



President Roosevelt signing Social Security Act of 1935 in the Cabinet Room of the White House. Also shown, left to right: Rep. Robert Doughton (D-NC); Sen. Robert Wagner (D-NY); Rep. John Dingell, Sr. (D-MI); Unknown man in bowtie; Secretary of Labor, Frances Perkins; Senator Pat Harrison (D-MS); Congressman David L. Lewis (D-MD). *Library of Congress photo, LC-US262-123278.*

**DROUGHT AND DEPRESSION ON THE GREAT PLAINS:
THE KANSAS TRANSITION FROM NEW DEAL
WORK RELIEF TO OLD AGE PENSIONS**

by
R. Alton Lee

Great Plains farmers and ranchers have generally opposed unions and their weapons of strike, boycott, and picketing. Yet when faced with terrible economic conditions during the Great Depression similar to those labor faced during wage cutting and stretch-out periods, farmers turned to union tactics to pursue their economic goals. The region-wide failure by both the states and the national government to resolve the relief crises led agrarians to organize and to strike. The Great Depression also was a decade where leaders of both groups pursued the age-old American dream, fruitlessly, of uniting the two forces politically. The purpose of this essay is to recount the New Deal programs and their results that assisted destitute farmers in the transition from being recipients of work relief to a pension under part three of the revolutionary Social Security program. This transition plagued rural people rather uniformly across the Great Plains and they followed much the same pattern in organizing to seek relief until the old age pension program of the Social Security Act became operational.¹

Farmers were in desperate straits during the Roaring Twenties and it did not seem possible for conditions to worsen after the Great Crash on Wall Street. But they did. By 1932 farm income had dropped to \$4,377,000,000, a decline of 58 percent from 1927. Wheat in Kansas sold at 33 cents, corn 15 cents, hogs 3 cents, cattle 4 cents, and eggs 10 cents. The New Deal, functioning under its philosophy of Planned Scarcity, created the Agricultural Adjustment Administration, a domestic

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allotment program that favored wealthy agrarians, but which was highly unpopular with poor farmers and tenants. In addition, nearly 40 percent of farmers had debts totaling \$12 billion and the Roosevelt Administration and farm states sought to ease this situation with the Frazier-Lemke Bankruptcy Act and similar state proposals.²

During this period it was discovered that farm people in “the Wheat State” could starve the same as laborers from “the Empire State.” They needed some type of relief and it was forthcoming when President Herbert Hoover’s Reconstruction Finance Corporation began its loan policy for state relief work late in his administration. In Kansas at that time poor relief was handled through the county commissioners with each county establishing its own system. Many had some type of “poor funds” when the depression struck and some used the degrading poor-farm system. This forced people to plead poverty, live on the poor farm, and perform whatever tasks they were capable of, and in return they received food and shelter. But the process of distributing these meager funds equitably was greatly exacerbated by the enormity of depression relief needs. Most of the commissioners had not yet accepted the need for professional case workers and struggled to meet relief needs through voluntarism without trained assistance. As a result, “inexperience, the growing number of jobless workers, and the high cost of providing relief” soon bankrupted most county governments. With no state relief assistance forthcoming because the governor believed that the Kansas Constitution forbade it, federal assistance became a must.³

Hoover’s relief policy required accurate information on unemployment and expenditures so Democratic Governor Harry Woodring established the Kansas Emergency Relief Commission (KERC), a bipartisan commission of twelve to gather statistics. Members of the commission chose Republican John Godfrey Stutz as executive director. Stutz was a remarkable politician and person. Following elementary school, he journeyed to Kansas State Agricultural College to take a short course in farming and ended up completing high school and a college degree in four years. He proved to be an outstanding administrator in his work that spanned the Hoover and Roosevelt years, insisting that relief work should suffer no political interference, and he

soon won plaudits from national New Dealers, if not from Democrats at home. The FERA field representative wrote his boss, Harry Hopkins, that “we now have in Kansas one of the best State Relief Administration set-ups.” Hopkins, who took pride in running his relief programs without political influence, agreed and informed the Postmaster General’s office that he believed Stutz to be “thoroughly competent and in the main the decisions that are made represent his best judgment.” Among other innovations, Stutz began forcing county officials to accept professional social workers.⁴

In addition to the economic problems, the region also endured a series of devastating droughts, the first in 1934 being quite severe, as was the third one until rains came in later spring of 1936. As a result, cattle as well as people were starving in Kansas. Livestock were dying by the tens of thousands and Harry Hopkins’ Civil Works Administration (CWA) began purchasing these cattle in 1934 with factories in Topeka, Parsons, Kansas City, and Wichita processing 107,000 head. The canned meat was distributed as surplus commodities in poor relief programs. Those animals found impossible to salvage were buried on farms and ranches in mass graves. As of January 12, 1935, the federal government had purchased 520,676 animals in the state for \$7,612,000.⁵

Dust Bowl realities grew so grim that a conference of agricultural college representatives from Texas, New Mexico, Oklahoma, Colorado, and Kansas met in Garden City on April 16-17, 1935. The conferees recommended an emergency program to control soil erosion. Their report noted that many people had abandoned their farms, more were planning to move, and when they did they would “become relief charges wherever they go.” The following month Harry Hopkins, in charge of federal relief programs, pledged an increase of \$6 million monthly in aid until the drought broke. That September New Dealers promised to use Public Works Administration (PWA) funds to employ farmers on work relief to build roads. KERC reported establishing transient camps in Wichita, Kansas City, and Topeka to handle this type of poverty and by November 1935 the Works Progress Administration (WPA, renamed Works Projects Administration in 1939) of that year was employing 13,700 men and women, many of them of rural origins.⁶

Franklin D. Roosevelt's election in 1932 brought a significant change in the approach to relief. By that time over 1 million people in the Midwest were on relief of some type and others were receiving commodities from the Federal Surplus Relief Corporation (FSRC). Farmers, schooled in the philosophy of "rugged individualism," found Hoover's type of assistance through loans to states disagreeable and "felt confused, guilty, and ashamed" over receiving it. Yet they had to accept reality, or flee their farms as many thousands of them did, driven out by depression, drought, and modernization. The New Deal philosophy emerged with the passage of the Federal Emergency Relief Administration (FERA) in May 1933. This approach provided direct FERA grants to state relief agencies to increase their spending efforts.⁷

