

FDR's New Deal and the fight for jobs

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Review by Annie Levin



Put to Work:

The WPA and Public Employment in the Great Depression

By [Nancy E. Rose](#)

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When Franklin D. Roosevelt took office in March 1933, 12 million people were unemployed, out of a total U.S. workforce of approximately 50 million. Investment in new plant and machinery had come to a virtual standstill. Estimates of the numbers of homeless transients ranged from half a million to 5 million. There were protests, riots, and strikes across the country, but the previous Hoover administration had done virtually nothing to address the question of jobs or relief.

In this short but excellent survey, *Put To Work: The WPA and Public Employment in the Great Depression*, Nancy Rose argues that FDR began the first jobs programs of the New Deal because he, unlike his predecessor, understood the threat that working class rebellion posed to restoring capitalism's stability. Rose writes:

Although much of the business community steadfastly opposed federal unemployment relief, increasing destitution, continuing protests, the exhaustion of traditional sources of relief, and pleas from local and state governments compelled the Roosevelt administration to act. The alternative, as historian Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., wrote in his study of this period, might be revolution.

In just 103 pages, Rose deftly sketches the history of the New Deal jobs programs. We get a sense of their grand scale—particularly compared to anything being discussed by the Obama administration in response to today's crisis—but also their profound concessions to racism, sexism, and the business-as-usual status quo.

As part of his legendary first hundred days in 1933, FDR established the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC), which put men to work in the national forests, and provided work for 2.5 million people over the next ten years. As Rose points out, women were barred from the CCC because construction was not considered appropriate women's work. Quotas limited Black men to just 10 percent of the jobs, and they were housed in segregated camps.

Above all, the push-pull of class struggle was decisive in shaping the form and final implementation of New Deal policies. When FDR took office, he was already facing a high level of workers' and farmers' unrest. In 1930, the Communist Party began organizing the Unemployed Councils, which led hunger marches, rent strikes, and demanded relief programs. As Rose writes "In general, cities with strong Unemployed Councils provided better relief." When the first jobs programs were established,

In general, the [eligibility] test was applied most leniently in the large northern cities, where protest was more widespread, as the high levels of unemployment led people to understand that joblessness was not caused by personal failure but by factors beyond the control of individuals. It was applied most stringently in the rural areas of the South, where the white elite continued to fight attempts to provide relief, especially to African Americans, because it also provided an alternative to low-wage labor.

The relief programs that issued in the first hundred days were sorely inadequate. As the first winter of FDR's term approached, his administration feared that the onset of cold weather would create a new upsurge in protest. Rose argues that this was one of the primary motivations that created the Civil Works Administration (CWA), established by executive order in November 1933. By January 1934, the CWA had created work for 4.3 million people. But the need was so great that another 7 million applied and were not accepted into the program, creating dangerous riot situations outside employment offices in cities around the country.

From the outset, big business raised an outcry against the CWA, and just three months into the program, FDR was already responding to the pressure by making cuts—most importantly, backing off on plans to make the CWA into a permanent jobs program. Protests across the country to defend the CWA were to no avail. By the summer, the program had been eliminated and replaced by the more conservative Federal Emergency Relief Administration (FERA) with its lower wages and more stringent eligibility requirements.

Why were these relief programs so threatening to business? In a real way, the programs helped raise wages by alleviating workers' need to compete for low-wage jobs. But they also raised hopes about alternatives to free-market capitalism in the depths of the Depression.

One of the least well-known, but most radical relief programs, called "The Ohio Plan," was started in June 1934; it allowed state and local relief administrations to reopen closed factories under government control, rehire the workers and set them to work making products that would then be distributed for free to other workers on relief. Government-run factories popped up in many states, with plans to expand into coal mines, rock quarries, and canneries. But the whole project was killed under pressure from business. Rose explains:

The underlying problem was that production-for-use projects raised a critical question: since production-for profit was not a sufficient motive to induce business to produce needed goods, and the government was producing them instead, why depend on the private sector at all?... This was simply the business sector's worst fear: that the system of production-for-profit would be replaced by production-for-use.

Sometimes the government stepped in to use relief as a weapon against workers in the class struggle. To accommodate the complaints of the Southern elite, the programs made sure to cut agricultural, migrant, and domestic workers—who were mostly Black —off the relief rolls whenever their labor was required.

During the great textile strike of 1934, which involved 400,000 workers from Maine to Alabama, the federal government looked the other way while local relief agencies cut strikers, and even their family members, off the rolls. When the mayor of Syracuse, New York, cut the city's textile strikers off his relief rolls in May, he said, "This is one way of starving workers into accepting any terms of employment offered them."

Rose argues that the scars of business lobbying and pressure from the more conservative wing of the New Deal administration can be seen even in the shape of the most expansive reform the U.S. working class has ever won—the Social Security Act of 1935. The initial version of the bill, called the Economic Security Act, included national health care and a permanent jobs program for those whose unemployment insurance ran out or who were not covered by unemployment at all. Pressure from the American Medical Association killed the plan for national health care, and the bill's final version spun off the jobs program as a separate, temporary program, the Works Progress Administration (WPA) of 1935.

The WPA was one of the great reforms of the Depression Era. In its eight years of operation, the WPA oversaw the construction or repair of more than 650,000 miles of roads; it built schools, libraries, and recreational centers; it established the first—and only—federal arts programs the U.S. has ever had. Most importantly, it gave jobs to millions of workers.

But it was also, in many ways, a compromised program. As a temporary program, it became a political football because it required yearly reauthorization from Congress. Long-term plans and projects were very difficult under the WPA, and workers experienced the constant insecurity of layoffs and budget cuts. These factors also made the WPA projects into sites of struggle and protest throughout the decade.

The policies of discrimination against Blacks, Mexicans, and immigrants continued in the WPA. There were quotas limiting the numbers of people of color. They earned lower wages and worked fewer hours. Projects were largely segregated. Since most of the work was in construction, and therefore deemed inappropriate for women, most WPA jobs went to men. As a rule, women in the program earned lower wages.

FDR ended the WPA in 1943 as he was gearing the country up for war production. By that time, the WPA had become a favorite target of the anti-New Deal right wing. Anticommunist witch-hunts, which are usually associated with later years, started when the WPA adopted a loyalty oath in 1939. The Federal Theatre Project was shut down because it was deemed a hotbed of radicalism, and communists were driven out of WPA jobs.

First published in 1994, the book's current edition includes a new introduction and afterword—where Rose argues that today's generation needs to raise its sights. If the government could create 4 million jobs in a month in 1933, then it can do much better than Barack Obama's tepid American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009, which claimed to "create or save 3.5 million jobs over the next two years"—in a workforce that now totals 155 million! Rose calls for a "mobilized mass Left" to keep "pressure on Obama" so he feels the need to consider left-wing solutions to the crisis, such as nationalizing the banks instead of bailing them out. The history of the New Deal, Rose writes, shows that "we can do better."

While she is absolutely right, it is hard to read this history and not feel that her conclusion is inadequate. Even in the 1930s, at the time when the working class rose to its greatest heights of struggle, and won its greatest reforms, the programs were insufficient to meet the needs created by the economic crisis. The rapacious U.S. capitalist class could not tolerate any program for long that tried to put resources where they were actually needed. Rose seems to favor a brand of socialism that she equates with a government-owned economy. Nevertheless, the important, often overlooked history she presents shows that a capitalist government is not interested in determining or satisfying workers' real needs. Only the working class, democratically organized, can play that role for itself.