The US proletariat during the Great Depression

In 1930-33, the situation of the American proletariat declined sharply. While not putting capitalist domination on the line, the proletariat was far from apathetic during that period. This text intends merely to summarize the various forms and phases of resistance by the American proletariat to its deteriorating conditions of reproduction.

After a very brief presentation of the capitalist offensive during the crisis, I will give a chronological account of the proletariat's struggles. As we shall see, right from the outset of the recession, survival was the main reason for the jobless proletarians' mobilization. Later on, the struggle shifted to the issues of wages and working conditions.

I/ CAPITALIST OFFENSIVE / RISING UNEMPLOYMENT/ FALLING WAGES

The financial crisis erupted in October 1929. By the next years, joblessness skyrocketed (2.7 million more unemployed, according to official statistics). Four years later, the wave reached its peak (nearly 13 million unemployed). These figures give an idea of the mass of excess capital that had to be destroyed.

	Unemployed (in millions)	% Civilian workforce	Wage index (1913=100)
1929	1.5	3.1	224
1930	4.2	8.8	226
1931	7.9	16.1	212
1932	11.9	24.0	194
1933	12.6	25.2	173
1934	10.9	21.6	
1935	10.2	19.9	
1936	8.6	16.5	
1937	7.3	13.8	
1938	9.9	18.7	
Source: J. Néré, *La Crise de 1929*			

Wages in fact declined more than the above figures suggest in that the latter concern nominal wages and do not count part-time work.

It is also worth mentioning a virtually unknown (and as yet unverified) fascist plot to overthrow the government. In 1934, a coup was planned with the intention of raising a private army of half a million men, composed largely of unemployed veterans. A government was to be formed modeled on Hitler/Mussolini policies. This was the brainchild, not of a handful of cranks, but of Wall Street financiers and major businessmen belonging to the most conservative right wing, who included the George W. Bush's grandfather, already known for his role in the business community's relations with Nazi Germany. The coup was discovered and nipped in the bud by Roosevelt.[1]

II/ THE VARIOUS FORMS OF PROLETARIAN RESISTANCE

The first struggles apparently focused on unemployment: demonstrations for benefits, hunger marches, looting, self-help groups, etc. Only later did the labor conflicts enter the arena, initially against pay cuts.

II-1/ Organization and struggles of unemployed workers

By early 1930, proletarians were forced by joblessness and the lack of unemployment insurance to resort to all sorts of expedients, oftentimes massive and in many cases organized. The Communist

Party made a point of staying visible on this front.

Ø February 11: The CP organized 3,000 unemployed workers to take over Cleveland's city hall. They were dispersed by the police. Comparable incidents in several other cities.

Ø March 6: Declared by the CP « International Unemployment Day. » Fighting in several cities.

Ø July 1930: CP conference in Chicago to establish the National Council of Unemployed, with numerous local branches, which earned a reputation for resisting evictions of Blacks from their homes. These unemployed councils were totally unrelated to any kind of council-communist initiative.

Ø March 1930: Spontaneous attack on two bakery delivery trucks in Manhattan. The attackers spied the trucks while waiting in a Salvation Army bread line. This is just one among many examples of « unemployment crime. »

II-1-1: Organized looting, hunger marches

Other initiatives were launched by unemployed workers in 1931.

Looting of stores on the rise. In July, 300 jobless marched on shopkeepers in Henryetta, Oklahoma to demand food, insisting they were not begging and threatening to use force if necessary. After several public figures intervened, the issue was settled without violence. By 1932, organized looting had become a nationwide phenomenon. Most often, shopkeepers tried to avoid the bad publicity of incidents by refusing to call the police.[2]

There were many hunger marches, most of them limited to a single city or region. In December 1931, the CP organized a March Against Hunger on Washington. Public statements by the CP (e.g., more than 1,100 trucks) and exaggerations by the police (Communist plot) contrast sharply with the actual event: 71 trucks and 1,600 marchers. Their main demand: unemployment insurance. This hunger march was far from the only one.