By March 1935, KERC was handling 113,519 relief cases and in 1936 the agency estimated that it had distributed over \$1,300,000 in federal surplus commodities. But in 1935 another transition took place in New Deal philosophy—an increased emphasis on work relief rather than assistance through "make work." On April 28 Congress passed the Emergency Relief Appropriations Act, which established the WPA and President Franklin Roosevelt named Harry Hopkins as its administrator. KERC immediately gave the WPA its work relief clients. Without these new federal funds, one authority wrote, "life itself would have become impossible" in drought-stricken southwestern Kansas. The law also empowered the President to create the Resettlement Administration (RA) to build community settlements for low-income suburbanites, called Greenbelt towns. It sought to aid marginal farmers who were not helped by the AAA and at the same time address flood control and soil erosion problems. Republican Cal Ward, president of the Kansas Farmers Union, became RA director for Kansas, Nebraska, South Dakota, and North Dakota, until the RA was replaced by the Farm Security Administration (FSA) in 1937.⁸

The RA, under Rexford Tugwell, had difficulty in creating a viable administration and it lasted only two years. As a result, the WPA moved in to supplant it and in a short time was providing work relief on road and soil-conservation projects. WPA guidelines stipulated that projects had to have local sponsors and be useful, be conducted on public property,

and be completed by the end of each fiscal year. "I don't think anyone can go on year after year, month after month accepting relief," Hopkins said in announcing the new approach, "without affecting his character in some way unfavorably." WPA was designed to save the dignity of unemployed workers. As Hopkins further explained it, meaningful work "preserves a man's morale. It saves his skill. It gives him a chance to do something useful," a philosophy his boss had endorsed ever since his term as governor of New York when the Great Crash occurred. Although not stated, this would also eliminate case workers "snooping" in "relievers" homes for evidence that they did not need help. The WPA spent approximately 85 percent of its funds on labor, striving to give workers "a security wage" of 30 cents minimum or the local prevailing hourly rates, whichever was higher, with an average monthly schedule of 120 to 140 hours. Finding the proper director for this program in Kansas proved difficult for Hopkins because, despite his determination to avoid it, politics affected his decision and forced him to contradict his philosophy.⁹

The Roosevelt administration concluded that Congress had politicized the WPA when their emergency appropriation act for fiscal 1936 included the proviso that all appointees with salaries of \$5,000 or more would require Senate confirmation and this influenced Hopkins' decision. At this point he noted that "at first I believed that I could be completely non-political if that was possible, at least for me. I finally realized that there was nothing for it but to be all-political." He became determined to name a Democrat as WPA director for Kansas because Stutz, while he had hewed to strict standards for his appointments, would always choose the Republican, if two applicants were equally qualified.¹⁰

Democrat Evan Griffith from Manhattan served as WPA director until the 1936 election. When Democrat Walter A. Huxman won the gubernatorial race that year, he appointed Griffith to the post of Highway Commissioner and the WPA named Clarence G. Nevins to head the work relief agency in Kansas. Before he left office, Republican Governor Alf Landon appointed Stutz as state director of relief, an office that would be phased out as the new federal program became fully operational and state relief programs disappeared.¹¹

Eventually 60,000 Kansans would work for WPA and highway

projects as relief workers. On September 6, 1935, FERA work relief closed down and the employables went on Stutz's KEREC relief rolls until the WPA became fully functional, and if qualified, they could be hired by that agency. The *State Journal* called attention at that time to the importance of federal relief work to the state. In 1934 Kansas received \$21,652,249 in this category and the state's agricultural crops that year were valued at \$118,139,000. Even though the state legislators were "tired of being told what to do" by federal bureaucrats, it was certainly financially advantageous to comply with New Deal demands as they reluctantly had done.¹²

Transition to the new program created other difficulties. Work relief in Kansas previously had been the primary responsibility of the counties, but WPA was structured to operate through six divisions in the state. Confusion often resulted between county officers and WPA administrators over statistics and procedures. The problem of definitions also existed. KEREC had previously trained inexperienced workers for certain jobs and assigned the handicapped to light work so they could "avoid the stigma of unemployment." These conflicted with WPA definitions of "employable persons." When temporary cutbacks in funding were announced in January 1936, these problems boiled over.¹³

The political campaign of 1936 affected these WPA work relief programs. In June President Roosevelt announced an acceleration of Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) activities in rural areas with increased emphasis on Great Plains shelter belts and RA programs of direct relief to farmers, along with the increased purchasing of submarginal lands. The next month the WPA claimed it would place 25,000 farmers on work relief in 24 hours and 55,000 in 10 days. In early July John Graber, Kansas State Director of the National Emergency Council; Walter Dodge, State Director of the RA; and Evan Griffith, State Director of WPA appealed to Washington to employ more farmers on WPA projects. On July 22 President Roosevelt established the Great Plains Drought Area Committee to provide long range planning for restoring agricultural productivity on the plains. This committee reported to the President on August 27 and he held a conference with Great Plains governors in Des Moines on September 3 to share their recommendations.

