public works

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[37] Croucher (1987:20,21) describes how the process of signing-on for unemployment benefits, perhaps twice weekly, created a "Labour-Exchange subculture", whilst the emergence of a public "street-corner" society of the jobless, whether amongst the miners in their pit villages, or the tailors and garment workers in London's East End, ensured that "it was impossible to regard yourself as the only person unemployed in the area: the human evidence stood around in public in a way which is not true today".

programmes, only to see their demands brutally rejected by the federal government.[38] This was to change in the interwar period (though given the scale of the unemployment crisis by the onset of the Great Depression, incredibly slowly). Certainly, by the end of the 1920s, increasing numbers of the unemployed themselves perceived their misfortune as a collective one (Piven and Cloward 1979:49) and either blamed the government itself for unemployment or at least expected government to do something to resolve the situation. That the multitude of squalid settlements of the unemployed and homeless emerging in the USA in the late 1920s were labeled "Hoovervilles" (Norrell 1993:16) reflected the responsibility for (and perceived indifference to) the economic situation that was assigned to the incumbent President, Herbert Hoover. Only with the election of Roosevelt in 1932 were popular expectations with respect to the role of the federal government met (see below).

2.5. Mobilization of the Unemployed in the Interwar Period

How was such mobilization generated and sustained? In both Britain and the USA, the unemployed, in the first instance, mobilized themselves. The "vast gamut of unemployed activity" (Flanagan 1991:184) in the interwar period grew out of, and was shaped by, the need to defend themselves in a context of utterly inadequate welfare provision. Some of this activity was uncoordinated, and apparently lacked clear objectives, thereby conforming to the allegedly "rootless volatility" (Flanagan 1991:23)[39] of the unemployed. Yet most of it, even when spontaneous, was not 'rootlessly volatile'; indeed, the interwar period is notable for the degree to which the unemployed, organizing themselves in a spirit of "collective self-help"[40] (Flanagan 1991:132; Croucher 1987:151; Folsom 1991:278), engaged in an endless series of direct actions at the local level. In both Britain and the USA, the unemployed invaded and occupied

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[38] See Schwantes 1994:15,21,33,37,57,100,259,271,274,277-8.

[39] Flanagan (1991:131-2) describes the sporadic and uncoordinated seizure of public buildings, mostly by unemployed ex-servicemen, in Britain in late 1920.

[40] A notable example is that of California's self-help movement during the depression years, to which, at various times, 500,000 families were affiliated, and which had approximately 75,000 active members. By the end of 1932, the movement had spread to 37 states (Kerr 1939 quoted in Folsom 1991:278).

workhouses and relief offices, or demonstrated outside courthouses and legislatures, to extract, or improve levels of, unemployed assistance. By the early 1930s, looting had become a "feature of many disturbances" in Britain (Croucher 1987:136), while at the same time in the USA, the "organized looting of food was a nation-wide phenomenon" (Piven and Cloward 1979:49). The bootlegging of coal by unemployed American miners reached astonishingly well organized proportions (to the tune of 1.5 million tons in 1932). Rent strikes waged by the unemployed were common in both countries. Perhaps most notable of all was the mass – and often physical - resistance to eviction from rented property, possibly the worst threat facing the unemployed during the post-World War One slump and at the onset of the Great Depression. Neighbourhood "block committees" often succeeded in defying the attempts of bailiffs and marshals to repossess rented property (Folsom 1991:264; Piven and Cloward 1979:53), while this type of "street militancy" in ravaged Detroit "practically stopped evictions" (Lorence 1986:29-30; Croucher 1987:71-74; Flanagan 1991:106,109,142,195; Folsom 1991:264,271; Piven and Cloward 1979:53,54-5,56-60,67,72).[41]

2.5.1. External Agency

Nonetheless, while such militant disruptive action very often won important concessions (see below), in terms of forging the unemployed into an organized movement, which functioned over a sustained period of time, the role of external agents was critical. In Britain, the National Unemployed Workers' Committee Movement (NUWCM) (1921-1929) and its successor, the National Unemployed Workers' Movement (NUWM) (1929-1939), were forged through the interplay of local-level protest action by the unemployed themselves and the organizing initiatives of various radical groupings. In the immediate aftermath of World War One, socialist militants played a key role in organizing the International Union of Ex-Servicemen (IUX) and the National Union of Ex-Servicemen (NUX). The latter expanded from a single branch with 50 members in May 1919 to more than one hundred branches with 100,000 members six months

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[41] And in the USA, many of those who failed to resist eviction built the aforementioned "Hoovervilles", possibly the most poignant example of collective self-help of the Depression era (Folsom 1991:277).

later; by July 1920, membership stood at 300,000. Shop stewards from the besieged ranks of skilled organized labour succeeded subsequently in pushing the NUX in a decidedly militant direction by advocating, in the context of rapidly rising unemployment, the essential unity of interest between demobilized soldiers and unemployed workers. In so doing, they laid the foundations for the NUWCM which emerged in 1921. Moreover, they went on to assume an important leadership role. While they did not create the unemployed movement, it was the unemployed 'labour aristocrats', drawn from the ranks of the shop stewards' movement in skilled heavy industry (especially engineering), and bringing with them valuable trade union-based organizational skills, who exerted leadership of the unemployed at the local and national levels (Flanagan 1991:93,96-116,122,124-5,131,149; Croucher 1987:12,15,21,26-7,30-1,198-9).

However, in the British case, the key organizer of the unemployed was the Communist Party (CPGB). Indeed, bringing discipline and centralization to unemployed activity, Croucher (1987:202) argues that the "movement owed its very existence to the CPGB". Certainly, the party, whose members were predominantly working-class, and who were "immersed in the everyday life of Britain's industrial cities" (Croucher 1987:32), figured prominently throughout the 1920s and early 1930s in much of the local-level activity of the unemployed described above. Moreover, by gaining control in 1921 of both the London District of Unemployed Organisations (itself formed from 12 local-level committees of the unemployed) and the Scottish unemployed movement, party activists played a critical role in laying the foundations of the NUWCM (Croucher 1987:31,76,87,90,119; Flanagan 1991:127-8,132,160). (Table 1).

In the USA, too, the organization of the unemployed (culminating, eventually, in the formation of the Workers' Alliance of America) was also forged through the efforts of a series of radical external agents. Again, the Communist Party (CP) figured prominently; indeed, as early as 1921, it had tried, unsuccessfully, to organize the unemployed into "Councils of Action" (Piven and Cloward 1979:68). With the onset of mass unemployment following the stock market crash of 1929, the party's organizing efforts bore fruit. Ever-conscious of its image as "an intrepid fighter for the underdog" (Cochran 1977:79), the party, by mid-1930, viewed the fight against unemployment as the "tactical key to the present state of the class struggle" and made organizing the unemployed its highest priority. Demanding a seven-hour day, a five-day week,

unemployment insurance administered by workers, an end to evictions, and public funds for emergency relief (Folsom 1991:242), the party was to lead, sometimes alone, the struggle against unemployment for the 1929-1933 period. It was prominent in many direct action campaigns at the community level and in 1929 began a new campaign, this time successfully, to esta-

Table 1: *Formal Organizations of the Unemployed Movement, Britain 1921-1935*

January 1921	London District Council claims representation of 250,000 unemployed.
April 1921	Delegates of unemployed committees meet at International Socialist Club, London. 81 representatives from 50 committees, with at least half of delegates from London. Meeting, dominated by CPGB, elects National Action Committee and subsequently announces formation of *National Unemployed Workers' Committee Movement (NUWCM)*. Latter remains "nothing more than a hopeful umbrella term for a loose federation of local committees".
November 1921	First full national conference of NUWCM. 150 delegates, with 219 affiliated committees: 66 from the North-East, 60 from Wales, 48 from London. Establishment of paid national organizer. NUWCM is divided into 7 divisions.
March 1923	NUWCM membership of 100,000.
1925	NUWCM National Conference establishes Councils of Action (to support striking miners).
March 1926	NUWCM membership of 10,000.
June 1928	Conference of Scottish NUWCM branches. NUWCM "strongest in mining areas".
December 1928	NUWCM membership of 10,000.
September 1929	Sixth National Conference of NUWCM.
October 1929	NUWCM changes its name to *National Unemployed Workers' Movement (NUWM)*.
1929	Establishment by NUWM of National Legal Department and of Women's Department. Strengthening of national headquarters.
1929	Conference of NUWM. 33 branches in Northern England, 7 in South Wales, 2 in Scotland, 2 in London. "Not national in scope".
December 1929	NUWM membership of 20,000.
1930	NUWM membership of 39,000.
August 1931	NUWM membership of 20,000.
December 1931	NUWM membership of 37,000.
October 1932	NUWM membership of 50,000.
February 1933	"Organizational highpoint of NUWM". 100,000 members in 349 branches, 36 District Councils and 34 Women's Sections.
February 1934	National Congress of NUWM attended by nearly 1,500 delegates.
December 1934	Ninth National Conference of NUWM organizes "mass action" against Unemployment Insurance Bill.
Spring 1935	NUWM membership of more than 100,000.