In January 1932, a populist priest, financed by small shopkeepers opposed to the supermarkets, led a march from Pennsylvania to Washington. The 12,000 marchers demanded relief measures, public works, and taxation of the wealthy.

In March 1932 came the Dearborn riots: The CP organized a march of 3,000 unemployed workers to the Ford plant at River Rouge. They demanded work for the jobless, payment of fifty percent of their wages, a 7-hour workday, a slowdown of the rate of production, no discrimination against Blacks, free healthcare, free coal, mortgages taken over by the company, $50 relief for the winter, etc. The police fired into the crowd, killing several demonstrators. Huge demonstration for the funeral, but no follow-up by the CP.

II-1-2/ Bonus Army

The most massive attempt by unemployed workers to gain attention was the great Bonus Army march.[3] WWI veterans converged on Washington to demand early payment of bonuses promised by the government in 1924 for 1945. They failed.

The starting signal was a bill addressing the matter, which had no chance of passing. Nevertheless, debate over the bill prompted veterans to leave for Washington in support of the plan. At least in the beginning, there was apparently no nationwide organizer. The veterans went spontaneously, either

alone, with their families or in a group. Many said they left because they had nothing else to do anyway where they were living. The first initiative originated in Oregon, where 300 men led by someone called Waters hopped on freight trains to go down in May 32. That led to brawls in Saint Louis, thereby attracting media attention that encouraged new groups to go. On their arrival in Washington, detachments of veterans set up camp near the center. At the peak of the movement (end of July 32), their number was estimated at 23,000. Their aim was to put pressure on Congress to sway the voting. They were very peaceful, highly disciplined, made few demands and hated the Communists, who tried to infiltrate their ranks.

The group from Oregon reached Washington on May 29. On the 31st, a formal organization was set up named the Bonus Expeditionary Force (BEF). Waters was its commander in chief and Glassford, the Washington police chief, was its Secretary and Treasurer. He was at the forefront in organizing encampments and requisitioning empty buildings to house the marchers. The largest was a makeshift settlement which sprung up like a shantytown on empty land in the suburb of Anacostia, facing the government district on the other side of the Potomac. The same Glassford went to great lengths to feed and care for the campers. The latter nevertheless set up their own team of stewards, who outlawed alcohol and weapons and blacklisted the Communists. The latter, naively unsuspecting, made every effort to gain control over the BEF. To no avail. When they went to Anacostia, anti-Communist sentiment was so violent that Glassford had to come to their rescue by slipping them out of the camp.

On June 17, the Senate rejected the bill for early bonus payment. Yet not only did the veterans stay their ground but their wives and children came to join them. The shantytowns grew. In July a bill was passed to loan the veterans $100,000 so they would go back home. That sum was an interest-free loan deductible from the bonus due in 1945. Some took the money, most with the intention of staying in Washington. That aroused growing opposition among politicians, who began to abandon Glassford.

On July 28, Glassford was forced to have the buildings occupied by the veterans evacuated. Without his knowledge, troops led by the future WWII heroes MacArthur, Eisenhower and Patton were sent in at the same time. The army evacuated and burnt all the occupied buildings, destroyed every encampment in the city center and repelled the veterans. Then it crossed the bridge to Anacostia, drove the occupants out of the shantytown and set it afire.

II-1-3: Barter and other methods of survival

Meanwhile, unemployed people started banding together to organize their survival. They set up self-help centers to try and solve all the difficulties of surviving without a job.

In urban areas

The first self-help center, established in Seattle during the summer of 1931, was called the Unemployed Citizen’s League. From a membership of 12,000 at the end of 1931, its ranks grew rapidly, totaling 80,000 across Washington State a year later. The goal was threefold: self-help, relief, looking for jobs. The city was divided into twenty-two centers, each of which sent five members to a weekly central meeting. No fees were charged, and volunteer members handled the secretariat.

