

## AFD Ep 372 Links and Notes - The WPA Strikes of 1939 [Bill/Rachel/Kelley] - Recording May 9

- On this week's episode, we're talking about the WPA Strikes of 1939 and especially the Minneapolis WPA strikes. While strikes occurred across the country that year in reaction to a rollback and more conservative reform of the WPA, the incidents were perhaps most intense in Minneapolis. So let's talk first a bit about the background of the situation nationally and in Minneapolis at the time...
- <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Works-Progress-Administration> *In 1939 the Works Progress Administration altered its name to Work Projects Administration. In that year increasing charges of mismanagement and of abuse of the program by workers led to a reduction in appropriations, and a strike by construction workers against wage cuts was unsuccessful. In 1943, with the virtual elimination of unemployment by a wartime economy, the WPA was terminated.*
- <https://www.mnopedia.org/event/works-progress-administration-strikes-1939> Our biggest source today, among many, will be the MNopedia article on these events. That website if you haven't heard of it is "an online encyclopedia about Minnesota developed by the Minnesota Historical Society (MNHS) and its partners. It is a free, curated, and authoritative resource about our state. All of our articles are prepared by historians, consulting experts, professional writers, and others who have been vetted by MNHS." (We will also be citing today from the MN Historical Society's main website, among other sources. You can find all our links posted in a PDF with this episode as usual.)
  - *Summary: In the summer of 1939, workers went on strike across the nation to protest budget cuts to the Works Progress Administration imposed by the Emergency Relief Appropriation Act. While they did not bring about the act's repeal, they kept their jobs and were allowed to return to work after the strike. Minnesota was the only state in which strikers faced criminal charges for preventing people from working.*
    - Our commentary: This relates in part due to the recent legacy of the 1934 Minneapolis strike we covered on [episode #346](#). But this was also a new era for Minnesota politics under 32-year-old Republican Governor Harold Stassen, who later became notorious for running for president at least nine times before his death in 2001.
      - Stassen came to power in Minnesota on a platform of [cleaning house in the civil service](#) after the single two-year term of Governor Elmer Austin Benson of the Farmer-Labor coalition. Benson, who was obliterated for re-election against Stassen in 1938, had been elected in 1936 to succeed Floyd B. Olson after his death of cancer in 1936. Olson, a committed leftist, had built the backbone of the Farmer-Labor coalition's party finances on the strength of its Minnesota Civil Service members in state government and its political power on the strength of farmers, workers, immigrants, radical labor groups, and civil servants. So, Stassen was trying to attack and dismantle that power base. Benson, a former appointed US Senator before his governorship, had been close to Olson and remained a key figure, if a doomed one, in Minnesota and national politics through the 1940s.
      - Along with Governor Stassen, the city of Minneapolis had returned to the control of former Mayor and retired Minnesota Army National Guard General George Emerson Leach, a reactionary Republican. (Not to be confused with MN National Guard General Ellard Walsh, who we covered in ep 346 for his peaceful

management of the 1934 strike.) Ironically, Leach's reputation was in good standing partly through the actions of Floyd Olson, who while serving as District Attorney during his anti-Klan purges had aggressively prosecuted an elaborate conspiracy by members of the KKK to libel Mayor Leach with a false affair claim. We also talked about Olson's anti-Klan campaigns in ep 346 but didn't mention that. [\[Go to Rachel\]](#)

- **Role of women in the WPA strikes in Minneapolis:** *In early 1939, Minneapolis WPA officials dismissed over 900 women workers, defending the decision by saying that the women could obtain income from Aid to Dependent Children (ADC). For most, however, getting ADC was impossible; even if they qualified, waiting for processing would deprive them of income. As the job cuts continued, the women organized, and in May, 1500 workers voted to take a one-day strike. On June 2, more than 5,000 workers marched to the WPA's Minneapolis office to demand re-instatement for laid-off workers and an increase in the budget for relief work. The one-day strike and march, however, did not succeed.*
- **"Reforms" to WPA = wage cuts & fewer jobs:** *On Saturday, July 1, 1939, a new law went into effect: the Emergency Relief Appropriation Act (Woodrum Act). Under this law, WPA positions were slashed from 3.35 million to 2 million, and the WPA budget was cut by 773 million dollars. Skilled Twin Cities workers' hourly wages dropped from \$1.25 to 71 cents. The result was the largest nationwide strike (up to that date) in US history, with close to half a million workers on strike across the country. On Tuesday, workers walked off their jobs at the Minnesota state fairgrounds. By the end of Wednesday, July 5, 13,350 workers were on strike in the Twin Cities alone. Workers in all sorts of projects walked off the job—plumbers, electricians, steam-fitters, sewing workers, and library workers. Even drummers in the Federal Symphonic band refused to play. [\[GO TO LEAD UP BELOW\]](#)*
- The problem the strikers faced is that due to the 1939 reforms, there were far fewer jobs available so there were **plenty of unemployed people willing to take the remaining positions** (I think): *WPA administrator Linus C. Glotzbach declared that anyone who failed to report to work by Monday morning, July 10, would be fired and replaced with eligible workers on the relief rolls (the federal government's lists of people looking for jobs). [...] Previously, when there had been a labor dispute at a [WPA] project, it had been shut down. Keeping projects open meant that workers would continue protesting.*
  - The Woodrum Act reforms to the WPA also contained a bunch of provisions anticipating strike actions and other resistance to the reforms: they prohibited a "hard picket—a picket where workers physically prevent scabs from going to work by blocking entrances. The hard picket violated section 28 of the Woodrum Act, which stipulated that any person who denied another's relief benefits by means of fraud, force, threat, or intimidation was guilty of a felony." The FBI deployed undercover agents to infiltrate the Minneapolis strikes and find hard picket violations so that hundreds of strikers could be arrested on felony charges with potentially long sentences. (We will talk about this more in a few minutes.)
- *Violent clashes ensued [after Glotzbach's announcement that workers would be replaced by July 10]. On Monday, July 10, fights along the picket line occurred at the sewing project headquartered at 123 2nd St North, and it was closed for the next five days. On July 14, there was a second battle at the sewing project, this time between pickets and police. A crowd of 3,000 had amassed in the area.*