Source: Croucher 1987:38, 48, 58, 76, 92, 102, 109, 148, 161, 168, 173; Flanagan 1991:165, 167, 170, 180.

blish "Unemployed Councils" throughout the USA. The following year, the party moved to create a national organization of the unemployed and in July 1930, at a National Unemployment Convention in Chicago, was instrumental in the establishment of the National Unemployed Councils of the United States. Party sponsorship of the massive demonstrations on International Unemployment Day on 6 March 1930 "marked the peak of CP political influence among the unemployed in the 1930s" (Lorence 1996:25). The party organized the First National Hunger March of the unemployed in December 1931 (Folsom 1991:285), and figured prominently in the notoriously brutal struggle of unemployed autoworkers with Ford in Detroit in March 1932.[42]

However, from 1933 onwards, the number of groups attempting to organize the unemployed increased, and the ideological basis of unemployed activity became more diverse. By 1934, the period of Communist predominance in the struggles of the unemployed was at an end, as the party was increasingly challenged, and eventually supplanted, by rival organizations. The Socialist Party, initially slow to recognize the success of CP activity amongst the unemployed, began its own organizing activity from 1932 onwards, setting up Unemployed Leagues in Illinois, Ohio, West Virginia, New Jersey and Pennsylvania, and major cities such as New York and Baltimore. The Musteites[43] did likewise in Ohio, West Virginia, Kentucky, North Carolina and Pennsylvania. Elsewhere, though often on a more localized basis, other radical groupings were instrumental in setting up organizations of the unemployed, or lent their resources to organizations already in existence. For example, the radical Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) and the Conference for Progressive Labor Action played critical roles in the establishment in Seattle of the Unemployed Citizens' League, with a membership of 12,000 in 1931 in Seattle, and 80,000 in 1933 in the state of Washington as a whole. In the mining regions, the United Mine Workers led hunger marches in West Virginia, led resistance to evictions in New Mexico, and

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[42] Cochran 1977:77; Lorence 1996:11,18-20,22,26-7,30-1,38-42,46,288-9; Folsom 1991:229,232,242,285-6; Piven and Cloward 1979:50,52,59,68-9.

[43] "A.J. Muste .. headed a non-Communist left-wing group dedicated to progressive unionism in the twenties and early thirties" (Cochran 1977:50).

lent financial support to unemployed groups in Pennsylvania. In Michigan's devastated Upper Peninsula, the National Miners' Union emerged in 1930-31 as the key agent of activism and organization amongst the unemployed. It was these and other radical groupings that jointly organized a conference in Washington in 1935 which established the Workers' Alliance of America (WAA), "the culmination of the organizational efforts among the unemployed" (Cochran 1977:78; Folsom 1991:279,341; Lorence 1996:12,51-3,67,82; Piven and Cloward 1979:69-70,71,75). (Table 2).

In sum, in both Britain and the USA, external agents played a critical role in generating and then sustaining an organizational structure for the protest action of the unemployed in the interwar period: "it is clear that in most instances, external coordination was an important factor in mass protest, and that after 1934, this tendency became more pronounced" (Lorence 1996:292). The unemployed movements were the product, therefore, of mobilization by the unemployed themselves and the considerable resources lent to them by external agents.

3. Problems of the Unemployed Movements

3.1. The Movements and their Memberships

In formal organizational terms, the scale and longevity of the interwar movements of the unemployed were impressive. In the USA, it has been estimated that "easily two million workers joined in some form of unemployed activity at some point in the thirties" (Rosenzweig 1974:43 cited in Piven and Cloward 1979:56n16), while in Britain, approximately one million people passed through the ranks of the NUWCM and NUWM (Croucher 1987:202). This reflected the latent discontent generated by mass unemployment and the considerable capacity, on occasion, of the unemployed movements to mobilize hundreds of thousands of unemployed workers in collective protest on the basis of such discontent (Croucher 1987:11,206; Flanagan 1991:180,190-1,195; Lorence 1996:289).

Table 2: *Formal Organizations of the Unemployed Movement, USA 1930-1936*

March 1930	Communists hold meeting, with 215 delegates from 13 states, calling for formation of autonomous national organization of unemployed.
March 1930	Preliminary National Conference on Unemployment, with 215 delegates from 49 states.
July 1930	National Unemployment Convention in Chicago, with 1,320 delegates. Establishment of national federation of state and local Unemployed Councils: the National Unemployed Councils of the USA.
Fall 1932	(Socialist) Chicago Workers' Committee establishes the Federation of Unemployed Workers' Leagues of America.
July 1933	In Columbus, Ohio, 800 delegates from 13 states form the National Unemployed League. Membership reaches "at one point" 150,000.
1933	Unemployed Councils have 150,000 members; Unemployed Citizens' League has 80,000 members.
February 1934	Third National Convention of Unemployed Councils in Washington, DC. Adoption of formal constitution.
March 1934	Leaders of Socialist-led organizations in Baltimore, New York, Westchester, Pittsburgh, Reading and Hartford establish Eastern Federation of Unemployed and Emergency Workers.
Summer/Fall 1934	Eastern Federation meets with Socialist-led state federations from Illinois, Wisconsin and Florida, leading to establishment of Provisional National Committee.
January 1935	National Congress for Social and Unemployment Insurance, with delegates from 101 "widely different organizations" concerned with relief.
Early 1935	First National Workers' Alliance Convention, Washington, DC. Delegates from 16 states. Establishment of "permanent nonpartisan federation" of most of the large unemployed organizations, the *Workers' Alliance of America (WAA)*. Adoption of constitution, dues-paying system, and establishment of National Executive Committee. Latter directed to negotiate unification with Communist-led Unemployed Councils.
1935	Pennsylvania Unemployed League has 25,000 members in 12 cities. Pennsylvania Security League has 70,000 members. Pittsburgh Unemployed Citizens' League has 50,000 dues-paying members in 50 locals.
April 1936	Second National Workers' Alliance Convention, Washington, DC, with 900 delegates representing organizations from 36 states, including the Unemployed Councils. Formal consolidation of WAA via merging of Workers' Alliance, Unemployed Councils, National Unemployed League, American Workers' Union, and several smaller independent state groups. Establishment of national headquarters in Washington, DC.
End 1936	WAA has 600,000 members, with 1,600 locals in 43 states.

Source: Folsom 1991:261,264,274,286,351,387,415,417; Lorence 1996:27,56; Piven and Cloward 1979: 70,72,74-76.

Yet, for the movements themselves, the unemployed constituted a problematic constituency. First, the militancy of the unemployed was decidedly ambiguous. While some have argued that the behaviour of the unemployed in the interwar period was indeed transformed (Lorence 1996:13), the *militancy* of the unemployed, even when it assumed very radical proportions[44], was nonetheless always sporadic. Most authors argue for the extremely demoralizing effects of unemployment, with all that this implied for would-be organizers. Many of the unemployed accepted their fate with "quiet resignation" (Lorence 1996:8); Croucher (1987:21,209) talks of the "apathy and despair" and "corrosive isolation" of joblessness, while Cochran (1977:78) describes how the long-term unemployed, far from becoming organization-minded, "sank under the leaden weight of hopelessness and inertia". For the most part, "unemployment in the 20s and 30s, as now, destroys people. It does not politicize people" (Croft 1983 cited in Flanagan 1991:194).

Second, the consciousness and identity of being unemployed were by no means propitious for collective organization. As Cochran (1977:78) notes, "though unemployment was a mass phenomenon in the thirties, the unemployed considered the lack of a job a temporary misfortune, not a vocation (..) To the extent that he had a consciousness of kind, it was a consciousness that the unemployed worker was determined to get rid of, not to perpetuate". And the attempt to escape the predicament of unemployment meant that the unemployed population was a relatively transient one. In the case of Britain, "the average member of the NUWM had only a fleeting association with the movement, paying only a few penny subscriptions before he or she fell out of touch, found work … or moved" (Croucher 1987:148-9). This phenomenon was especially pronounced in the USA.[45] In 1932, in the depths of the Depression, possibly up to 2 million migrants were shifting from one place to another within the USA; the Southern Pacific Railroad ejected 683,457 people from its trains in the course of the year (Folsom 1991:311; Piven and Cloward 1979:48). In these

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[44] Lorence (1996:41) cites a survey in Detroit in 1932 which found that 25% of unemployed workers thought that "a revolution might be a good thing".

[45] On the comparative immobility of the unemployed in interwar Britain, see Ginzberg 1991 [1942]. The unemployed movement in Britain argued for work to be found where people were, and tried to dissuade workers from uprooting themselves (Croucher 1987:101).

circumstances, "it was extremely difficult to maintain a long-term organization because of a shifting, transient membership base of jobless workers whose work status was in a constant state of flux. Because of their mobility, the jobless did not develop the close bond with one another that might have facilitated the establishment of a more stable institution" (Lorence 1996:45).[46] A perennial problem for the unemployed movement was therefore how to mobilize and organize the unemployed on a continuous basis (Croucher 1987:202).[47]

In fact, this problem proved, ultimately, to be insurmountable. Instead, just as protest itself tended to ebb and flow with fluctuations in the rate of unemployment, so too did the organizational strength of the unemployed movements (measured in terms of membership levels) (See Tables 1 and 2). To a very large extent, therefore, the movements were at the mercy of changes in the unemployment rate. The pattern in Britain during the 1920s illustrates the point. With economic recovery and declining unemployment in 1924, "the times were unpropitious for any organization of the unemployed" (Flanagan 1991:158). The most important factor in the NUWCM's quiescence over the next five years was the decline in unemployment: "it was not only a question of the members lost directly to the NUWCM who moved back into employment (very few members continued their allegiance when they were in work again).[48] It was also a question of the psychology of the situation in that people hoped that they might get work, and this tended of course to distract them from agitation as one of the unemployed" (Croucher 1987:58-9). Though the NUWCM survived the relative economic boom years of the mid-1920s, it did so "in an attenuated and ossified form"

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[46] Similarly in the late 19th century, the Socialist League had declared, in exasperation, that "the unemployed are not organized and cannot be organized" (Flanagan 1991:23,35).

[47] An added, and no less important, implication of a transient constituency was instability of income. In general, the unemployed in the interwar period were hard-pressed to support themselves, let alone contribute financially to the unemployed movements. The latter were in a chronic state of financial crisis throughout the interwar period (Croucher 1987:53,62,148-9,182; Cochran 1977:78).

[48] This somewhat instrumental attachment of the unemployed to the NUWCM was paralleled in the US case, where people were attracted by the chance of obtaining relief, only to drop out once the relief was obtained (Piven and Cloward 1979:72).

(Croucher 1987:76).[49] Conversely, from 1929 onwards, with unemployment rising once more, the NUWM enjoyed a slow but steady increase in membership levels.