During the summer of 31, the League functioned fairly well, setting up barters, getting permission from farmers to glean potatoes or fruit in their fields, obtaining the loan of vehicles, or organizing women to exchange sewing for produce. By the winter of 31-32, things took a turn for the worse, and the League had to ask for funding from the municipality. It received $462,000. The League became

the city's social welfare bureaucracy and was fairly efficient and cost-effective at that. An estimated third of the voters did, after all, belong to the League. After the city council elections, the new mayor regained control over the welfare administration and threatened to use arms against unemployed workers' demonstrations.

The winter of 32-33 was even more difficult than the previous one for the League, which was in decline by the time the Communist Party took it over.

During the same period, similar actions sprang up in California, where the mild climate was more conducive to farm work. A barter exchange was even created in Los Angeles, which issued scrip to pay people for what they brought in. Although the system quickly became unmanageable, one of the uses of the scrip was in bartering labor, which was unlawful and soon attacked by the trade unions. In early 1933, the Communists began infiltrating the Los Angeles movement.

The self-help movement spread from the West Coast to the rest of the country with the primary aim of organizing barter centers. Nevertheless, the movement's membership – 300,000 in all organized in 330 centers across 37 states – was modest compared with the total jobless population. Furthermore, the barter system soon fell victim to counterfeiters who fabricated fake scrip, as happened in Argentina during the 2001 crisis.

Return to the countryside

During the depression years, a clearly growing trend developed to return to the countryside, organized in some cases by Utopians (such as Ralph Borsodi) or out of nostalgia, but likewise supported by leading businessmen and the authorities. As early as 1931, public funds were granted to buy back small farms. I assume these grants were actually designed by the authorities to rid urban areas of unemployed workers, because farming during those years no doubt fared even worse than industry.

Bootleg Mining

This phrase designates illegal extraction of coal. The practice, very widespread in the Pennsylvania mining country, consisted of a small group of men openly digging a hole in land belonging to the mining company. If all went well, it would take them between two weeks and two months to hit the seam. They would then remove the coal with ropes and buckets and sell it in full view. Many accidents occurred in those primitive mines.

In 1931, 'stolen' coal was estimated at no more than 500,000 tons. By 1933, it had blossomed into a small-scale industry, on which mining towns depended for their survival. Miners acquired trucks to go sell their coal in the city. This activity generated some fifteen to twenty thousand jobs, and 3500-5000 trucks were reportedly used. Estimated output in 1934 was five million tons.

The owners were apparently powerless to halt the phenomenon. The illegal mines that they dynamited were immediately replaced by new tunnels. And the authorities closed their eyes to these practices either to avoid worse happening or out of solidarity.

Bootleg mining was considered a form closely related to worker self-management, serving as a model for the future revolution. Mattick had praise for this experience which, according to him, showed that « all that is really necessary for the workers to do in order to end their miseries is to perform such simple things as to take where there is, without regard to established property principles… and to start to produce for themselves… The so-much bewailed absence of socialist ideology on the part of the workers really does not prevent the workers from acting quite anti-

capitalistically, in accordance with their own needs. [The bootleg miners' action] is a manifestation of the most important part of class consciousness – namely that the problems of the workers can be solved only by themselves. »[4]

II-2: The three waves of strikes in the 30s.

The statistics given above, though only indicative, show the three waves of strikes: in 1932, in 1934 and then from 1937 on. These three waves differ in nature and the first two alone genuinely reflect the workers' reaction to the outbreak of the 1929 crisis.

II-2-1: 1932 – First wave of strikes

These were strikes against employers' attempts to cut wages.

Miners' strike in Illinois

In April 32, the United Mineworkers of America signed an agreement on wage reductions. The 150,000 strikers rejected it twice. Only 3,000 returned to work when the UMA confirmed the agreement. Armed threats against the strikers. The town of Franklin was declared off-limits. On August 22, 1932, 25,000 miners marched on the town. When they crossed city limits, the police fired, killing several people. The revolt gained ground. In the end, it became necessary to call in the National Guard, which terrorized the entire region.