This increased interest in the Great Plains waned, though, after the election in November and WPA began cutting back in its programs, especially for older workers who could qualify for the new Social Security old age pension plan if their state set up such a program.¹⁴

The new WPA official in 1937, Clarence G. Nevins, was a merchant from Ford County and Dodge City. He, too, had been born on the family homestead like Stutz and attended Kansas State College. After graduation he joined his father in the hardware and implement business and entered Democratic politics, serving two terms in the state legislature, where he was elected minority leader. In 1932 the likeable, successful young politician became a member of KERC and acquired considerable experience in relief work under the leadership of John Stutz. He did not, of course, iron out all WPA problems after his appointment and, in fact, faced new ones brought about by the emergence of new organizations prompted by the work relief issues.¹⁵

This unemployment crisis, in turn, led to the forming of groups in Kansas to assist and to lobby for the unfortunates who could accomplish nothing by acting singly. These organizations evolved from first having philanthropic and charitable goals of helping those on relief and then to the banding together of unemployables similar to a union because in unity there is strength. On May 10, 1933 the Unemployed Trading Post was chartered in Wichita. Those who were able contributed new and used merchandise, which was made available to the needy at reasonable prices. The poor, in turn, accepted whatever kinds of jobs they could find to earn Trading Post dollars to purchase or barter for needed commodities. As unemployment levels and conditions worsened, these groups evolved into organizations to assist public agencies in their promotion of public works and to protect their members from any discrimination, injustices, and favoritism of agency personnel who distributed relief and relief work unfairly.¹⁶

Agrarians as well as urbanites were suffering, especially during the drought years of 1934 through 1936, and by 1937 almost 1 million farm families were on relief. On August 26, 1934, destitute Kansans in Pittsburg and other towns banded together into the Farmer-Labor party. They later adopted the name Farmer-Labor Union in an attempt to unify

these two groups politically. The following year representatives of some two dozen similar groups of distressed farmers and laborers met in Emporia on June 7-8 and formed the Kansas Alliance of Workers (KAW) that affiliated with the Workers Alliance of America (WAA) in May 1936. This alliance was formed to give uniformity of programs and actions among the various groups as they pressured Congress for relief action. Among other successes, WAA staged a massive march on Washington in August 1937 and saved 300,000 WPA jobs from being abolished. On the national level WAA sought recognition from the WPA as sole spokesman for those workers as did KAW on the state level.¹⁷

The first annual convention of the radical WAA organized in 1935. They met again the following year in Washington, D.C., with chairman David Lasser's opening address calling attention to "the more and more frequent resort to the armed forces of the state, the use of tear gas bombs, [which] indicates the determination of the masters of our industrial system to crush the labor movement." He lamented the fate of the current fourteen million unemployed and the convention endorsed the Lundeen bill, introduced in Congress in 1934, that would provide unemployment insurance to both laborers and farmers who were unable to find employment. The AFL (American Federation of Labor) opposed this measure because it included farmers and they wanted to cover laborers first. At their third convention in 1937, the WAA delegates sent a telegram to President Roosevelt protesting the cutback of 427,000 WPA workers by July 15 and successfully called for a week of national demonstrations to protest the decision. They also passed a resolution endorsing his current "Court Packing Plan."¹⁸

The KAW established its headquarters in the capital city and elected Topekan Ernest McNutt as its secretary-treasurer and general factotum. The WAA and KAW endorsed the Lundeen bill, government ownership of monopolies, and a vast federal housing program. These stances made it easy for groups to label them Communistic, as did the Dies Committee for instance, a congressional investigative body that also came to the same conclusion about the Boy Scouts of America. Undoubtedly some members belonged to the CPUSA (the American Communist Party), but claims such as a writer made in the *Topeka State Journal* that "national

alliance members have been heard and quoted 'whooping it up for Leon Trotsky, booing the American Federation of Labor (because they opposed including farmers in the Lundeen bill), claiming that capitalism is dead,'" made it easier to apply the label loosely to the entire organization of 700,000 people and the 70,000 members of KAW.¹⁹

KAW lobbied for a state law setting 50 cents as the minimum wage, free school textbooks, endorsed the Lundeen Workers Bill, demanded co-drivers for safety reasons on all trucks and busses operating on Kansas highways, and stressed the need for improved relief, both in amounts and procedures. When Governor Landon called a special session of the legislature in the summer of 1936 to consider constitutional amendments to "allow" the state to assist in relief efforts, a power the state supreme court said he already possessed, KAW leaders met with him. They sought his permission to present their "demands" to the solons, including action to relieve the distress of old people during the lengthy interim before they became eligible for Social Security benefits, beginning on January 1, 1942. Landon told them this was beyond the scope of the executive branch, but he used his office to arrange a meeting for them with the house speaker and the lieutenant-governor who presided over the senate to discuss their problems. This proved fruitless and the KAW members staged a "sit-in" of the legislature until it adjourned without helping them, despite the positive efforts of the minority Democrats. All these activities received extensive coverage in the national and state press.²⁰

Many people, including Franklin Roosevelt and numerous KAW people foresaw the advantages of realigning political coalitions during this economic crisis. In June 1936, months before the presidential election and one month after affiliating with WAA, a special committee of KAW members met and heard political speakers espouse the concept of a Farmer-Labor party in Kansas. T.J. Tidler, representing "certain elements in the Socialist party, urged this because the "present political organizations" appeared inadequate in the current crisis. Max Salzman of the CPUSA recommended that the "most progressive movement...among the farmers and laborers and the middle class" work toward the same goal. Finally, Joseph Morris spoke for the "organized unemployed" or KAW, suggesting that these people "should be the first

to accept” such an idea although this goal had failed in the past “because of the working class people’s failure to take a stand.” Again they failed to take a position and this concept never took root, except with Minnesota’s successful Farmer-Labor party.²¹

WPA projects in Kansas had hardly begun during the transition period when workers in Emporia went on strike. They were being paid 30 cents hourly, the prevailing rate in Lyon County, and they demanded 40 cents. On June 7, 1935 groups of strikers were reported traveling across the county urging other workers to join their protest. That day John Stutz telegraphed Mrs. Shirley P. Pryor, County Poor Commissioner, that if the protest movement continued, federal rules required him to withhold funding for the projects. This quickly ended the strike.²²

In early August 1935 FERA cut work relief funds by 67.5 percent, or from \$225,000 to \$80,000 for the next five weeks in Wyandotte County and WPA would not be ready to hire those who were employable until early September. On August 6, some 100 relief workers marched on the Wyandotte County Courthouse, seized control, and declared they would not vacate it until their demands were met. This was some five months before the Flint, Michigan auto strike. They sent out members in automobiles to relief work projects to invite others to join their protest and soon 1000 people were demonstrating, a group that eventually swelled to 2000. Workers confronted Frank M. Holcomb, chairman of the county commissioners, with shouts of “drag him out,” and forced him to agree to consult with other commissioners to increase county funding to make up for the projected FERA reductions. They wanted the full amount in cash for the relief cards they signed on July 12, or more than \$30 rather than the reduction to about \$10 monthly and a 25 percent increase in the county relief budget until September. They also insisted on free milk for children, the aged, and the ill, and ice water made available on all work relief projects, all “doable” demands. But the marchers insisted that all county workers with salaries of \$100 or more must donate one month’s pay and all others a half-month’s pay to the county relief fund, which hit home with officials’ pocketbooks and was summarily rejected. Marchers demanded no eviction for failure to pay rent and to keep their water and gas supplies running during the five-week

interim. They endorsed the radical Lundeen social insurance bill. Finally, they included the interesting requirement that the county provide them with food and beds during the occupancy of the county courthouse.²³