Yet even in periods of peak unemployment, the sobering reality was that relatively few actually entered the movement. In 1933, when the unemployment rate stood at 20.4%, and the NUWM's membership stood at 100,000, this still only meant that 1 in 30 of the unemployed adhered to the organization. Overall, the movement probably never reached more than 10% of the unemployed at any given time (Croucher 1987:87,148,203; Flanagan 1991:172). In sum, the movements' relationship to their own constituency was problematic. As Anuerin Bevan reflected, they were movements of the unemployed, but clearly not of *all* the unemployed: "it is not easy to give organizational expression to circumstances from which men are trying desperately to escape" (Flanagan 1991:123).

3.2. Movement-External Agent Relations

The relationship between the unemployed movements and those external agents in possession of potentially valuable resources was equally difficult. Throughout the interwar period, hostile political forces charged repeatedly that the protest activity of the unemployed was highly vulnerable to manipulation from without, especially that of the Communist Party. As I have noted, the latter (regardless of its ultimate motives and objectives) played a key role in the generation and subsequent organization of collective protest. Yet the continual accusations of Communist domination of the unemployed movements were, in general, highly inaccurate.

In Britain, contrary to the claims of its political rivals on the Left and political opponents on the Right, the NUWCM and NUWM were never Communist Party "fronts". Certainly, many prominent leaders of the unemployed throughout the interwar period were party members, and the party provided the NUWCM with occasional (but by no means

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[49] Croucher (1987:183) also cites declining unemployment after 1934 as a "problem" for the NUWM.

regular) funding. The latter, while sympathetic to the party, was never subordinate to it; the politics of both the NUWCM, and later the NUWM, were never reducible to, or identical with, the CPGB: "the politics of the unemployed in this period continued often to be spontaneous, rarely disciplined, and almost impossible to subjugate to the whims of democratic centralism" (Flanagan 1991:121). At its third national conference in 1923, the NUWCM voted (albeit narrowly) against forming a "United Front" with the CPGB. Indeed, while individual Communists continued to play a critical leadership role in the NUWCM, the party acknowledged as early as 1925 that it exerted no effective control over the unemployed movement. By the 1930s, the NUWM prospered, despite criticisms from the CPGB of its allegedly "legalistic" role in representing the interests of the unemployed within the state bureaucracy, and successfully resisted calls from the Comintern for its abolition, as a means of bringing the unemployed movement firmly under party control. In sum, "while the CPGB was a key element .. the politics of the unemployed were a much broader phenomenon during the inter-war period than the CPGB, and the NUWM was to enjoy a mass legitimacy that the CPGB was never to rival" (Flanagan 1991:178;153-4,161,167-8,174; Croucher 1987:60,104,115).

In the USA too, the CP and the organized unemployed were not synonymous; the former by no means created the latter. It is true, of course, that in attempting to organize the unemployed, the CP was an "external agent" with a decidedly vested interest - it recognized, after all, "that the plight of the unemployed provided an opening for substantial inroads among disenchanted workers" (Lorence 1996:26). Indeed, in its first big recruiting drive after the 1930 demonstrations against unemployment, the party gained 6,000 new members, "largely from the ranks of the unemployed". In 1932, most new party recruits were "won over chiefly through unemployed mass work"; in 1933, 90% of new party members were unemployed; in 1935, two-thirds (Cochran 1977:79). Yet the fact that "so many recruits were unemployed in the early depression years is scarcely surprising or revealing, given the condition of the country" (Cochran 1977:80). Nor did it imply control by the CP of the unemployed themselves, even in organizations that the party itself had sponsored or created. Membership of the Unemployed Councils – the emergence of which implied the growing radicalization of unemployed workers – was not synonymous with membership of the CP. To

the extent that the latter provided leadership, it was "firmly based on pressure and initiative from the jobless community itself .. the unemployed were frequently more militant than the leadership .. leaders sometimes had to catch up with their followers" (Lorence 1996:27-28). In fact, the Unemployed Councils never succeeded in attracting significant numbers of recruits for the CP. Moreover, while the party gained support amongst the unemployed on the basis of its role (at which it excelled) in their concrete, day-to-day struggles, Communist ideology per se "was almost incidental .. a relevant but secondary concern" for those at whom the party directed its appeal (Lorence 1996:31,77,79).

Ironically, it was the relationship of the organized unemployed to their potential allies in the mainstream labour movement[50] that was fraught with complications, though here, there are considerable differences between the US and British cases. Above all in the 1930s, the American unemployed movement developed in a much more benign political environment than did its counterpart in Britain.

In the USA, the Coolidge (1924-28) and Hoover (1928-32) administrations had been indifferent to the plight of the unemployed and consistently hostile to the idea of a role for the federal government in reducing unemployment. Coolidge himself is remembered for his infamous observation that "when more and more people are thrown out of work, unemployment results" (cited in Folsom 1991:231). Hoover, meanwhile, either vetoed or emasculated Congressional legislation to expand federal works programmes, and steadfastly resisted the growing clamour from the big cities' mayors, industrialists and bankers for federal relief for city budgets exhausted by the pressure of growing unemployment. This was to change with Roosevelt's sweeping victory of 1932, when popular expectations with respect to the response of government to the crisis were finally, and explicitly, recognized – indeed, the scale of Roosevelt's victory was a product of such popular expectations.[51] With

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[50] By mainstream, I mean non-revolutionary: in the USA, the AFL, CIO, and the Democratic Party; in Britain, the TUC and the Labour Party.

[51] Following on from heavy Republican losses in the 1930 congressional elections, the 1932 presidential election "produced one of the most sweeping political realignments in American history" (Piven and Cloward 1979:65).

increasing numbers expecting a more comprehensive solution to national economic problems from a more activist government, Roosevelt, in his inauguration address, declared that "this nation asks for action, and action *now*. Our greatest primary task is to put people to work" (Norrell 1993:32). Acknowledging that the economic disaster was national in scope, the federal government assumed direct responsibility (for the first time in American history) for relief of the unemployed and established, in 1933, the Federal Emergency Relief Administration. Roosevelt's New Deal was subsequently consolidated in 1935 with a series of landmark legislative victories, including the Wagner Act (which consolidated the position of labor unions, above all in the auto industry), the introduction of unemployment insurance and social security, and the establishment of the Works Progress Administration (WPA). The latter generated a vast public works program which provided, on average, two million jobs per year during its first five years of existence. Though this failed to keep up with the rate at which unemployment increased in the 1930s,[52] the WPA was nonetheless critical in providing a favourable context for unemployed organization – as a program rooted in the concept of the *right* to gainful employment, it enabled jobless organizers to apply a collective bargaining model to those unemployed workers that it took on. In this way, the programs of the New Deal era provided, at a minimum, an opportunity for a cooperative relationship between the unemployed and organized labour: "among the themes that surfaced in the Roosevelt period, none was more significant than the development of the idea that the unemployed were workers subject to organization on a labor union model".[53]

Such a cooperative relationship was not inevitable. The erstwhile major American labor confederation, the American Federation of Labor (AFL), "maintained a measured distance from the feverish unemployed organizing that occurred in the wake of the [1929] crash" (Lorence 1996:16), avoided any organization of the jobless, fought against unemployment insurance (though it later relented), and refused to allow even its own

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[52] At its peak, the WPA accounted for only one in four of the estimated unemployed: in 1936, for example, when the WPA provided approximately 2.5 million jobs, nearly 10 million were still unemployed (Piven and Cloward 1979:83).

[53] Cochran 1977:77; Folsom 1991:224,229,235,255,258,375-6; Lorence 1996:6,8,11,80,82; Piven and Cloward 1979:47,61-2,64,66,80,83.

members to belong to their unions after becoming unemployed. Even when, with the advent of the WPA in the mid-1930s, public works and federal relief unemployed workers became "legitimate subjects of quasi-union organizational activity" (Lorence 1996:82), the AFL only toyed with the idea, and ultimately reverted to its traditionally cautious and distant stance: "craft union avoidance of unemployed activity was wholly consistent with the elitist tradition of a skilled workers' federation suspicious of government intervention and historically committed to emphasis on the interests of the labor aristocracy" (Lorence 1996:16;82; Folsom 1991:393-4).

In the circumstances, more progressive brands of trade unionism seized their opportunity – first, the United Automobile Workers (UAW),[54] based in the auto industry's heartland of Michigan, and second, and more generally, the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) which emerged as a powerful and militant challenger to the AFL. In sharp contrast to the latter, both the UAW and the CIO promoted a social commitment which went beyond the traditional immediate concerns of their employed dues-paying members and instead extended to the interests of the unemployed themselves. The leader of the UAW, Walter Reuther, articulated a vision of trade unionism "rooted in the Socialist view of organized labor as a sweeping social movement. Convinced that the union must become the worker's extended family, Reuther and his backers accepted the organization's responsibility to support individual members in their hour of greatest need" (Lorence 1996:291).[55] Thus the UAW, at the same time as leading the workplace struggles of its employed members, played a much wider community role by retaining union membership, and providing welfare services, for unemployed autoworkers.[56] Moreover, with the resources at its disposal, "from the moment that the UAW embraced the unemployed, other competing groups were at a

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[54] The UAW, alongside other unions such as the National Miners´ Union, had established their progressive and radical credentials well before Roosevelt's election victory (Lorence 1996:23-24,67-68).

[55] Also, in practical terms for the UAW, organizing the unemployed was a vehicle for union-building. The benefits to the union of retaining the loyalty of the unemployed became apparent in 1941 when previously unemployed auto workers played a key role in the UAW's successful and historic drive for union recognition at Ford (Lorence 1996:14,291).

[56] It did so by creating a Community Services Division, which managed the union's relations with social service agencies, the United Fund, and union families in need of welfare services (Lorence 1996:293).

decided disadvantage. The Workers Alliance [WAA] never recovered .." (Lorence 1996:290). By the late 1930s, it was the UAW and CIO (the latter was greatly influenced by the former) that were the key organizers of the unemployed (Lorence 1996:9,11-14,290-292).