Textile workers' strike in North Carolina

On July 18, 1932, several hundred workers in six hosiery plants in High Point went on strike against a twenty-five percent cut in the piece rate, the second reduction that year. The movement spread throughout the region. On the evening of the 19th, one hundred plants were shut down, in the furniture industry as well. The general strike began in Kernesville, Jamestown, Lexington, and Thomasville. On July 20, strikers at High Point attempted to enter a movie theater without paying. When they were refused entry, they proceeded to ransack the place. As the strike spread, the governor offered to arbitrate and succeeded in getting the pay cuts at High Point cancelled. The strikers returned to work gradually, the last on October 16. The movement was entirely spontaneous, without organizers from the Communist Party or any other group. It nonetheless led to the formation of the Industrial Association of High Point, an industrial type trade union which at the time claimed 4,000 members.[5]

II-2-2: 1933 – The New Deal

The passage of the National Industrial Recovery Act paved the way for a Keynesian brand of economic stimulus. Section 7a of the Act, which recognized the employees' right to unionize in companies, resulted in workers flocking to the unions. They hoped that, with the help of Roosevelt, whose portrait hung in every worker's home, the unions would make employers yield on wages and the pace of work – two issues raised in many sectors. With the crisis, employers not only cut back on the workforce and working hours but increased the rate of production. The unions naturally opened their arms to the newcomers, sometimes trying to organize them along craft lines, unacceptable to the workers (Akron), but were not very militant on the workers' problems. A second wave of strikes, often wildcat, ensued.

II-2-2: Second wave of strikes (1934)

The accounts of strikes that follow are those most often cited in works on the Depression. We can assume that they are fairly representative of a broader movement.

Longshoremen's strike on the West Coast[6]

After passage of the NIRA, and especially section 7a, workers joined the labor unions massively. Early in the summer of 1933, ninety-five percent of San Francisco's dockworkers belonged to the International Longshoremen's Association.

At the beginning of 1934, the ILA rank and file tried to force union leadership to challenge the « shape-up » system used by the bosses, a process they called the « slave market. » Every morning, foremen would pick out those they wanted for the day. The longshoremen demanded that the system be replaced by union-run hiring. ILA bureaucrats were unsupportive. Members of the CP were active among the rank and file.

A proposed compromise between the bosses and ILA leadership was repudiated, and on May 9, 1934 longshoremen walked out in every West Coast port, cutting off nearly 2,000 miles of coastland. Strikebreaking would have seriously threatened the strike, but within four days the teamsters decided not to haul goods unloaded by strikebreakers. Other maritime workers (sailors, stewards, cooks, firemen, etc.) joined the movement. On May 21, the Joint Maritime Strike Committee was established, with five representatives from each of the unions involved. The strike, including pitched battles, lasted for weeks. Several attempts at mediation were booed down by the rank and file. On the evening of July 5, after a day of fighting, the governor called in the National Guard. The strikers returned to work.

The violence of the repression crystallized support for the idea of a general strike, which had been under discussion for weeks among the AFL unions (although opposed by San Francisco's AFL leadership). The general strike broke out in mid-July. Some 130,000 workers walked out, effectively crippling the life of the city. The AFL Central Labor Council assumed direction of the strike by establishing a General Strike Committee, which did its best to sabotage the rank-and-file initiatives. The general strike ended after four days, and the longshoremen capitulated on their most important demands (Brecher, *Strike!*, p. 150 fol.).

Minneapolis, Teamsters' strike

In early 1934, the union blocked sixty-five out of the city's sixty-seven coal yards to gain official recognition of the union. This was won in three days, and the union, organized on an industrial basis, recruited by the thousands. Trotskyists allegedly headed the union local.