The strikers sang, tried to sleep, and managed to remain calm and peaceful the first day and night. They wired President Roosevelt that 6,500 families in Wyandotte County were facing starvation and eviction from their homes. The group, led by Frank Paine, chairman of the county's old age pension society (Townsend Club), appointed twenty "policemen" to maintain order, to keep the court house clean, and to eject Communists from the movement. The second morning they staged a march to Seventh and Minnesota and back to the courthouse. On the third day State Senator Joseph S. McDonald negotiated an agreement with KERK and the then state WPA director Evan Griffith to persuade Washington officials to continue FERA funding until the WPA projects were underway the following month. John Stutz began distributing an additional \$225,000 to Kansas counties "on the basis of need." All these demands, as well as the milk and groceries for those who were literally starving, were fulfilled. On August 11, Frank Paine addressed the crowd, telling them of the successful conclusions, and adjourned the gathering.²⁴

They were not completely successful in keeping out the Communists. Authorities arrested Jack Shaw, a radical with Communist literature in his possession. When Paine tried to disperse the peaceful crowd after he had adjourned them, Mrs. Helen Hester, age thirty-five and mother of a three-year-old boy, informed him they were not yet finished with their business. Mrs. Hester, a relief worker from Beloit who had been discharged from her job for leading a protest strike and who had participated in the Emporia strike, insisted the crowd march on city hall and free Jack Shaw, and she encouraged other radicals to speak. Paine warned that they were "outsiders trying to cause excitement" and he left the meeting. When the demonstrators arrived at city hall and refused to disperse, officials arrested Mrs. Hester, William Burnley, and three other leaders. Authorities searched Burnley's house, where Mr. and Mrs. Hester and son were living, and found "a quantity of alleged Communist literature." On August 12 the leaders were fined \$50 for vagrancy. Those who were outsiders were ordered to go home and not return, and this ended the

Kansas City demonstration.²⁵

KAW leaders met their first major test while supporting the “drought farmers” of Shawnee and surrounding counties in March 1937. In the most rural Kansas counties, farmers and farm laborers “for the most part” were the principal clients on work relief. The “Shawnee County Farmers Rebellion” arose when the “drought farmers” were cut off their WPA jobs and before the RA was fully operational. Part of these layoffs stemmed from machinery replacing the work they and their horses had performed. Their livestock was starving, their families were hungry, and now they had lost their relief work. Conditions worsened and they met with Governor Landon to discuss their problems. They asked for reinstatement of their WPA jobs and a thirty-hour work week at 50 cents hourly. Landon, they claimed, “*deliberately washed his hands* [italics in original] of the unemployed workers and busted farmers of Kansas. The KERC and WPA heads [Stutz and Griffith] treated us the same way.”²⁶

On December 28, 1935, Senator Arthur Capper led a march of 150 of them to discuss their plight with the county commissioners. This proved unsatisfactory as the commissioners already faced too many demands for their limited relief funds so the farmers called a protest meeting in the KAW hall in Topeka where some 250 farmers from Shawnee and surrounding counties gathered. They sent scores of telegrams to President Roosevelt, Harry Hopkins, and WPA officials lamenting that “our children and livestock are starving,” to no avail. It was not until Governor Walter Huxman’s inauguration in 1937 that they finally got action when he arranged a meeting with the distraught farmers and Cal Ward of Omaha, the regional director of RA. “With so much pressure,” the KAW secretary wrote, “the resettlement administration was pushed into action and by February 1 resettlement checks was [sic] being received.” The farmers had other complaints against the Shawnee County relief authorities and 60 of them occupied the office overnight until they won their demand for the county to fill grocery orders for the needy. The farm rebellion also raised money to send delegates to participate in a demonstration in Washington, D.C., to call the attention of Congress to their plight. This successful uprising increased agrarian membership in KAW to about 300 farmers.²⁷

On March 1, 1937, following the initial WPA layoffs, approximately 50 former WPA employables met in the KAW hall and decided to petition Governor Huxman for a meeting with him, the Shawnee County commissioners, and the Shawnee delegates to the state legislature to discuss their situation, which had improved very little. At that point the legislature was deadlocked over how to finance the new Social Security pension plan. The governor had recommended a regressive 1-cent sales tax increase to provide the money, which the lawmakers ultimately accepted. The senate wanted the state to assume the entire burden but the house insisted on the state providing \$2 million, the federal \$2 million, and the county units \$4.5 million, in disregard of the burden under which the local governments already labored by providing relief for the unemployables and their families. Also at issue was the question of “beer or no beer.” The solons finally accepted the sale of 3.2 malt beverages, shattering their long-held intoxicating principles primarily because of the need for additional revenues. The house version of the measure placated the traditional prohibitionists by assuring them that 3.2 percent was non-intoxicating and the bill passed as a revenue act because of the urgent need for funds.²⁸