In sharp contrast to the USA in the 1930s, the British unemployed movement endured a much more hostile environment throughout the entire interwar period - what the unemployed gained in these years was almost entirely a product of their own struggles. The Lloyd George Coalition government of 1916-22, the Conservative governments of 1922-24 and 1924-29 and, above all, the National governments of 1931-40, were consistently hostile to the interests and organizations of the unemployed. As early as 1919, the Coalition government rejected any program of large-scale relief work on the grounds that they would "concentrate large masses of men violently discontented with the wages they receive" (Croucher 1987:20). In 1921, it imprisoned unemployed and Communist activists and imposed cuts in unemployment benefits (later rescinded grudgingly in the face of widespread protests). In 1928, in one of the most significant reforms of the interwar period, the Local Government Act of Baldwin's Conservative government abolished the local Boards of Guardians, hitherto responsible for the dispensation of unemployment relief, and established Public Assistance Committees, the funding of which came directly from the Exchequer (that is, the central state). In so doing, a significant – and accessible - target of local-level protest vanished, thereby severely circumscribing the "corrosive influence of the politics of the unemployed" (Flanagan 1991:163). But it was the National government, in the early 1930s, that was to wage the most aggressive and repressive campaign against the unemployed. In late 1931, unemployment benefit was cut by 10%, nearly 0.4 million claimants were removed from statutory benefit at a stroke, and a hated Family Means Test introduced, whereby the 852,000 claimants whom it affected endured the "degrading and humiliating process of a state inquiry into the financial means of the whole family" (Croucher 1987:120). Meanwhile, the 1934 Unemployment Act not only reinforced the effects of the 1928 Local Government Act through the creation of a centrally-controlled Unemployed Assistance Board, but made attendance at government training centers compulsory upon pain of loss of unemployment benefit. Nor, as described earlier, did the government flinch from repressing – often brutally – the protest that such policies provoked. For example, the 1932 Hunger March organized by

the NUWM not only suffered particularly violent treatment at the hands of the police, but was followed by the imprisonment of most of the NUWM's national leaders (Croucher 1987:20,118-120,125,133,141; Flanagan 1991:137,138,146,173,184,186,208-209).

In these circumstances, the unemployed looked to the official labour movement, in the form of the Labour Party and the TUC, for aid and support. Indeed, the "hope of the inter-war unemployed movement was to work within the labour movement to fight unemployment" (Flanagan 1991:120).[57] Yet such hopes were, ultimately, dashed. For the most part, both the Labour Party and the TUC maintained an indifferent and/or hostile distance from the unemployed throughout the interwar period (Flanagan 1991:120).

At first glance, this is somewhat surprising. After all, a large part of the Labour Party's pre-World War One advance had been based on its skillful exploitation and presentation of unemployment as a major political issue. In 1904, Keir Hardie had stated that "the responsibility of providing work for the able bodied unemployed belongs to the nation, and should be systematically undertaken by the state" (Flanagan 1991:56). Thereafter, the party seized, and largely maintained, the political initiative with respect to unemployment. Its Right to Work bill of 1907, for example, proposed the formation of unemployment authorities that would provide jobs for all registered unemployed on public works. Later, the Conservative leader Baldwin would acknowledge (in 1925) how successful the Labour Party had been in identifying itself with the problems of the unemployed during the first twenty years of the 20th century. Yet there were limits to such identification. Above all, "organization and discipline were central to the advance of the Labour Party: they were the antithesis of the spirit and form of the politics of the unemployed" (Flanagan 1991:82). As such, the party remained cautious and distant with respect to the pre-World War One agitations of the unemployed: "a politics of riot and agitation was a politics of unknown risks, not the least being the threat to Labour's leadership" (Flanagan 1991:83; 56,57,64,73).

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[57] C.f. Croucher (1987:40) who argues that in the early 1920s, leaders of the unemployed emphasized the need for "building an independent organization which would co-operate with labour movement bodies, but would also refuse to subordinate its own interests…".

To the chagrin of the unemployed, such caution was to define the Labour Party's behaviour, both in and out of government, after World War One. Emerging as a credible contender for political office, the party's primary objective in the interwar period was to win and then retain the Liberal working class vote. In policy terms, therefore, "it stayed in the center through the 1920s, and was unwilling to adopt any radical program that might seriously combat unemployment .. it was never actually committed to a full employment policy, and was never interested in the radical solutions to the problem proposed by its own left" (Flanagan 1991:120-121). With respect to the unemployed as a constituency, however, such an electoral strategy was fraught with difficulties – indeed, the response of the national labour movement to the growth of the unemployed movement after World War One was "necessarily duplicitous". On the one hand, to a "modern party committed to parliamentary representation, the politics of the unemployed represented an older and seemingly archaic form of working-class political activity" that was not easily controlled. On the other hand, the unemployed had mobilized critical mass support for the party's cause. The NUWCM campaigned hard in the 1924 General Election which brought Labour to power for the first time. For this reason, it is important to emphasise that even the much-vilified interwar Labour governments (those of 1924 and 1929-1931) were responsive, to a certain extent, to the demands of the unemployed. The 1924 government raised unemployment benefits (albeit modestly), and the 1929-31 government abolished (albeit grudgingly) the hated "Not Genuinely Seeking Work" clause of unemployment benefit provision (Croucher 1987:67-68,101; Flanagan 1991:144,159,171).

On balance, though, the Labour Party *demobilized* the unemployed.[58] It did so for three principal reasons. First, as indicated, any independent movement of the unemployed challenged the party's legitimacy as leader of the labour movement: "implicit in much of the politics of the unemployed was a challenge to the position of the Labour Party as representatives of the working class" (Flanagan 1991:145). In September 1921, for example, the London Labour Party expressed its fears of "losing control over the unemployed"

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[58] Even though Flanagan's claim that it managed to "divert much of the seething river of unemployed discontent into the exceedingly narrow gutter of electoral support" (1991:144) is exaggerated.

(Flanagan 1991:145). At the party's national conference the same year, despite rank and file concern with growing unemployment, a motion to receive and hear a delegation from the London District Council of Unemployed Organisations was thrown out. Instead, parliamentarianism was endorsed as the solution to unemployment, while the unemployed themselves were urged to join the Labour Party. The proceedings of the Conference were not only criticized bitterly by the NUWCM but became, ironically, a catalyst for the subsequent formation of a separate national organization of the unemployed (Croucher 1987:39,42; Flanagan 1991:134-136).

Second, the party was, in intellectual terms, poorly equipped to offer any solutions to the problem of unemployment: it had "little idea what to do for the unemployed" (Flanagan 1991:145). It largely accepted the prevailing orthodoxies of sound finance and the revival of international trade as the principal means of resolving the problem of unemployment. As such, its policies in office were timid[59] and differed little, if at all, from those of its political rivals: unlike Roosevelt's Democratic party in the USA, it rejected the idea of large-scale public works relief. High unemployment persisted during Ramsay MacDonald's minority Labour government of 1924, and increased during his 1929-1931 government.[60] Yet like the Conservative party, Labour persisted in labeling unemployment as a regional, rather than a national, problem. In 1931, in the face of economic crisis, it was the Conservative orthodoxy of cutting unemployment benefits that was accepted, precipitating a split in the Labour party and the defection of MacDonald to a Conservative-dominated National government under his leadership (Croucher 1987:100,101; Flanagan 1991:145).[61]

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[59] Only in 1932 – out of office – did the party finally commit itself, for example, to the abolition of means-testing (Flanagan 1991:183).

[60] In 1925, Conservative party leader Stanley Baldwin stated that he was "profoundly grateful" that Labour had been in power in 1924. Labour, he noted, "no more than any other government, have been able to produce a panacea for unemployment" (cited in Flanagan 1991:64).

[61] In typically smug fashion, a Right-wing Labour politician writes of MacDonald's legendary act of treason thus: "he bequeathed the Left its most valued inheritance, the evidence that it was only through treachery that Labour governments never achieved socialism" (Dell 2000:208-209). Yet Dell's snide commentary avoids the central issue: the poverty-stricken nature of Labour's thinking on what was the major social and economic scourge of the interwar period.

Third, as a creature of organized labour, the Labour Party, both in its thinking and policies, was heavily circumscribed and restrained by the priorities of the TUC.

As early as 1921, at its first full national conference, the NUWCM declared that its main objective was to build bridges between the employed and the unemployed and, to this end, sought affiliation with the TUC. Yet as with the Labour Party, relations between the unemployed movement and organized labour throughout the interwar period were wary and generally hostile. As a would-be benefactor, the TUC provided the unemployed movement with precious few resources. In the early 1920s, the TUC and its major constituent unions believed that unemployment was the result of a series of post-World War One economic dislocations that would, in time, rectify themselves. When unemployment persisted, however, they assumed that unemployment simply could not be solved: "their primary concern remained for those in work, not for those out of it" (Flanagan 1991:121). This divide was further accentuated in the 1930s when the majority of the workforce remained in work and enjoyed rising standards of living, compared to the sharp deterioration in the material well-being of the unemployed. In these circumstances, "in general, the workless struggled in isolation. This gulf between those in and out of work was a major limiting factor in the potential gains which could be made by the agitations of the unemployed .. the 'unity of the employed and unemployed' so often called for by the leaders of the NUWM remained a rhetorical device rather than a reality" (Croucher 1987:108-109;48).