Once recognized, the union sought to reach an agreement with the employers, who refused. On May 12, the union decided to call a strike. The city was blocked and transportation virtually paralyzed. The strike was very well organized, with its headquarters in a central garage, in constant phone contact with all of the pickets. At any given time, there were always at least 500 men at headquarters, ready to go help the pickets at any location around the city. One hundred-twenty cooks served up 10,000 meals a day at the garage, a medical team attended to the strikers, and a team of auto mechanics kept the strike committee's 100 vehicles in repair. The official strike committee consisted of one hundred rank-and-file teamsters. Assemblies were held nightly.

The employers counterattack, too, was very well organized around the Citizens' Alliance which had sought for twenty-five years to keep the unions outside the city.

There were open battles. The first, on May 21, was not decisive, but the second on the following day was undeniably a victory for the workers, who participated massively and kicked the cops out of the city. Work resumed even though nothing was settled, and each side prepared for a second offensive. On July 16 the second strike broke out, even better organized than in May and firmly supported by public opinion. On the 20th, the police provoked an incident and opened fire on the crowd. This triggered huge protest demonstrations. The governor declared martial law and called in the National Guard. But the pickets started up again with renewed vigor. The authorities, which had occupied the strike headquarters and arrested its leaders, were forced to back down and occupied instead the headquarters of the Citizens' Alliance. After a month of striking with the city at a standstill, the employers yielded.[7]

Auto-Lite, Toledo, April 34

The AFL organized a strike, with little success, at Auto-Lite, an auto parts plant. The remarkable fact was that the strike pickets, not very effective at keeping out scabs, gained the support of a jobless workers organization, the Lucas County Unemployed League, affiliated with Muste's American Workers Party. Management sought a court injunction prohibiting the mass pickets, but without effect. Within three days, the 1,000-strong picketers in front of the plant gates swelled to 6,000 workers and unemployed. The police then deputized a private security force (Toledo cops were no longer considered politically reliable) paid by Auto-Lite to arrest the pickets. The outcome was a seven-hour battle, during which the pickets broke into the plant three times before being repelled amid extremely violent fighting. At dawn the next day the National Guard arrived. But the workers and unemployed continued to fight the guardsmen, who ended up firing into the crowd, killing two people and wounding another fifteen. Auto-Lite finally recognized the labor union, granted pay increases and reinstated the strikers.

Textile strike, September 34

The industry addressed the crisis by shortening working hours and cutting wages. The United Textile Workers union openly collaborated. It isolated the first strike (Alabama, July 34). An industry-wide general strike finally broke out on September 3. Two days after 65,000 workers walked out in North Carolina, a total of 325,000 workers were on strike. The « flying squadrons, » a tactic recognized as effective and widely used, were soon repudiated by UTW leadership. There were fifty squadrons in the Carolinas, in detachments of 200 to 650 strikers. They garrisoned the towns they moved through to ensure that the mills would stay closed. The governor of South Carolina soon had to call out the National Guard and declared martial law on September 9. Mill owners mobilized numerous special guards. An armed confrontation during which seven strikers were shot dead marked the beginning of the second phase of the strike. It became stronger organizationally and gained support from workers in other industries, despite the AFL leader's urging not to go out on strike. On September 11, 25,000 strikers shut down the town of Hazelton, Pennsylvania for twenty-four hours. The strike spread along the East Coast to New England, where strikers battled the National Guard. In Rhode Island, the rebellion reached such proportions (battle of Woonsocket, September 12) that the National Guard was overwhelmed. The governor called in federal troops. With the union leadership's approval, he declared that this was not a textile strike but a communist uprising.

On September 20, even as strikers continued to join the movement (421,000 at its peak), work resumed in some mills. The Board of Inquiry appointed by Roosevelt issued its report on the same day. Aside from calling on the strikers to terminate their strike, the board's members limited their recommendations to commissions that would study various aspects of the conflict. The Strike Committee hailed this as a victory and, on September 22, ordered the strikers back to work.

