

Fighting for Economic Protections

Protests Led to New Laws and a Social Safety Net

Howard Zinn

In the 1930s, the Great Depression left one third of the working population unemployed. Working class people and poor people began to join together to demand economic rights.

One of the first major actions was in 1932 when veterans of World War I came to Washington, DC. These veterans had children who were going hungry. They had been promised bonuses as a result of their service in World War I. They never

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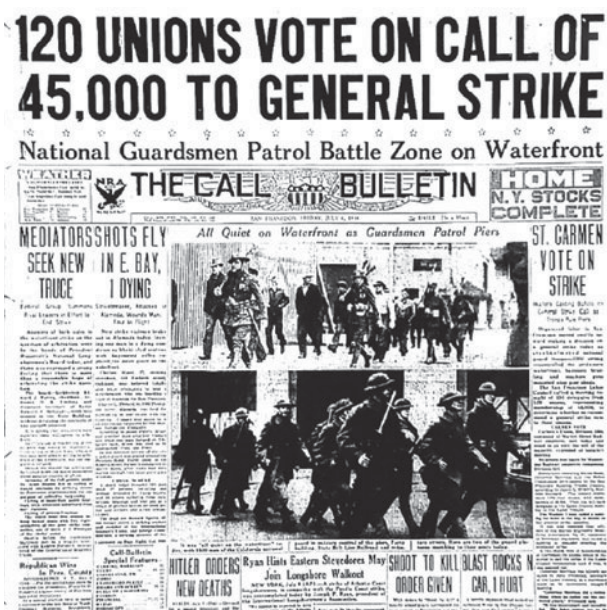
received their bonuses. So 20,000 of them came from all over the country and they set up a camp near Congress to demand their bonus. Ironically, the government called on the police and army to destroy their tent colony.

But this was just the first of many rebellions that would take place through the rest of the decade.

When Franklin Delano Roosevelt came to office in 1933, he faced large and powerful working



World War I veterans came to DC to demand the post-war bonus they had been promised.



Headlines report the 1934 general strike in San Francisco.

class and poor people's movements. A lot of people think, "Roosevelt was a kindhearted man, and he wanted to help people, so he helped pass a lot of economic reforms." It is true that Roosevelt was more sensitive than most presidents have been to the plight of the poor. Furthermore, he had Eleanor Roosevelt at his side, and she was even more sensitive than he was, and she was a good influence on him.

But Roosevelt faced turmoil all over the country, and *that* is what pushed him to take action. He faced pressure from massive numbers of unemployed people organized together in councils; he faced tenants' councils organizing rent strikes. He faced a general strike in Minneapolis and a general strike in San Francisco. He faced 400,000 textile workers in the South going on strike in 1934.

The country was in danger of having the whole system torn apart, and Roosevelt under-



Students at the University of Virginia staged a hunger strike and numerous protests in support of workers' right to a living wage.

stood that. The result was the “New Deal” reforms of the 1930s: Social Security, unemployment insurance, a minimum wage, and subsidized housing — a “social safety net,” which did not eliminate poverty by any means, but it did offer some basic protections to many people. Also, for the first time, workers won new labor laws, such as the National Labor Relations Act, which gave some rights to labor unions.

People have continued to fight for economic rights. While the labor movement is not as powerful or as well organized as it was in the 1930s and 1940s, working people still fight for better jobs. One of the current demands — for a living wage — has brought together students, factory workers, janitors, and bus drivers. So the fight for economic justice is a long struggle, which still continues.

*Howard Zinn (1922-2010) was the author of *A People's History of the United States*. This piece was excerpted from “History of Workers’ Movements in the U.S.,” <www.pbs.org/pov> and adapted by Cynthia Peters. Find more teaching materials on this topic at <zinnedproject.org>.*

Thinking Further about Economic Rights

What economic demands does Howard Zinn mention or allude to in the article?

According to Zinn, what pushed President Roosevelt to create the “New Deal” reforms of the 1930s?

Write down some current debates about economic policy happening in the U.S.