Why was this so? In the harsh industrial and political climate of the interwar years, the trade unions feared the unemployed, as a source of both downward pressure on wages and, above all, of strikebreaking. Yet to an astonishing degree, the unemployed movement acted, from the earliest years of the interwar period, to assuage such fears. Despite its treatment at the hands of the 1921 Labour Party conference, the London District Council of Unemployed Organisations pledged soon afterwards "that in no circumstances" would its members be allowed "to be used as instruments for blacklegging" in trade union disputes (Flanagan 1991:136). Indeed, the following year, the NUWCM played a key role in supporting the AEU in the bitter national lockout in the engineering industry, providing the union with thousands of unemployed workers for its picket lines, and it later played an important role in the 1926

General Strike in trying to prevent strike-breaking (Croucher 1987:52-53,78-79; Flanagan 1991:151). However, such remarkable behaviour on the part of the unemployed, then and subsequently, did not succeed in solidifying their relationship with organized labour, for two reasons. First, in a tragic irony, the unemployed movement was *too* effective in removing the threat which the TUC had initially feared: "mass scabbing had not taken place .. the lack of widespread strike-breaking had of course in part been due to the activities of the NUWCM, and in this sense the movement had defeated itself" (Croucher 1987:69).[62] Second, with the defeat of the AEU in 1922, the collapse of the 1926 General Strike, and the catastrophic defeat of the miners soon thereafter, the TUC shied away from industrial militancy and increasingly viewed the NUWCM as an embarrassment. Levels of overt industrial conflict subsequently dropped significantly, thereby severely limiting the opportunities for the unemployed movement to demonstrate this type of solidarity. By the early 1930s, there were far fewer opportunities for the NUWM to construct links with striking trade unionists (Croucher 1987:83,108).

In these circumstances, "the only impulse driving the TUC towards collaboration with the NUWCM was its rather weak general sense of social concern" (Croucher 1987:69). Yet in parallel with the Labour Party, even this social concern was sharply constrained by the TUC's institutional priority of maintaining its leadership of the labour movement. At its 1923 conference, the TUC General Council agreed, unenthusiastically, to establish a Joint Advisory Committee (JAC) with the NUWCM on unemployment. But even this relatively modest institutional bridge did not survive the debacle of the 1926 General Strike, soon after which the TUC unilaterally abolished the JAC.[63] In general, the TUC remained wary of any kind of independent organization of the unemployed that was formally recognized within the labour movement itself. In addition, given its strong anti-Communist leanings (which became particularly pronounced in the 1930s), the TUC was deeply suspicious of any organization

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[62] Scabbing, of course, *did* take place. Many of the unemployed were driven by desperation to scab, accept lower wages and inferior working conditions: "even at its mightiest, the NUWCM could not deny this fundamental truth of mass unemployment: that it did set worker against worker, employed against unemployed. But the NUWCM could, and did, challenge that this should always be so" (Flanagan 1991:137).

[63] At its 1929 conference, the NUWCM reflected bitterly on the exercise as a "mere pretence of interest by the TUC", and "withheld" a further demand for affiliation to the TUC (Croucher 1987:83-84,103).

associated with the CPGB, and fearful of the militant and direct-action style of politics that the latter espoused. As a result, the relationship between organized labour and the unemployed in the interwar period was, in general, one of mutual suspicion and hostility.[64] The TUC refused to support any of the Hunger Marches of the 1920s and 1930s and consistently rebuffed the unemployed movement's requests for affiliation to its ranks and for cooperation in fighting hostile legislation. For example, the notably conciliatory role and participation of the TUC in the production of the government-sponsored 1927 Blanesburgh Report – which reinforced the "Not Genuinely Seeking Work" clause, and threatened to eliminate the benefits of some 250,000 unemployed workers – infuriated the unemployed movement which "began to speak in terms of incredulous bitterness about the betrayals it felt it was suffering" (Croucher 1987:83). In similar fashion, the TUC rejected the NUWM's pleas for help in mounting "mass action" against the equally draconian Unemployment Insurance Bill of 1934 (Croucher 1987:168). Indeed, the TUC's conscious distancing itself from the NUWM went one step further when, in 1932, its General Council attempted to organize the unemployed itself, independently of the NUWM, via the establishment of TUC-controlled associations providing educational and recreational facilities for the jobless. However, the initiative (launched in the wake of unemployed protest against cuts in the dole and the reintroduction of means testing) represented, unofficially, an attack by the TUC General Council on "Communistic control of the unemployed" (Croucher 1987:198). In any event, the associations, envisaged very much as centers of recreation rather than organizations of protest, were a failure. Largely as a result of the overly restrictive attitude of the TUC, and the general indifference of many trade unionists, their membership never exceeded 20,000.[65]

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[64] This was not necessarily the case at the local and regional levels, where individual unions often aided and explicitly allied themselves with the unemployed movement. This was especially true of the mining areas of Scotland and, above all, South Wales, where the SWMF was practically synonymous with the unemployed movement. This contrast between the local and national levels was true of the Labour Party as well (Croucher 1987:30-1,42,76-7,88,95,137-9,159-161,168-170,175-6).

[65] Two other attempts to organise the unemployed independently of the NUWM are worthy of note. The first is that of the "unemployed clubs" organised by the National Council of Social Service (NCSS), ostensibly independent of the National government but in fact heavily encouraged and subsidised by the latter from 1932 onwards. As with the TUC's initiative, the aim was very much to set up centres of recreation for the unemployed and, at all costs, to "stifle unemployed political activity" (Flanagan 1991:216,200-221). Though it never came close to dislodging the NUWM, the unemployed club movement between 1932 and 1939 was the

In sum, for most of the interwar period, the Communist Party in both the USA and Britain played an important (and honourable) role in aiding and sustaining the unemployed movements. Yet apart from this similarity, the political contexts in which the American and British movements operated were strikingly different. The American movement, at least in the 1930s, developed with the aid of enlightened allies in the form of Roosevelt's Democratic Party and the UAW and CIO. The British movement developed despite the opposition of its would-be allies in the form of the Labour Party and TUC.[66]

4. Movement Transformation

A key issue in the study of social movements is how they evolve, in terms of their organization and activity, and the implications of this evolution for the success with which they achieve their objectives. The issue is particularly pertinent with respect to poor people's movements which, according to Piven and Cloward (1977, 1979), are especially vulnerable to the effects of organization and cooptation by external agents. In their influential study, they traced a process by which initial and often spontaneous grass roots militant protest, with radical objectives, gradually gave way to more organized and less militant forms of protest, with greatly moderated objectives and demands. Growing organization and cooptation, often as the result of resources offered and accepted by external agents, meant deradicalization and demobilization.

"one major non-socialist attempt to organize the unemployed that met with some success" (Flanagan 1991:197) (despite, ironically, criticism from the TUC of the club movement's threat to union wage rates [Croucher 1987:178]).

Second, the British Union of Fascists (BUF) attempted to organize the unemployed via the Fascist Union of British Workers (FUBW). This initiative also failed, largely as a result of the FUBW's own unwillingness to match the militant tactics of the NUWM, though also due to the latter's own position in the forefront of the interwar anti-fascist struggle in Britain. NUWM leader Hannington's claim that the NUWM had played a central role in preventing fascism from developing as a major force within the British working class had some foundation. Certainly, in Germany, it was the unemployed who became a critical source of support for the Nazis, though the depth of the interwar crisis in Germany greatly exceeded that of Britain (Croucher 1987:187,208; Flanagan 1991:198-199; Zukas 2001).

[66] In this context at least, so much for the much-vaunted "political opportunity structure" in explaining the emergence of social movements.

In general terms, the organizational transformation depicted by Piven and Cloward is true of both the American and British unemployed movements. In the course of the interwar period, both movements emerged on the basis of local-level grass roots struggle and gradually acquired more formal, centralized and bureaucratic forms of organization (see Tables 1 and 2). The nature of their activity – again, in general terms – also changed, with militant forms of direct action gradually giving way to more routine and bureaucratic activity. Yet in both cases, the implications of such changes in organization and activity, and, indeed, the relationship between organizational change and levels of militancy, are not clear.

4.1. The US case

The movement of the unemployed in the USA "had originated in local communities, in sporadic street demonstrations, in rent riots, and in the disruption of relief centers" (Piven and Cloward 1979:72-3). Yet as early as 1930, many radical leaders argued for greater organization and centralisation: "a significant political movement capable of winning major victories depended, they thought, on firmly structured local and state organizations knit together in a national body and with a national program" (1979:73). Such a belief was reinforced with the victory of Roosevelt and the coming of the New Deal. Indeed, Lorence distinguishes between pre- and post- New Deal stages in the organization and activities of the American unemployed movement. In its first, Communist-influenced "militant stage", from 1929 to 1935, unemployed organizers emphasized social action, community organizing and the exertion of pressure through mass action which, in turn, involved various direct action tactics such as public demonstrations, sit-ins at welfare offices, and resistance to evictions: "at this point in their development, unemployed groups were often governed through a process of direct democracy in which the rank-and-file had substantial influence on policy and strategy" (Lorence 1996:11). The second stage of development followed Roosevelt's legislative victories of 1935 and the establishment of unemployment insurance, social security and, above all, large-scale public works projects. As the New Deal steadily "developed institutional channels for the expression of complaints" (Lorence

1996:292), so the WAA[67], while not abandoning grass-roots community action, acquired an increasingly organized and bureaucratic character: "in 1936 and 1937, the militant Workers Alliance assumed center stage, eventually gaining prestige, political acceptance, presidential patronage, and UAW cooperation … the Alliance succeeded in establishing a position as the recognized union of the unemployed" (Lorence 1996:11-12; 9,10-12,289,292; Folsom 1991:229).

Did the unemployed movement's incorporation into the institutions of the New Deal entail its deradicalization? Piven and Cloward (1979) argue that it did. They (and Folsom [1991]) point to the benefits gained by direct and militant forms of protest action in the early 1930s, even though such forms of protest were met, at the time, with severe and violent repression. The massive and militant demonstrations on International Unemployment Day (6 March, 1930) won many concessions from state and federal authorities, most notably the establishment of a government public relief apparatus "where none had existed before" (Folsom 1991:257). A demonstration of the unemployed in New York in October 1930 led to the appropriation, the next day, of $1 million for relief. Violent rent riots in Chicago in August-October 1931 forced relief officials to concede money for rent payments. In general, the occupation of relief offices by the unemployed forced concessions from administrators. When, in June 1932, city authorities in Atlanta decided to drop 23,000 families from the relief rolls, a march of 1,000 unemployed to the courthouse forced the retraction of the decision and the appropriation of additional relief money. It was the "protests of the masses of unemployed" that drove the mayors of the biggest cities to become "lobbyists for the poor" and appeal to the federal government for aid in ameliorating the situation of the unemployed (Piven and Cloward 1979:64). Indeed, for Piven and Cloward, such direct protest action produced the Federal Emergency Relief Act of 1933 which, in allocating $500 million for immediate grants to the states for unemployed relief, heralded the arrival of the New Deal: "it had taken protest and the ensuing fiscal and electoral disturbances to produce federal relief legislation, and it took continued protest to get the legislation implemented" (Piven and Cloward 1979:67;55-57,59-60,64; Folsom 1991:257,259,270).[68]

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[67] Itself established in 1935 as the principal national-level movement of the unemployed (see Table 2).