II-2-3: Rise of the wildcat sitdown

Disillusioned workers flooded out of the unions. A new tactic appeared – the sitdown strike – which clearly finds its source in the mass-production workers' revolt. The expression is said to come from an incident at a baseball game. Players from two factories refused to play a scheduled game because the umpire was not a union man. They sat down on the diamond until the umpire was replaced.

A sitdown is a wildcat strike staged at the workplace. Often it is partial, short (« quickies ») but highly disruptive of assembly-line work. This form of struggle appears to be specific to Ford-type mass production. At union leadership persuasion, the wildcat sitdowns were supplanted by plant occupations.

II-2-4: Third wave of strikes: plant occupations in 1936-37

Firestone (Akron), January 1936

The truck tire builders sat down against a reduction in rates and the firing of a union committee member. The men had planned their action: when the hour struck, the worker closest to the master safety switch walked over and pulled the handle. Within a day, all workers at the plant were on strike, and the next day the second plant went out. Management capitulated.

Goodyear (Akron), February-March 1936

After several attempts, a sitdown strike broke out on February 14, 1936. The union marched the workers out of the plant. On the sixth day of the strike, the C.I.O. sent in delegates, and United Rubber Workers executives finally sanctioned the strike. Until then, everything had been done by the rank and file: they put pickets at the forty-five gates around the plant's eleven-mile perimeter; they elected their own strike coordination; and they set up a soup kitchen. In March, word spread that an attack was planned against the strikers. The union broadcast on the radio throughout the night to inform workers at home and tell them to be ready to rush wherever the attack occurred. A proposal for mediation by Roosevelt was rejected by the workers. After more than a month, Goodyear capitulated on almost all demands, although not on union recognition. Rebelliousness remained high in the plant after the return to work, with numerous quickies. This situation brings to mind the revolt of mass-production workers in the 60s.

Auto industry 1936-37

The same could be said of the atmosphere that prevailed in the auto industry, where production speed-ups were an ongoing grievance. The workers organized informally to cap output and resist employer pressure. As far back as 1934, tension began rising everywhere in the auto industry, and the workers flooded into the unions to push them to organize a strike. The AFL, however, stalled continually. Finally, the leading AFL official asked President Roosevelt to intervene and demand that the workers postpone the strike. Local representatives agreed to cancel it even though the compromise proposed by Roosevelt was actually a major defeat for the workers. They soon realized that they had been betrayed and left the union. What militants remained turned to the C.I.O.[8] That was the starting point for the development of sitdowns in the auto industry, and the newly emerging C.I.O. alliance rode that wave of defiance to take root and win union recognition by the bosses. In late 1936, many strikes broke out in the auto industry, usually on rank-and-file initiative (whether unionized or not) and against the will of the UAW executives.

General Motors, November 18, 1936 – February 11, 1937.[9]

That was the background against which the great strike commenced at GM. For months, even the

union locals were apparently not involved in the many sitdowns that occurred. However, in December 1936, the union turned the sitdown into a plant occupation. Summary of events:

Ø *Atlanta*, Fisher Body plant, 11-18-36: one-night occupation of the plant.

Ø *Kansas City*, 12-15-36: Occupation of the plant until 12-23 to protest the dismissal of a union employee. The union ended the occupation (but not the strike) due to difficulties in feeding the occupiers.

Ø *Cleveland*, 12-28-36: strike on union rank-and-file initiative. Management demanded that the plant be evacuated. All but 259 employees (out of 7,200) left.

Ø *Flint*, 12-30-36: The two Fisher Body plants (1,000 and 7,300 employees) shut down, the first spontaneously and the second on union initiative.

Ø *Other GM plants*: Flint became the center of the strike, but thirteen of the corporation's other plants were also shut down over the following days, for varying lengths of time (S. Fine, p. 146).