The Shawnee County commissioners finally met with the KAW in what proved to be a stormy session. The unemployed demanded, among other exactions, that the county pay their rent and/or taxes during the crisis and that their agency be recognized as their collective bargaining unit. The commissioners remained adamant. They refused recognition, insisting that no one in the county was being denied assistance if they were eligible for relief, although the mere application did not guarantee receiving it. Furthermore, the county could not assume any further financial burdens as their funds were almost depleted from the increased strains of recent weeks, a suggestion that some might be denied assistance in the future. When the unemployed complained about the inefficiency of the poor relief program, a harbinger of future discord, the commissioners lamely responded that their relief provisions and procedures were the best they could possibly provide. Workers disgruntled over the administration of their relief work in Wichita had created a serious riot in 1934 and this set a precedent for the KAW

workers to emulate.²⁹

After two weeks of meetings, complaints, and fruitless demands, the KAW people took direct action. Approximately 150 men and women seized the Shawnee County relief headquarters on March 20 in an unusual "sit down" strike, a month after the end of the Flint "sit down" precedent in the automobile industry had gained widespread notoriety. The crowd, in good humor, spent the night there with a stringed orchestra. Those who did not want to dance played pitch or other card games. The reinstatement of WPA workers over age sixty-five who had been discharged proved to be their major demand. As a lesser grievance, they wanted the daily quotas of production terminated in the WPA sewing room that occupied the third floor of the building. With this show of support, the sewing room workers struck later that night, demanding the resignation of Poor Commissioner Lyle O. Armel and the appointment of an entirely new county relief staff. They further insisted on the county paying rent for the employables not on relief, a distribution of surplus commodities before they spoiled, not afterward, the right of an applicant for relief to choose someone to help him present his case, and a 20 percent increase in the county relief budget. The sewing room project specifically wanted a halt to the termination of workers for insufficient production, a cessation of what they considered to be coercion and intimidation by supervisors, the removal of supervisor's powers to determine standards of efficiency, and they demanded a clear understanding of the functions of their floor stewards. Sheriff Roy Boast and County Attorney Paul Harvey, hearing of the strike, investigated, but found no evidence of violence.³⁰

The forced occupancy of the first floor, and thus access to the remainder of the building, continued throughout the weekend. The sitdowners came in shifts, staying a few hours then going home to do chores or run necessary errands. Leo Palmer, the leader, threatened to call in 20,000 KAW members from across the state to come to Topeka for a "hunger march." It was reported that other unemployed groups across the Great Plains and the nation were watching with great interest the outcome of the Topeka strike. Lyle Armel responded to these developments with the wry observation that while the occupancy continued, it was causing

increased suffering among the “legitimate needy” because relief personnel had no access to their offices to process claims and to carry on their work.³¹

The sitdowners continued to hold the first floor, however, determined to stay until they received satisfaction on their grievances. Occasionally farm groups came and pledged their support. Children joined their parents during the day and then went home to sleep. There was a noticeable increase in participants in the evenings and at night. They stopped dancing for the Sabbath and a couple of preachers, including C.L. Atkins of the First Congregational Church, delivered sermons that day. Supporters prepared meals in the KAW hall. Strikers settled their differences with the WPA “temporarily” with additional work relief funds to expand employment rolls but insisted that they had “run after” the county commissioners for four years to gain satisfaction and “now they can come to us.” If their demands were not met by Thursday (March 24), they promised to extend their sitdown to the courthouse and prevent transactions of county business, although this action did not materialize. It was reported that many “rubber neckers,” as the strikers called spectators, came to view the strike. Finally, on March 27 the county commissioners agreed to meet with the strikers, Armel, and County Attorney Harvey in the KERC office of director Jerry Driscoll.³²

Nothing came of this preliminary meeting because the county commissioners insisted on the strikers vacating the building first and they could present their demands “later.” The group failed to accept this obvious ploy and voted unanimously to continue the strike. They also began applying pressure on the Topeka Chamber of Commerce to support their cause or the KAW would campaign against their pending \$850,000 bond issue for a new city hall, not because they opposed it but because they believed relief funding took precedence in this situation. One citizen complained to a newspaper at this point that he was indignant, as a taxpayer, because the county sheriff, county attorney, and a candidate for mayor had made major contributions to these “irresponsible” strikers.³³

A breakthrough came on March 28 with the announcement that “through the persistent and special efforts of Governor Huxman,” additional funding was acquired for WPA projects in Kansas, which

resolved that issue momentarily. Federal officials authorized Clarence Nevins to rehire some of the terminated employables over sixty-five as a “temporary” solution until the new pension law went into effect. That same day the strikers in Topeka voted to end their ten-day takeover on the promise of the commissioners to give them a hearing. The *Topeka Daily Capital* noted that the “novelty” of the occupancy had “apparently wore [sic] off.” The KAW had acquired 300 new members during the lengthy conflict.³⁴

The issue took a slightly different twist in southeast Kansas. A meeting of 350 KAW members from Cherokee, Crawford, and Bourbon counties was held in Pittsburg, where they planned a “move in” of the courthouses of their counties on April 1, 1937. Area WPA workers promised a sympathy strike and the Bourbon County farmers local #43 pledged its support as did the two Townsend Clubs in Pittsburg. Working with representatives from these three counties posed a problem different from that of the Shawnee County strike. Some KAW leaders believed they should mail their demands to WPA officials as the latter would need time to reply before the three separate county committees met to consider their responses. All this, obviously, could not be accomplished in the one week remaining before the announced takeover. In addition, the three groups had slightly different agendas to pursue.³⁵

The Bourbon County delegation met again in less than a week and decided on a courthouse occupancy on April 1 regardless of the decisions of the other two counties. The county relief problems were staggering and the Bourbon County KAW members wanted to relieve the local government of some of this burden and place it on the shoulders of the WPA where, they insisted, “it rightly belongs.” In addition to the demands that the WPA re-hire those over sixty-five who had been terminated, they wanted common labor wages to be increased to 50 cents an hour and to \$40 minimum monthly. They demanded work assignment immediately for all eligible and certified county relief applicants. Finally, after employables were assigned to WPA jobs, they insisted that all direct relief payments be raised to \$30 monthly until the Social Security pensions became available. The county commissioners expressed sympathy but declared they were financially unable to do more than what

they were currently providing. Leaders set the strike for all three counties for April 1, despite Clarence Nevins' promise of extra WPA funding to re-hire elderly workers temporarily. The KAW men and women in Pittsburg met and voted to proceed with their sit-in but first they had to enjoy a hearty lunch scavenged by their local "mooching committee." After the repast, a caravan of 150 people drove to Girard where they decided arbitration was the best route. They chose a committee of A.J. Fritter, John Babbitt, Bill Wiggins, and Booker T. Cummins, "colored," to accompany officials to Topeka to plead their case with WPA leaders. The WPA agreed to adjust unfair wage scales of workers and quotas of workers, and promised transportation of WPA workers for long distances to jobs or to assign them work closer to home. This ended the uprising.³⁶