[68] The authors point to subsequent episodes of direct action protest in Chicago, Kansas City, and New York in forcing recalcitrant authorities to grant the appropriated relief (1979:67).

Conversely, Piven and Cloward present a devastating account of the consequences for the unemployed movement of its subsequent incorporation into the institutions of the New Deal. They argue that as early as 1934,

> while the leaders of the unemployed groups had been concentrating on forming a national organization complete with a constitution and a bureaucratic structure, the local groups across the country were declining .. largely as a result of the Roosevelt Administration's more liberal relief machinery, which diverted local groups from disruptive tactics and absorbed local leaders in bureaucratic roles … by seeking to achieve more substantial reform through organization and electoral pressure, they forfeited local disruptions and became, however inadvertently, collaborators in the process that emasculated the movement (1979:76-77).

With the New Deal came expanded administrative machinery, more readily available funds, and the introduction of elaborate formalized procedures for negotiating with organized groups of the unemployed: "in some places, relief administrators went so far as to induct leaders of the unemployed into the relief bureaucracy .. as unemployed groups were inducted in these ways, they came to be more 'seasoned' and 'reasonable', and functioned as a kind of auxiliary staff .." (1979:79-80). Such a tendency was further reinforced by the subsequent establishment of the Works Progress Administration and the vast expansion of federal work relief from 1935 onwards. While the authors acknowledge that some actors, such as the CP, warned against "entanglement with the bureaucracies", most local leaders, "believing cooperation would yield them significant influence over relief policies, hailed the bureaucratic reforms, and relinquished the use of confrontation tactics" (1979:80-81). Herein lay the movement's downfall:

> The earlier successes of the unemployed movement in obtaining benefits for people had not been won by lobbying or negotiating, or by using standardized complaint procedures ..What leverage these groups had exerted on local relief officials resulted from the very disturbances, the 'pressure tactics' which both leaders and administrators later scorned as primitive. Victories in obtaining relief had been won by mobilizing people for abrasive demonstrations and by demanding benefits on the spot for hundreds of people. By abandoning disruptive tactics in favor of bureaucratic procedures, the movement lost the ability to influence relief decisions in the local offices. No longer able to produce tangible benefits, the [Workers Alliance] also lost the main inducement by which it had activated great numbers of people. There was in the end no mass constituency, however impermanent, in whose name and with whose support it could negotiate (1979:81-82)

As such, relief officials regained control over relief centers, and the national administration regained control of relief policy. By the mid/late 1930s, the authors report, the influence of the Workers Alliance was in steep decline. Its call for a $6 billion relief

appropriation for the February 1936-June 1937 period was crushed in the U.S. Congress. The severe recession during the winter of 1937-38 generated a series of small demonstrations by the unemployed across the country, but the WAA had neither called for nor mobilized them. That the unemployed were no longer considered a "threat" was demonstrated when the deputy administrator of the WPA simply turned down the WAA's invitation to speak at its September 1938 convention. The latter, in any case, drew only 500 delegates, a reflection itself of the organisation's declining levels of political influence, militancy and membership. In 1941, the WAA "was quietly dissolved" (1979:90).

Despite its "lofty aspirations" in a period of acute social and economic despair, Piven and Cloward therefore sharply criticize the WAA:

> even while the alliance leaders were taking pride in their organizational structure and their dues-paying membership, and were inventing far-reaching legislative reforms, their local affiliates had become entangled in bureaucratic procedures and were declining. That leadership failed to understand that government does not need to meet the demands of an organized vanguard in order to assuage mass unrest, although it does have to deal with the unrest itself. One way that government deals with unrest is through the vanguard. By creating a political climate that encouraged faith in the possibility of national electoral influence, the New Deal destroyed the incentive of the leaders to exacerbate disorder. And by instituting procedures on the local level that subverted the use of disruptive tactics, the New Deal undermined the ability of the leaders of the unemployed to exacerbate disorder (1979:91).

The "tragedy" of the WAA therefore concerns the role it "played during the brief and tumultuous period when people were ready to act against the authorities and against the norms that ordinarily bind them. Instead of exploiting the possibilities of the time by pushing turbulence to its outer limits, the leaders of the unemployed set about to build organization and to press for legislation, and in so doing, they virtually echoed the credo of officialdom itself .. the tragedy, in sum, is that the alliance did not win as much as it could, while it could" (1979:91-92; 76-79,80-82,87,89,90-92).

In keeping with Piven and Cloward, Lorence (1996:82) notes how "since the 1960s .. historians have emphasized the co-optation of worker movements, including the unemployed insurgency of the early 1930s, by a New Deal that essentially domesticated worker organizations..". Indeed, his own detailed analysis of the interwar unemployed movement in

Michigan conforms with that of Piven and Cloward's for the USA as a whole: "the direction taken by unemployed organizing .. provides evidence that after the early expressions of mass protest and direct action, a combination of New Deal reforms and a bureaucratizing labor movement coopted the militants and drew many of them into a developing liberal consensus" (1996:13). Yet he directly challenges Piven and Cloward's interpretation: "close examination of Michigan's unemployed organizations suggests that theirs was a movement that welcomed this co-optation" (1996:82). For Lorence, increased organization of the unemployed, and their subsequent incorporation into the institutions of the New Deal, certainly implied the bureaucratization of unemployed activity and the decline of direct and militant protest action.[69] Yet in the long term, such a transformation enabled the unemployed to secure extremely significant gains, especially in the context of a more benign political environment. The "unionization of the unemployed worker" was a concept introduced in this period and embraced first by the WAA and subsequently by the UAW which, as described earlier, had emerged as the principal organizer of the unemployed by the late 1930s. This organizational transformation had important implications. First, it helped secure an important shift in thinking – that is, that federal work relief was an entitlement, and not an act of charity. Second, it helped diminish the threat of strikebreaking by the unemployed, thereby building bridges between the jobless and those in work (an issue largely overlooked by Piven and Cloward). Third, it underpinned the type of progressive trade unionism that emerged in the 1930s at the expense of the traditionally more exclusive unionism represented by the AFL. Certainly, there were costs to such a transformation, but the gains were of historic proportions: "between 1937 and 1941, unemployed organizing became a vehicle for union-building and the reinforcement of class solidarity. In the end, the great reserve army became a dedicated union-conscious force, though its radical potential was smothered by the resultant bureaucratization" (Lorence 1996:291;13,32,74,291,293).

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[69] Interestingly, Piven and Cloward (nor Lorence, for that matter) never consider the long-term costs for the unemployed of sustaining militant protest actions (despite noting themselves the brutal repression which these types of protests usually suffered). They assume instead (though never explicitly) that such actions would have continued to achieve the benefits attributed to them *ad infinitum.*

Folsom also questions the allegedly moderating effects of increased organization, and incorporation into New Deal institutions.[70] In retrospect, the WAA had "created a body of thousands of workers who had learned a great deal about how to organize and get results (1991:431), as reflected in the series of effective strikes, organized by the WAA, which plagued the WPA in the course of 1935 (1991:417-418). Moreover, the WAA did not retreat from the use, on occasion, of militant tactics. When, following Roosevelt's reelection in 1936, the WPA announced the firing of 475,000 workers, the WAA mounted a nationwide mobilization which brought nearly 3,000 elected delegates to Washington and which forced the administration to raise appropriations to the WPA from $500 million to $655 million (1991:423-424). Overall, Folsom also emphasizes the long-term gains achieved by the organized unemployed, and very much in similar terms: "the concessions granted by the New Deal did .. represent victories for the unemployed, whose pressures on the government had been *centrally planned and highly organized*" (1991:375; emphasis added).

4.2. The British Case

The relationship between organizational transformation and levels of militancy is even less clear in the British case. Though the British movement became increasingly centralized in the course of the interwar period, the process was more ambiguous than in the American case. Though the newly-formed NUWCM established a paid national organizer as early as November 1921 (at its first national conference), the organization itself "remained nothing more than a hopeful umbrella term for a loose federation of local committees" (Croucher 1987:42;46,48; see Table 1). At its 1924 national conference, there was "a serious step away from democracy", whereby the officials of the movement "were, in effect, to become the leadership" (Croucher 1987:75). Indeed, in contrast to the early 1920s, the NUWCM, between 1924 and 1929, "limped along, slowly building a new unemployed movement, different in structure .. than the old

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[70] Though unlike both Lorence (1996) and Piven and Cloward (1979), Folsom argues against the idea of a clear historical dividing line between periods of more militant and more moderate tactics and strategy. Instead, he points to "the differing tactics pursued in the unemployed movement. The two approaches – one emphasizing confrontation and mass pressure, the other emphasizing negotiation and cooperation – continued in *unstable equilibrium through the depression years*" (1991:297; emphasis added).