The occupations were organized on a military model. Discipline, upkeep of equipment and premises, no alcohol, no women, entertainment. One assembly a day. The Flint cafeteria had a maximum of 2,000 meals to serve. However, since many non-occupying strikers also ate there, they should be taken into account to get an idea of the actual number of occupiers. In actual fact, roughly 450 strikers occupied Flint Fisher Body No. 2 plant on January 5 but only seventeen on January 26 (S. Fine, p. 168). « The problem faced by the sit-down organizations in Flint was not that of persuading strikers to leave the plants because it was difficult to feed them or because their talents were required on the outside but rather of keeping enough men inside to be able to hold the factories. » (Fine, p. 168) Leaves were restricted, and a number of sitdowners were kept in the plants against their will. UAW members from other plants came to take part in the occupation. Articles were published in the local paper to explain to the wives that their husbands' presence in the factory was absolutely necessary.

Despite these difficulties, the occupiers successfully fended off an attempt by the police to force entry into FB2 on January 11, 1937. This was quickly dubbed the Battle of the Running Bulls. What motivated the police? Neither the governor nor GM management wanted the occupying strikers forcibly evicted.

The strike lasted forty-four days, at which point GM agreed to recognize and bargain with the unions in the occupied plants and promised not to deal with any other organization in them for six months. This 6-month monopoly enabled the UAW to consolidate its position in the corporation's plants. The head of the strike committee at FB1 remarked, « That ain't what we're striking for, » and the men observed that there was nothing about the speed of the line.[10] Nevertheless, work resumed.

III/ Short summary

Based on the above accounts, the proletariat's reaction to the crisis developed in several stages:

Ø The first reaction was for jobless workers to organize and struggle for survival.

Ø Only in 1932 do we begin to see strikes against pay cuts.

Ø In 1934, a second wave of strikes combined demands for union recognition (authorized by the

NIRA) and against pay cuts. The strikes won in certain key industries (automotive, transportation) and lost in others (textile).

Ø In 1936-37, the third wave of strikes already signaled the emerging post-crisis era. These intense struggles against assembly-line work ushered in a new form of unionism, adapted to the Ford system of production, that was poised to prevail in all industrialized countries. As in France in 1968, the union, not the workers, gained most from the plant occupations. « Thus with the cooperation of the government, which created a rigid institutional framework for collective bargaining through the Wagner Act [1935] and its National Labor Relations Board, the C.I.O. was able to channel the sitdown movement back into forms of organization which, far from challenging the power of the corporate rulers, actually reinforced their power over the workers themselves. »[11]

It is also worth noting that, despite the workers' dynamic confrontations with the bosses, no group or 'revolutionary' party was able to establish a lasting foothold. The proletariat's determination in defending its rights seems to have consistently stopped short of challenging authority, even at a local level. Illusions about Roosevelt were apparently pervasive, even though quite a lot of disillusionment was heard over the NIRA.

If my analysis of the three waves of strikes is relevant, it means that the undeniable energy of the proletariat's crisis action was devoted, at least in part, to union consolidation. The agenda of the American proletariat during the Great Depression of 1929 was arguably to gain union recognition by companies and impose unionism on an industrial basis.

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Translated by J Reuss

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[1] Alan Nasser, « FDR's Response to the Plot to Overthrow Him, » *Counterpunch*, October 3-5, 2008.

[2] I. Bernstein, *The Lean Years*, p. 422

[3] I. Bernstein, *ibid*, p. 437 fol.

[4] Quoted by Howard Zinn, *A People's History of America*, p. 386

[5] About these two strikes, see I. Bernstein, *The Lean Years*, and J. Brecher, *Strike!*, p. 148

[6] J. Brecher, op. cit. , p. 150 fol.

[7] J. Brecher, op. cit., p. 160

[8] At the time, the Committee for Industrial Organization was still part of the AFL.

[9] The sources for what follows are: Jeremy Brecher, *Strike!*, Boston, 1972; and Sidney Fine, *Sit Down*, Ann Arbor, 1969.

[10] J. Brecher, op. cit., p. 222.

[11] Ibid., p. 216