On March 31 the legislature completed its marathon session and Governor Huxman was reported as "rushing" to set up the administration for the new social welfare programs in order for the state to qualify for federal financing. On April 3 the Shawnee County commissioners rejected all the strikers' demands, including the firing of Armel, although they also failed to re-appoint him. It was not until May 25 that they ousted him in a closed session and appointed Frank Long as his replacement. Armel had been in office for four years and rumors had circulated for the previous year that two of the three commissioners were unhappy with him. The state's leading newspaper believed that the sit-in had aroused the ire of the commissioners to the extent that they had delayed their vote to remove him from office as a result of their anger. The commissioners received an unexpected "shock," however, when M.T. Kelsey, "an efficient case worker," resigned in protest of the firing of his boss.³⁷

At this point, a major problem developed that John Stutz had raised before he resigned from KERK, an issue that the Social Security Act of 1935 had created for elderly workers. Evan Griffith had noted that as older persons assigned to WPA qualified for a pension, new replacements could then be made on WPA projects for their vacated jobs. In response to this development, Stutz declared, incorrectly, that "there is no provision in the Federal Social Security Program for giving pensions to the needy aged."³⁸

Part three of the Social Security Act of August 14, 1935 provided for grants-in-aid up to \$15 monthly to help states meet their cost of old age pensions for people who would not come under the purview of OASI (Old Age and Survivors Insurance). This type of welfare had previously been handled in Kansas by the county Poor Commissioner through commodity distribution and by county poor farms, but not grants of money. State law now needed to be changed to establish a pension plan for participation in the program in order to receive the federal funds. Difficulties arose when many legislators proved content with the current system. They also held little sympathy for helping the poor when relatives could do so but declined. Social Security was an entirely new approach to relief to the elderly, so the lower house sent a copy of its proposal to Washington to verify that it would comply with federal law and thus qualify for the matching grants. After extensive debate, the lower house approved its bill on March 13, 1937 by a vote of 82-2. The upper house endorsed a different measure on March 18 with a 37-0 tally. The proposal then went to conference to iron out the differences between the two approaches, especially over prohibiting persons from receiving old age assistance if any relative was financially capable of caring for them. The conference committee finally omitted this objectionable requirement and the lower house endorsed the compromise 99-0 on March 30 and the senate gave its approval 34-0 on the same day.³⁹

The statute established a state Board of Social Welfare to administer the program, coordinating state funding with matching federal grants. It included this significant reactionary disclaimer:

it is not the policy of the state to discourage or interfere with the universally recognized moral obligation of kindred to provide, when possible, for the support of dependent relatives, but rather it is the policy of the state to assist the needy and where necessary, the relatives in providing the necessary assistance for dependents.

Other rural states were even more demeaning by requiring recipients to sign a pauper's oath to qualify. The law provided pensions for those age

sixty-five and older, blind people, and dependent children, thus abolishing the need for the archaic, degrading poor farm. The following criteria were to serve as guidelines for the board in qualifying people for the assistance: (1) insufficient income; (2) Kansas residence for one continuous year; (3) not an inmate of a state institution; and (4) no transfer of property to anyone by the applicant for two years prior to application.⁴⁰

Meanwhile, the delay in enacting this Social Security program was proving critical to thousands of Kansans. Because of the availability of this assistance and the need to spread meager work relief funds as far as possible, in late January 1937 WPA officials announced that those eligible for old age assistance (over sixty-five) would be discharged from their jobs gradually, beginning the following month. "If we do not take them off," Clarence Nevins correctly observed, "they would never be eligible for old age assistance." He explained that, in addition to their advanced age (life expectancy in America then was sixty-seven), and many were over sixty-five, their work was often dangerous and they also needed to be protected from the inclement weather on the Great Plains. He noted that Kansas was the only state in the Midwestern region that had been permitted to keep their elderly workers on the WPA rolls.⁴¹

In late January "the startling announcement" came from Nevins that the WPA would commence discharging these people in February. What would happen to them until the state legislature acted on Social Security? Washington officials had just announced a "springtime" cut in WPA rolls for Kansas from 41,500 to 30,200 by June 1 but the problem of older relief workers was above and beyond this cutback. This presented a real crisis because action by the state legislature at that point still was indefinite and certainly the timing was questionable as the solons had not yet begun to consider proposals to provide matching pension funds. The day after the announcement by Nevins, state officials received notification that Kansas would receive \$2,729,000 in matching funds for Social Security pensions plus money to administer the program when the state established it. This heightened the pressure on the legislators because, until they acted, those who had been laid off WPA jobs would have no income. Other states faced the same dilemma. The governors of

Minnesota, Illinois, Massachusetts, Wisconsin, New York, and Rhode Island, in officially protesting the rapid reduction in WPA payrolls, summed up the situation succinctly when they observed that the “cost of relief to the unemployables cannot be borne by local units of government.” Most importantly, these aged workers were reluctant to give up a WPA job paying a minimum of \$30 monthly for a pension of unknown amount.⁴²

The district supervisor of WPA in the Tri-State mining area announced that his rolls would be reduced by 10 percent for each of the coming five months, similar to other district cuts. He expressed the hope that the largest reductions would come in the “purely agricultural counties” so that he could take into account “the seasonal decrease” in the coal mining industry because the area would soon see “hundreds” of men unemployed.⁴³

Fifty of these elderly unemployed met in the KAW hall in Topeka to protest being dropped from WPA. They decided to petition Governor Huxman, the Shawnee County commissioners, and the county legislative delegation to resolve their problem. The following day they endorsed a resolution to present to the state legislature demanding an old age pension “of not less than \$30 monthly.” They further went on record as supporting a “sit-down” strike if a resolution was not forthcoming.⁴⁴