NUWCM" (Flanagan 1991:160). In terms of the trend towards centralization of the movement, the NUWCM's national conference of September 1929 marked a historical turning point. The movement adopted a new constitution and shortened its name to the NUWM: "the word 'committee' and with it all the old syndicalist dreams of establishing a new order based on workers' committees, was dispensed with .." (Flanagan 1991:167). Instead, the movement's national headquarters was strengthened, thereby ensuring that the NUWM "took on a fundamentally different appearance from the loose coalition of often anachronistic unemployed committees of the early 1920s" (Flanagan 1991:165). Yet there were limits to this transformation. Though the movement's local-level branches now retained very little constitutional power, the national headquarters, while running affairs to a much greater extent than in the early 1920s, remained, in practice, "in thrall to the pulse of the branches, being compelled to follow the leads of the rank and file activists, rather than the inverse" (Flanagan 1991:166). This situation was only accentuated with the impact of the Wall Street crash, when the national headquarters' principal task amounted to attempting "to bring order and co-ordination to an already volcanic series of local eruptions" (Croucher 1987:104). Such tensions between the national and local levels persisted into the 1930s (for example, considerable intra-movement conflict surrounded the 1932 Hunger March). Indeed, it was only in the late 1930s that the balance of power tipped decisively and unambiguously in favour of the centralized, national level – but this was essentially by default, due to the brute fact that unemployment was falling significantly. As such, in the last two years before World War Two, the movement suffered a steady drain of activists back into employment, with the domination of the movement's headquarters accelerated by the declining size and activity of local-level branches. In these circumstances, a weakened NUWM was very much led from the centre, with its later conferences – in sharp contrast to the 1920s – relatively formal, stage-managed, and platform-led (Croucher 1987:190-191; Flanagan 1991:177-178).[71]

Did increased organization and centralization result in the deradicalization of the British unemployed movement? Certainly, as with direct protest action in the USA, "conflict .. conferred

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[71] This was the only period when it is probably true to say that the CPGB dominated the movement, but by this stage, it presided – again, largely by default – very much as a general without an army (Croucher 1987:202-203).

benefits" (Flanagan 1991:187). In early 1921, unemployed organizations in London agitated fiercely, and successfully, to force local Boards of Guardians to concede higher rates of unemployment relief. Later in the year, the newly-formed NUWCM mounted a massive national campaign demanding "work or full maintenance". While it met with severe police violence, such protest activity enabled sympathetic Labour-controlled local authorities to justify concessions to the unemployed. Later still the same year, workhouse invasions forced Boards of Guardians to concede further, while in October 1921, a week of national agitation organized by the NUWCM forced the government to raise unemployment benefits. The latter represented an important victory: "the government was giving de facto recognition to the argument that .. benefit had to be sufficient to survive upon" (Flanagan 1991:146;133,139,143-4). Subsequently, the First and Second National Hunger Marches of 1922-23 and 1929 forced government concessions on health and unemployment benefits. In fact, the results of direct protest action during the 1920s were "not inconsiderable": between 1920 and 1931, the real value of unemployment benefit increased by 92% for a single man and by 240% for a husband, wife and two children. Moreover, by 1930, such benefit was paid continuously, with the amount determined by social considerations rather than actuarial principles (Flanagan 1991:162;161-162; Croucher 1987:54,95).[72]

However, what is notable about the British case is that such direct protest action survived well into the 1930s, long after the supposed bureaucratization of the unemployed movement. There was, therefore, nothing inherently "deradicalizing" about an increasingly formal and centralized apparatus. Indeed, given that the "unemployed had to agitate to secure improvements", the use of conflict as a vehicle for organization and action was central to the success of the NUWM in transforming individual discontent into effective protest (Flanagan 1991:184-5).[73] As such, the NUWM continued to sponsor and organize direct action protest. In 1932, the worst year for unemployment in the interwar period, the protests waged by the NUWM

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[72] Though Flanagan (1991:148-149) notes the irony that the gaining of concessions often led to the decline of discontent and subsequent demobilization.

[73] Flanagan (1991:188-9) cites the case of Bristol which, after militant protest by the NUWM in 1931-32 to defend the right of the unemployed to demonstrate, became a stronghold for the movement throughout the 1930s: "the NUWM's politics derived their power from the way the NUWM asserted them on a mass basis out on the streets. This was the case .. anywhere the NUWM organized".

forced the government to relax the administration of the despised means test. The notably disciplined and well-organised National Hunger March of 1934 achieved the restoration of previous cuts in unemployment benefits, while the 1936 National Hunger March forced important government concessions on unemployment relief: "clearly the result of militant action by the NUWM" (Croucher 1987:181). Above all, the massive and militant campaign waged by the NUWM (see above) in January-February 1935 against the government's Unemployment Insurance Bill not only forced the government to suspend newly devised scales of unemployment relief, but marked, in retrospect, the "high-water mark for the unemployed movement. The NUWM had never won a clearer victory for the unemployed .." (Croucher 1987:170-1;161,169,181; Flanagan 1991:184-5).

Moreover, the implications of the increasingly routine nature of the movement's activities in the 1930s are not clear either. It is true that at its momentous 1929 national conference, key changes were made to the NUWM's thinking and strategy. The revolutionary and utopian rhetoric promising a new world and work for all that had characterized the struggles of the 1880s, early 1900s and the 1919-1921 period was unambiguously dropped. Instead, the NUWM now "sought incorporation and representation within the existing welfare structure" (Flanagan 1991:166). As such, the NUWM established a National Legal Department with which to confront the increasingly complicated structure of unemployment benefit and welfare provision in general. Subsequently, the movement's legal work in representing individual unemployed workers expanded enormously, as unemployment rose rapidly, and government legislation became more complex and threatening. The NUWM proved to be far more effective than the trade unions in processing cases and by 1932 had organized nearly half the appeals concerning unemployment benefits brought before the government's "National Insurance Umpire". By the end of the 1930s, it had fought hundreds of thousands of individual cases concerning dole payments. Its expertise was not only acknowledged by the trade unions (who did not contest the movement's prominence in this field of activity) but eventually in official and academic circles as well (Croucher 1987:113-115,206).

The CPGB derided such "legalistic" activity as generating "passivity" amongst the unemployed, and diverting the movement from developing "mass agitations". Yet not only was

such activity compatible with more direct forms of protest, but was itself informed by radical objectives - especially in the adverse political circumstances prevailing. With the collapse of the Labour Party in 1931, and the election of a hostile National government, there was nothing inherently moderate about the NUWM's "grim desire to see the dole administered with a measure of humanity" (Flanagan 1991:181). Indeed, in contrast to the American case, the very fact of "incorporation" represented a hard-fought *victory* for the British unemployed movement. When, in late 1928, the Scottish Board of Health recognized that the NUWCM had the right to represent unemployed claimants at the Courts of Referees, an important set of principles had been conceded by the state (however grudgingly) for the first time, and a severe blow dealt to the notion that the unemployed had no rights and could expect only charity. In any case, the NUWM stoutly rebutted the CPGB's criticisms, arguing that it had an all-or-nothing choice: to represent the unemployed or not. Hannington, the NUWM leader, pointed out that such representational work "provided the basis for agitation both in terms of building relationships with those represented, and .. of providing cases for propaganda purposes" (Croucher 1987:115). It also provided the movement with a "major recruiting argument",[74] a "continuous basis for its activity" and thereby greater stability: "in periods without any mass agitation, there was still an important reason for joining the NUWM" (Croucher 1987:117). It is notable that as late as 1941, when unemployment had fallen to 0.2 million, local NUWM branches continued to function effectively (though on a lesser scale) as agencies of advice and representation for the jobless (Croucher 1987:197-198;94,113-115,117,198,206; Flanagan 1991:166,167,170,181).

Finally, in historical perspective, the radical longer-term shifts and developments in British welfare provision for the unemployed in the course of the 1930s must be at least partially credited to the activities of the NUWM. Its ability and willingness to mobilize hundreds of thousands of people in large-scale protests (particularly the Hunger Marches staged up until 1936) did lead to improvements, albeit modest ones, in procedures of provision, in insurance benefits, and in terms of resisting the National government's repeated attempts to cut levels of unemployment benefit. That the 1942 Beveridge Report proposed the creation of a social

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[74] Interestingly, the state itself eventually provided the NUWM with a major reason for existence, since membership of either a trade union or the NUWM became obligatory for a national insurance appeal to be considered (Croucher 1987:117).

security system that did not include the means test was a reflection of the NUWM's influence; Beveridge himself acknowledged as much. But above all, the direct protest actions of the NUWCM in the 1920s and NUWM in the 1930s, and the allegedly more bureaucratic activity of the NUWM in the 1930, generated two broad shifts in political thinking with respect to both unemployment and the unemployed. First, the right of the unemployed themselves to representation within the system of welfare provision "unquestionably came from the NUWM's persistent advocacy and practice of that right between the wars" (Croucher 1987:210). In so doing, the NUWM contributed to a change (far from inevitable) in the "ideological construction of 'unemployed'" (Flanagan 1991:225) from that equated with personal failure to that of the product of wider economic forces. Effecting the transformation of the unemployed worker as a pauper suitable only for the workhouse into an economic casualty with rights to compensation was, and remains, a notable achievement of the organized unemployed. Second, while the unemployed movement never succeeded in convincing a hostile government of the need for job creation schemes on the US scale, most British politicians, by 1943, recognized the need to pay attention to popular demands for full employment after the war. While it was the Labour Party that benefited from this emerging consensus, it "had been the extra-parliamentary activity of the NUWM that had made the human problems of unemployment visible to the public eye .. Between the wars, the NUWM ensured that the failure of governments to provide either work or adequate maintenance was publicly made painfully apparent" (Croucher 1987:207). In so doing, the NUWM helped build one of the cornerstones of the thirty-year postwar consensus in Britain: the commitment of successive governments to full employment (Croucher 1987:204-207,209-210; Flanagan 1991:182,225,227). As in the American case, the growing organization and bureaucratization of the British unemployed movement did not prevent the achievement of radical, longer-term objectives.

