

## DOCUMENT 6: THE DEPRESSION AND THE CITY

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, many Americans moved to cities to find

work. The factory closings and business failures deeply affected urban workers, especially since there was

no federal unemployment program.



**The Unemployed Union: marchers south on Broadway in Camden, NJ**

Courtesy of the Franklin D. Roosevelt Library Digital Archives  
<http://www.fdrlibrary.marist.edu>

Many New Yorkers found that they could not afford their high rents, so they invented "rent parties." In this interview, conducted by a WPA worker in 1938, a woman named Bernice describes the parties, which were popular in Harlem.

When I first came to New York from Bermuda, I thought rent-parties were disgraceful. I couldn't understand how any self-respecting person could bear them, but when my husband, who was a Pullman porter, ran off and left me with a sixty-dollar-a-month apartment on my hands and no job, I soon learned, like everyone else, to rent my rooms out an' throw these Saturday get-togethers.

I had two roomers, a colored boy and white girl named Leroy and Hazel, who first gave me the idea. They offered to run the parties for me if we'd split fifty-fifty. I had nothing to lose, so that's how we started.

We bought corn liquor by the gallon and sold it for fifty cents a small (cream) pitcher. Leroy also ran a poker and black-jack game in the little bedroom off the kitchen. An' on these two games alone, I've seen him take in as much as twenty-eight dollars in one night. Well, you can see why I didn't want to give it up, once we had started. Especially since I could only make six or seven dollars at the most as weekly part-time worker (domestic).

The games paid us both so well, in fact, that we soon made gambling our specialty. Everybody liked it, and our profit was more that way so our place soon became the hangout of all those party-goers who liked to mix a little gambling with their drinking and dancing.

Bernice, New York City (October 2, 1938)

Source: Library of Congress, Manuscript Division, WPA Federal Writers' Project Collection

Battle Creek Mich

April 5, 1936

President Roosevelt:

Please continue this W.P.A. program. It makes us feel like an American citizen to earn our own living. Being on the dole or relief roll makes us lazy and the funds are not enough to live decent on. We are thankful for what we receive though.

So we as W.P.A. workers in Battle Creek Michigan, appeal to you as our Great Leader to continue this great cause for Better citizens in Battle Creek Michigan.

Your Faithful,  
W.P.A. workers of Battle Creek

Source: McElvaine, p. 127

In this interview, conducted by a WPA worker in 1939, a packinghouse worker talks about the difficulty that urban workers had unionizing. A packinghouse is a place where livestock is slaughtered, packed, and shipped to stores.

The bosses in the yards never treat Mexican worker same as rest. For 'sample, they been treatin' me, well, ever since I start wearin' the button they start to pick an' 'scriminates. I was first to wear CIO button.

I start in as laborer. Get 62 1/2 cents hour. I get laid-off slip from fellow who has to leave town, that's how I get in employment office. Now I work as beef lugger, carryin't the beef on cuttin' floor. Work is heavier than laborer, make 72 hour.

I can butcher, but they won't give me job. They fired me on account of CIO union one time. I started organize the boys on the gang. I was acting as steward for CIO union. We had so much speed up and I was advisin' the boys to cut the speed and so when I start tellin' the boys we have a union for them they all join up. Almos' all join right away. So we talk all the time what the union goin' to do for us, goin' raise wages, stop speed-up, an' the bosses watch an' they know it's a union [comin'?!].

So every day they start sayin' we behin' in the work. They start speedin' up the boys more an' more every day.

The boys ask me, what you gonna do? Can't keep on speed-up like this. We made stoppage. Tol' bosses we workin' too fast, can't keep up. The whole gang, thirteen men, they all stop. Bosses come an' say, we ain't standin' for nothin' like this. So 4 days later they fire the whole gang, except 2. So we took the case in the labor board and they call the boys for witness. Labor board say we got to get jobs back. Boss got to promise to put us back as soon as they can. That time was slack, but now all work who was fired. All got work.

Now the bosses try to provoke strike before CIO get ready, before the men know what to do. Foremen always try to get in argument about work, to make the boys mad so they quit work. We know what they do, we don't talk back, got to watch out they don't play trick like that.

- Jesse Perez, packinghouse worker in Chicago, Illinois  
(interviewed by Betty Burke on 6/21/39)

Source: Library of Congress, Manuscript Division, WPA Federal Writers' Project Collection.