This pressure produced results. On March 13 Howard O. Hunter assured Senator Arthur Capper that Kansas would be assigned extra WPA funds to prevent further immediate WPA cuts. He emphasized that “no one now employed by the WPA who is still in need will be dismissed,” and reminded listeners that when “drought farmers” were taken off WPA rolls earlier they “were not left high and dry but were accepted by the Resettlement Administration for grants and loans.”⁴⁵

Protesters from the Tri-State region of Bourbon, Crawford, and Cherokee counties met 350 strong in the local labor temple to declare their support of these threatened older workers. Leaders declared the national relief officers had “proved to their satisfaction” that the difficulties lay in the local administration of relief funds and they planned a “move-in” of the county relief offices on April 1 if they were not satisfied with improvements. Fortunately, the state legislature resolved

the crisis before that deadline.⁴⁶

WPA projects continued until 1943, well into World War II, but with constant periodic reductions by an antagonistic Congress from 1938 until its demise. Every Congressional cut in appropriations was met with opposition by Kansas relief workers, with the one in 1939 producing a national strike. The workers learned well from the success of their early demonstrations. Usually Harry Hopkins met relief worker strikes with the threat of the termination of the project or at least suspension until they decided to return to work.

The unique economic conditions of the Great Depression produced a new philosophy of the role of the national government, but the change was not sufficient to overcome the obstacles for unity of agrarians and wage workers. With so many desperate people on the verge of starvation, citizens began looking to Washington for assistance for their state relief burden. They also believed that in Franklin Roosevelt they had a President who really was concerned about their well-being. As one voter said later, he was the only President he had known who would understand that “my boss is a son-of-a-bitch.” Herbert Hoover first responded with RFC loans that the states never repaid. Then New Dealers proposed resolving the problem with relief assistance at first, then later with work relief projects that helped the unemployed to preserve their skills and their dignity rather than “make work” such as raking leaves or doling out money or commodities to them to feed their families. The program also contributed to society by funding necessary and enduring enterprises.

As with so many revolutionary experiments, there proved to be gaps between these programs, in this case the termination of relief work and the implementation of the Resettlement Administration for desperate farmers or the new Social Security pension plan for both rural and urban workers. Men over age sixty-five needed income yet wanted to retire to become eligible for the new type of assistance. There also could be a differential between WPA wages and the lower retirement income. Embattled men and women struck in retaliation in a surprising show of militancy. It is important that these issues affected both agrarians and suburbanites receiving relief in all the states.

Using the new union tactic of “sit-down” in forcing recognition of

their organization by the automobile industry, these strikers were very effective in coercing public officials to address their problems. In fact, Democratic bureaucrats often treated ardent Republican Kansans very liberally. Many New Dealers, in turn, found it difficult to fathom the strange concept that if workers disagreed with terms of their work relief provided by hard-pressed taxpayers, they would strike in protest instead of following the customary path of quitting. During the 1930s the tools used by organized labor—organizing to achieve power through numbers, and use of powerful weapons such as the strike, boycott, picketing, and demonstrations—were becoming acceptable in industrial relations but not in taxpayer-funded work relief, especially in agrarian-dominated Kansas where citizens found acceptance of unionization to be extremely difficult. But the strike tactics usually worked and they achieved many of the goals immediately before mobilization for defense production ended the terrible unemployment crisis and the seizure of public buildings became a distant memory.

NOTES

1. See R. Alton Lee, *Farmers vs Wage Earners: A Century of Organized Labor in Kansas, 1860-1960* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2005), 176-82.
2. Francis W. Schruben, *Turmoil in Kansas, 1930-1936* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1969), 104, lists commodity prices. See Michael W. Schuyler, *The Dread of Plenty: Agricultural Relief Activities of the Federal Government in the Middle West, 1933-1939* (Manhattan, KS: Sunflower University Press, 1989), 14, 20, 39, for farm income and indebtedness. Harry Hopkins noted that the number of farmers on relief rose 75 percent from October 1933 to February 1936 to 733,000 families. Harry Hopkins, *Spending to Save* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1936), 40-41.
3. Pamela Riney-Kehrberg, *Rooted in Dust: Surviving Drought and Depression in Southwestern Kansas* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1994), 68. The author observes that only three of the sixteen Dust Bowl states had poor farms. For Landon's attitude, see R. Alton Lee, "'[Not] a Thin Dime': Kansas Relief Politics in the Campaign of 1936," *The Historian*, 67 (Fall 2005): 475, 478. Peter Fearon, "From Self-Help to Federal Aid: Unemployment and Relief in Kansas, 1929-1932," *Kansas History* 13 (summer 1990) is excellent for this period.
4. Sherrard Ewing to Harry Hopkins, October 6, 1933; Harry Hopkins to Harlee Branch, October 9, 1933, FERA records, RG 69, entry 10, National Archives. There is a copy of "John Stutz Hurdled Schools in Record Time," *Kansas Business*, April 1834, in *Ibid.*,