5. Conclusions: Organization and Protest

In a 1984 essay, Hobsbawm presented a subtle but stern critique of Piven and Cloward's analysis of the effects of organization on poor people's movements.[75] Hobsbawm acknowledges that Piven and Cloward's analysis rests on the correct assumption that poor people do not usually find ways of expressing their discontent effectively, mainly because a stable social order makes them docile and keeps them so by knowledge of their political weakness. They are only likely to "break the bonds of conformity" during periodic dislocations of the social order. The Great Depression was plainly one such dislocation (1984:289). Piven and Cloward are also correct in emphasizing that the pressure of "the poor" is institutionally determined by what the system establishes as legitimate protest and, when it goes outside the permitted forms, by what the actual situation of the protesters urges and permits them to do. And what it urges them to do is to aim protests about specific grievances at specific targets. In this sense, Hobsbawm notes that "the most original contribution of Piven and Cloward .. is their argument that this local rebellion is actually the most effective form of action open to them" (1984:290):

> What the poor can do is to disrupt and *rely on the political reverberations of their disruption*, which will be considerable in times when the social and political system is dislocated, which are precisely the times when the poor can be moved to disruption .. The results will be controlled by those who make concessions from above, but concessions will be made .. Yet the very process of concession from above which gives them these gains is also one which attempts to reintegrate protest into 'more legitimate and less disruptive forms of political behaviour', e.g., by coopting its leaders. When protest is thus swallowed by the institutions, the poor give up the one thing which actually extorts improvements: their refusal to play the established game. They are once again disarmed. But a movement which instead of escalating disruption concentrates on transforming it into permanent organization helps to reinstitutionalize and therefore to dismantle it (Hobsbawm 1984:291; original emphasis).

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[75] With little effect, apparently. In a 1992 critique of resource mobilization theories of collective protest, Piven and Cloward restated their original thesis: "How then can people without conventional political resources exert influence? In our own work on unemployed and labor movements, rent strikes, welfare rights organizing, and the civil rights movement, we have tried to show that lower-stratum protesters have some possibility of influence .. if their actions violate rules and disrupt the workings of an institution on which important groups depend. When lower-stratum groups form fragile formal organizations and employ conventional political strategies, they can easily be ignored. But institutional disruptions cannot so easily be ignored .. It is not that disruption and violence are never employed by formally organized groups; it is that, in general, organization constrains such tactics" (1992:319).

Nonetheless, Hobsbawm labels such an argument as unsatisfactory, even though attempts to build permanent mass organizations out of unorganized constituencies (such as the unemployed) have almost universally failed, and even though it is sometimes even true that firmly structured and organized movements have been less effective at mobilizing mass discontent than loose and unstructured ones (1984:291-292). The problem is that any historian of past social movements is familiar with examples which conform exactly to the Piven and Cloward formula: "but *only* historians are familiar with them, since, in the absence of organization, they disappear rapidly, leaving nothing behind" (1984:293; original emphasis). What the mobilization of the American unemployed in the 1930s won was therefore not entirely lost because it produced mass trade unionism.[76] As such, "the poor" become " a subject rather than an object of history only through formalized collectivities, however structured". Up until the end of the 18th century, the poor remained largely invisible "precisely because their active impact on events was occasional, scattered, and impermanent. If this has not been so since the end of the eighteenth century, it is because they have become an institutionally organized force" (1984:293).[77]

Moreover, even though non-revolutionary grass-roots insurrections "do not find organizations at their best", organization nonetheless becomes indispensable with respect to the eventual formulation of coherent and long-term demands and objectives. Hobsbawm argues that to call for the escalation of disruption in itself is "merely to press for as much as possible, without any mechanism for deciding not only *how much* is possible, but how much of *what*." (1984:294). The essential weakness of "strategies of blind militancy" is that "it is not enough to push and see what will happen" (1984:295). On this basis, Hobsbawm makes the case for the critical role of "organizations of the left" in organizing the poor and shaping their demands. They "may at such times be blamed for recommending the wrong policies, but right or wrong they are

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[76] Whereas the labourers' insurrection in the Peruvian highlands in 1948, which briefly forced collective contracts on the great landed estates, "came, went, and was forgotten" (Hobsbawm 1984:293).

[77] Wilson (1995 [1974]:7 cited in Morales 2001:2) has made a similar general argument: "passions can be aroused and for the moment directed; they cannot be sustained. Organization provides continuity and predictability to social processes that would otherwise be episodic and uncertain".

the only bodies which can formulate *policies* for the poor and, with luck, make them effective" (1984:294).

In general terms, Hobsbawm's critique of Piven and Cloward is borne out by the analysis of the British and American unemployed movements presented in this paper. In both cases, increased organization *per se* of the unemployed did not imply a process of deradicalization; on the contrary, it laid the basis in both countries for the achievement of longer-term demands, particularly with respect to the development and expansion of adequate welfare provision.[78] However, whether the role of "organizations of the left" is as critical as Hobsbawm suggests is, at least in historical terms, moot. The natural ally for the unemployed movements of the interwar period was, above all other potential actors, organized labour. Yet here, as we have seen, a sharp contrast exists between the American and British cases. In the former, the movement was aided, sustained, and eventually almost entirely directed by trade unions acting out of enlightened self-interest. In the latter, the movement emerged and survived despite the almost uniform and continuous hostility of the unions. Clearly, organized labour had room to choose: sixty years on, the choice made by the TUC in the 1920s and 1930s remains a staggering indictment of the British labour movement's thinking on, and response to, the problem of mass unemployment.

In the contemporary period, however, Hobsbawm's concern for the role of organizations of the left remains valid. In structural terms, the unemployed now represent a considerably more fragmented constituency than they ever were in the 1930s,[79] while the appalling threats from unemployment of starvation[80] and homelessness characteristic of the interwar period, which generated grass-roots militancy in the first place, are now greatly diminished. In these

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[78] Gunder Frank and Fuentes (1985:35) argue that social movements enter into spaces where institutions have not previously existed.

[79] Piven and Cloward (1992:310) argue that the structural requisites for protest are overstated: "To be sure, people have to be related to one another .. but these requisites do not depend on the dense and enduring lateral relationships posited by the [resource mobilization] school". Their conclusions, however, at least with respect to the possibilities for collective action of the unemployed in the contemporary period, seem overly optimistic: "because people are averse to being alone, they construct relationships even under the most disorganized conditions, and they do so rapidly. In short, lateral integration, however fragile, is ubiquitous, thus making opportunities for protest ubiquitous" (1992:311).

[80] Not for nothing did "We Refuse to Starve in Silence" figure prominently amongst the slogans of the

circumstances, the role of trade unions in the mobilization of discontent on a collective basis may well be indispensable. Yet the evidence suggests that organized labour remains, as before, ambiguous.[81] In Britain, one year into the Thatcher government, with unemployment rising to unprecedented levels for the postwar period, a white-collar union leader stated organized labour's historic dilemma succinctly:

> Why should we want to organize the non-employed? I start with a political point. The Government would like to drive a wedge between those who are in work and those who are not. They want to blame the unions for that problem. We want to look after all those who would like to work. We must ensure that we establish a community of interest between all those who have to work for their livelihood or who want to do so.[82]

Yet subsequently, the TUC struggled to formulate a strategic response to rising unemployment, and did little, if anything, to mobilize collective protest action of the unemployed (Bagguley 1991; Richards 2000:164-167). Few lessons, it seems, were learnt from the 1930s. As in the interwar period, the unemployed remained, ostensibly, an object of concern, but by no means a political actor in their own right.

British unemployed movement in the interwar period (Croucher 1987).

[81] For an overview of union attitudes towards unemployment and the unemployed in the contemporary period in Britain, France and Spain, see Richards 2000; see also Polavieja and Richards 2001. For an overview of new organizing initiatives on the part of American organized labour, in the context of a precipitous decline in levels of unionization, see Levi 1999.

[82] Speech by Clive Jenkins to 112th Annual Trades Union Congress, 1980; cited in Bagguley 1991:116-117.

Appendix 1: *Unemployment in Britain, 1900-1939*

Year	Unemployment rate (%)	Unemployment level
1900	2.5	
1904	6.0	
1908	7.8	
1912	3.2	
1914	3.3	
1918	0.8	
1919	2.4	
1920	0.9	
1921 (Spring)		1,500,000
1921 (May)	23.0	
1922	14.6	> 2,000,000
1923	11.2	
1924 (Summer)	9.4	1,000,000
1925	10.9	
1926	14.5	
1927	8.8	
1928	9.8	
1929	9.7	
1930	15.0	1,917,000
1931	20.3	
1932	22.0	2,745,000
1933	20.4	
1934	16.2	
1935	15.5	
1936	12.8	
1937	10.7	
1938	12.8	
1939	10.5	

Sources: Croucher 1987:13,58,106; Flanagan 1991:26,118,171.

Appendix 2: *Unemployment in the USA, 1914-1939*

Year	Unemployment rate (%)	Unemployment level
1914		c. 2,000,000
1920		c. 4,000,000
1922	7.3	
1923	4.5	
1924 (Summer)	6.0	
1925	4.9	
1926	4.1	
1927	5.0	
1928	5.5	
1929 (Spring)	5.5	2,286,000
1930 (January)	9.1	4,065,000
1930 (April)		3,188,000
1931 (January)		8,000,000
1931 (October)		9,000,000
1932	18.8	
1933	19.8	c. 12-17,000,000
1934	21.3	20,000,000
1935	19.5	
1936	16.6	10,000,000
1937	14.1	
1938	17.8	
1939	16.0	

Sources: Folsom 1991:220,237,340; Piven and Cloward 1979:46,66,67,83; Smiley 1983:488.

Note: In the USA in the 1920s, the government made no comprehensive surveys of either the number of unemployed or the size of the labour force. In the 1930s, it did estimate the number of unemployed, but not the size of the labour force with which to calculate the unemployment rate (Smiley 1983:487). As such, the actual rate of unemployment in the USA in the interwar period is the source of longstanding debate amongst economic historians (see, amongst others, Lebergott 1964; Coen 1973; Darby 1976; Mayer 1979; Smiley 1983). For an overview of ten different estimations – and the very considerable discrepancies between them – of the US unemployment rate for the entire, or various parts of, the interwar period, see Table 1 in Smiley (1983:488). Three of the 10 columns in Smiley's Table 1 (columns 5, 6 and 7) calculate the unemployment rate as a percentage of the civilian labour force; the figures I reproduce here are from column 6 which, overall, lie midway between the higher figures in column 5 and the lower figures in column 7. I am grateful to Martha Peach for bringing these sources to my attention.

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