Seemingly unprovoked, police fired into the crowd, killing one relief client and injuring twenty-four. **[GO BELOW TO FDR/MURRAY QUOTES]**

- Neither the mayor of Minneapolis, George Leach, nor the governor of Minnesota, Harold Stassen, wanted to deal with the strike. They argued that since the WPA was a federal project, the city and state were not responsible for maintaining law and order. [...] Over the next week, a joint strike committee met with Glotzbach and Stassen to come to an agreement. The bosses got the workers to accept their existing wages and working conditions, and the strike was settled on July 21. Most of the laid off or fired workers were then re-instated or re-assigned to their jobs. [This feels similar to the outcome of our episode on the 1922 railroad shopmen's strike: A defeat in objectives but a strong enough show of force by the workers to be re-hired at the reduced wages without being fired altogether or ending up worse than before the strike. With the exception of the large number of arrests in this case, **which we will talk about now.**[Jump to Kelley/MNHS source])
- <http://collections.mnhs.org/cms/display?irn=10729354>
- <https://www.nytimes.com/1939/07/16/archives/wpa-strike-the-wpa-takes-the-center-of-the-national-stage.html>
- <https://www.loc.gov/item/2016679227/>
- <https://digitalcollections.hclib.org/digital/collection/MplsPhotos/id/4564/rec/7>
- <https://hclib.tumblr.com/post/186193472017/wpa-strike-and-the-minneapolis-sewing-project-on>
- 3rd trial *The strike ended on July 21, and workers returned to the sewing project and other WPA worksites. The story was far from over, however. FBI agents that had infiltrated the strike were instrumental in getting charges brought against over 100 people for their actions in the Minnesota strikes. Edward Albert ([pictured here at his arrest](#)) was one of the men charged. A steward on the WPA sewing project, Albert was present at the strike, but he pleaded innocent of any violence or illegal actions. Rather, he testified that he and other strikers had worked to help police keep sidewalks and streets clear and that outsiders had instigated the violence. Despite these avowals, Albert and the entire group of 25 defendants with which he was tried were convicted in December 1939.*
- **[jump down to BLS roundup from 1940 to close out]**
- <http://collections.mnhs.org/MNHistoryMagazine/articles/42/v42i06p202-214.pdf>
- **Lead up to Strike:** "BEFORE THE Woodrum relief appropriation bill took effect in July, 1939, WPA workers had been receiving the prevailing hourly wage of the area in which their project was located. For a skilled craftsman, this meant that he was paid the prevailing union hourly wage, and each month he worked the number of hours required by this wage scale to make up what the WPA termed his "security wage." The new act, however, stipulated that all project workers should work 130 hours a month for their security wage. (The bill was drafted as a means of standardizing the number of hours required of the diversely employed WPA workers.) A consequence of the revision would be a cut in hourly wages for all workers. The reduction would be greatest for building tradesmen and other skilled craftsmen who, though union members, would be working at less-than-union wages or scabbing in competition with their own unions. "
- **MN Trials**
  - 162 people, 55 of whom were women, were indicted on August 18th.
  - Bails were set very high and local labor organizations were unable to pay them.
  - Persons were not tried individually, but in groups depending on time and place of involvement

- First group was charged with having conspired and engaged in acts of violence at the university project. 2 of the 8 were acquitted. Others found guilty of intimidation and/or conspiracy.
- The second trial revolved around an incident at a gravel pit and lasted only three days. 3 of the 4 defendants were found guilty.
- The third trial revolved around violence at the sewing project where one person died and many were injured. All 25 defendants were found guilty of intimidation and conspiracy. (Lots of red-baiting here.)
- The rest of the defendants had their case dismissed as Roosevelt believed they had "learned their lesson". [\(go to Rachel\)](#)
- **Public Reaction to the Strike:**
  - "At a White House press conference on July 14, President Roosevelt issued the dictum (giving explicit permission to the press to quote him), "You cannot strike against the government," shortly after a similar opinion had been expressed by Attorney General Frank Murphy."
  - "A few hours after the president had spoken, Thomas A. Murray, president of New York City's Building and Construction Trades Council, responded for labor: "You cannot force any American workingman to work at his job if, for any reason, he decides that he is unwilling to do so. If the day should ever come when a man who abstains from his job because he is dissatisfied with the terms of employment can be coerced into resuming his job against his will, then our cherished democracy will be dead."
- <https://www.bls.gov/wsp/publications/annual-summaries/pdf/strikes-in-1939.pdf> (May 1940 official report of the Bureau of Labor Statistics on all strike actions in 1939)
  - *The building-trades unions were especially opposed [to the 1939 WPA reforms], as they felt that abandonment of the prevailing-wage principle would affect union wage scales on private construction as well as on WPA projects.*
  - Nationwide: *The number of WPA workers who were idle for 1 or more days in connection with these stoppages was about 123,000. Many more than this were idle for a part of a day, as a result of mass meetings and short demonstrations which were held in protest against the new WPA regulations.*
  - Many WPA strikers across the country returned to work in less than 5 days for fear of losing their listing on government relief rolls permanently
- Closing thoughts
  - FDR / Coolidge comparison: "There is no right to strike against the public safety, anywhere, anytime."
  - Stassen/Leach hands off?