- indicating an early interest of New Dealers in Stutz. A copy of an undated memo in Governor Landon's papers signed by T.J. Edmonds, an FERA administrator, is even more effusive, saying that Stutz's work was "unexcelled in any state." Governors Correspondence, Alf M. Landon, 27-11-04-3, box 12, folder 3, Kansas State Historical Society, Topeka, hereafter cited as KSHS.
5. Schuyler, *Dread of Plenty*, 90, 93. The *Topeka Daily Capital*, July 18, 19, August 1, 1934, discusses the slaughter program. Lawrence Svobida, *Farming the Dust Bowl* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1986), 17, lists the 107,000 figure.
 6. Governor Correspondence, Alf M. Landon, 27-06-04-03, box 12, Folder 6, KSHS; KERK, *Report*, November 9, 1939, KSHS. See also Michael W. Schuyler, "Federal Drought Relief Activities in Kansas, 1934," *Kansas Historical Quarterly*, 42 (winter 1976):412-16.
 7. Schuyler, *Dread of Plenty*, 64, 75, 89. See Svobida, *Farming the Dust Bowl* for the story of a wheat farmer during this period.
 8. Schruben, *Kansas in Turmoil*, 160-61, 179. For a change in Rooseveltian philosophy and a distinction between the First and Second New Deals, see Otis L. Graham, "Historians and the New Deals," *Social Studies* 54 (April 1963). The "life itself" quotation comes from Pamela Riney-Kehrberg, "Hard Times—Hungry Years: Failure of Poor Relief in Southwestern Kansas, 1930-1935," *Kansas History*, 15 (autumn 1992): 167.
 9. Schuyler, *Dread of Plenty*, 133. The WPA conformed to an unwritten rule that it did not interfere with private enterprise. William W. Bremer, "Along the Way: The New Deal's Work Relief Programs for the Unemployed," in Melvyn Dubofsky, (ed.), *The New Deal: Conflicting Interpretations and Shifting Perspectives* (New York: Garland, 1992), 207. For the evolving concept of relief stipends during this period, see Arthur Edward Burns and Peyton Kerr, "Survey of Work Relief Policies," *American Economic Review*, 27 (December 1937). Rexford G. Tugwell, "The Resettlement Idea," *Agricultural History*, 33 (October 1959): 160, attributes administrative problems to the RA concepts being established too quickly and its coverage too broad.
 10. George McJimsey, *Harry Hopkins: Ally of the Poor and Defender of Democracy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987), 89.
 11. *Topeka Daily Capital*, May 25, 28, 1935; *Topeka State Journal*, May 25, 29, 31, 1935; Schruben, *Kansas in Turmoil*, 144.
 12. *Topeka Daily Capital*, June 21, July 23, December 16, 1935; *Topeka State Journal*, October 21, 18, November 1, 1935. The state commission on labor noted the magnitude of the unemployment problem in April 1937, the last time it listed these statistics. Using April 1930 as an index of 100, the agency reported that in April 1935, the index was 547.1, still a staggering unemployment problem for the Sunflower State. A memo of a meeting of WPA and county officials on July 30, 1935 noted that there were currently 3,700 projects and 17,000 workers needed to be transferred to them by September 1. Stutz papers, RH MS 327, box 1, folder 33, Spencer Library, University of Kansas; hereafter cited as Stutz papers.

13. Schruben, *Turmoil in Kansas*, 179-80.
14. Schuyler, "Drought and Politics," 5-17. John A. Salmond, *The Civilian Conservation Corps* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1967) is the standard study of the CCC. See also R. Alton Lee, "The Civilian Conservation Corps in Kansas," *Journal of the West*, 44 (Fall 2005).
15. George Mack, Jr., (ed.), *The 1933 Kansas Legislative Blue Book* (Lawrence, World, 1933), 70, labeled the WPA leader as "genial."
16. Ernest F. McNutt, *Kansas Unemployed Organizations* (WPA Writers Project, October 25, 1940), 3-4, KSHS.
17. "1 million farm families on relief" from Theodore Saloutos, "New Deal Agricultural Policy: An Evaluation," in Melvyn Dubofsky (ed.), *The New Deal: Conflicting Interpretations and Shifting Perspectives* (New York: Garland, 1992), 232; McNutt, *Kansas Unemployed Organizations*, 3-4; *Bulletin of Kansas Allied Workers*, 1935. A check of the WAA on the internet revealed that graduate student Eric Davin of the University of Pittsburgh won Freedom of Access entry into the FBI files of David Lasser in 1995. Otherwise, no bibliography was uncovered for the WAA.
18. WAA proceedings of 2nd and 3rd conventions, copies in KSHS. For the Lundeen bill, see Kenneth Casebeer, "The Workers Unemployment Insurance Bill: American Social Wage, Labor Organization, and Legal Ideology," in Christopher L. Tomlins and Andrew J. King (ed.), *Labor Law in American*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992).
19. *Topeka State Journal*, February 15, 1937.
20. McNutt, *Kansas Unemployed Organizations*, 72-75.
21. *The Kaw Bulletin*, June 12, 1936, KSHS.
22. Governors Correspondence, Alf M. Landon, 27-06-04-03, box 12, folder 6, KSHS Riney-Kehrberg, *Rooted in Dust*, 86, notes that if anyone even complained about their relief job in Stanton County, they were replaced by another worker on the waiting list. By allowing the Emporia strike, Lyon County obviously did not follow such strict standards.
23. *Kansas City Kansan*, August 6, 1935.
24. *Ibid.*, August , 8, 1935.
25. *Ibid.*, August 11, 12, 1935.
26. "For the most part" quotation from Victoria Hazelton, "Work Relief," *Saturday Evening Post* 207 (March 2, 1935): 85.
27. McNutt, *Kansas Unemployed Organization*, 75-80.
28. *Topeka Daily Capital*, March 1, 1937.
29. *Ibid.*, March 6, 1937; Peter Fearon, "Riot in Wichita," *Kansas History*, 15 (winter 1992-1993).
30. *Topeka Daily Capital*, March 20, 1937.
31. *Topeka State Journal*, March 22, 1937.
32. *Topeka Daily Capital*, March 22, 24, 1937.
33. *Ibid.*, March 24, 1937.

34. *Ibid.*, March 25, 1937.
35. *Pittsburg Headlight*, March 22, 1937; *Fort Scott Tribune*, March 23, 1937.
36. *Fort Scott Tribune*, March 27, 30, 1937; *Pittsburg Headlight*, April 1, 1937.
37. *Topeka Daily Capital*, April 3, 1937.
38. John Stutz to Evan L. Griffith, December 21, 1935, Stutz papers, RH MS 327, box 1, folder 5.
39. *House Journal*, 1937, 854; *Senate Journal*, 1937, 677, 726; *Topeka Daily Capital*, March 11, 31, 1937.
40. *Kansas, Laws*, 1937, chapter 327.
41. *Topeka Daily Capital*, January 28, 1937.
42. *Columbus Daily Advocate*, January 30, 1937; *Topeka Daily Capital*, January 29, March 1, 1937.
43. *Topeka Daily Capital*, February 17, 1937.
44. *Ibid.*, March 1, 5, 1937.
45. *Ibid.*, March 13, 1937. *Topeka State Journal*, March 13, 1937.
46. *Pittsburg Headlight*, March 22, 1937.