

Exercises

1. Why did the Seattle general strike end after five days?
2. What did the Seattle general strike symbolize to the business and government elite?
3. Why were there so many strikes directly after the end of World War I?
4. Why is the depiction of the 1920s as prosperous and "roaring" a misleading one?
5. Why might working-class women not celebrate the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment?
6. How did Fiorella La Guardia behave differently from other political figures in the 1920s?
7. Would you have voted for the Mellon Plan? Why or why not?
8. Why was a communist party not organized in the United States until after 1919? (Why did socialism not emerge in America until after the Civil War?)
9. Why did mill owners move their factories to the South in the 1920s?
10. What was Galbraith's explanation of the American economy collapse in 1929? What was the socialist's explanation? What was Henry Ford's? What information, in addition to what Zinn provides, would you want to have in order to decide which theory to support?
11. What percentage of the workforce was laid off during the Great Depression? What happened to these workers?
12. What series of historical events did Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath* chronicle?

Self-help in Hard Times

The war was hardly over, it was February 1919, the IWW leadership was in jail, but the IWW idea of the general strike became reality for five days in Seattle, Washington, when a walkout of 100,000 working people brought the city to a halt.

It began with thirty-five thousand shipyard workers striking for a wage increase. They appealed for support to the Seattle Central Labor Council, which recommended a citywide strike, and in two weeks 110 locals—mostly American Federation of Labor, only a few IWW—voted to strike. The rank and file of each striking local elected three members to a General Strike Committee, and on February 6, 1919, at 10:00 A.M., the strike began.

The city now stopped functioning, except for activities organized by the strikers to provide essential needs. Firemen agreed to stay on the job. Laundry workers handled only hospital laundry. Vehicles authorized to move carried signs "Exempted by the General Strike Committee." Thirty-five neighborhood milk stations were set up.

A Labor War Veteran's Guard was organized to keep the peace. On the blackboard at one of its headquarters was written: "The purpose of this organization is to preserve law and order without the use of force. No volunteer will have any police power or be allowed to carry weapons of any sort, but to use persuasion only." During the strike, crime in the city decreased.

The mayor swore in twenty-four hundred special deputies, many of

Self-help in Hard Times

them students at the University of Washington. Almost a thousand sailors and marines were brought into the city by the U.S. government. The general strike ended after five days, according to the General Strike Committee because of pressure from the international officers of the various unions, as well as the difficulties of living in a shut-down city.

The strike had been peaceful. But when it was over, there were raids and arrests: on the Socialist party headquarters, on a printing plant. Thirty-nine members of the IWW were jailed as "ring-leaders of anarchy."

Why such a reaction to the general strike, to the organizing of the Wobblies? A statement by the mayor of Seattle suggests that the Establishment feared not just the strike itself but what it symbolized. He said: "The general strike, as practiced in Seattle, is of itself the weapon of revolution, all the more dangerous because quiet. To succeed, it must suspend everything; stop the entire life stream of a community.... That is to say, it puts the government out of operation."

Furthermore, the Seattle general strike took place in the midst of a wave of postwar rebellions all over the world. A writer in *The Nation* commented that year:

The most extraordinary phenomenon of the present time...is the unprecedented revolt of the rank and file....

In Russia it has dethroned the Czar.... In Korea and India and Egypt and Ireland it keeps up an unyielding resistance to political tyranny. In England it brought about the railway strike, against the judgement of the men's own executives. In New York, it brought about the longshoremen's strike and kept the men out in defiance of union officials, and caused the upheaval in the printing trade, which the international officers, even though the employers worked hand in glove with them, were completely unable to control.

The common man...losing faith in the old leadership, has experienced a new access of self-confidence....

In the year 1919, 350,000 steelworkers went on strike; 120,000 textile workers struck in New England and New Jersey, and 30,000 silk workers struck in Paterson, New Jersey. In Boston the police went out on strike, and in New York City cigarmakers, shirtmakers, carpenters, bakers, teamsters, and barbers were out on strike. In Chicago, the press reported, "More strikes and lockouts accompany the mid-summer heat than ever known before at any one time." Five thousand workers at International Harvester and five thousand city workers were in the streets.

When the twenties began, however, the situation seemed under con-

trol. The IWW was destroyed, the Socialist party falling apart. The strikes were beaten down by force, and the economy was doing just well enough for just enough people to prevent mass rebellion.

Congress, in the twenties, put an end to the dangerous, turbulent flood of immigrants (14 million between 1900 and 1920) by passing laws setting immigration quotas: the quotas favored Anglo-Saxons, kept out black and yellow people, limited severely the coming of Latins, Slavs, Jews. No African country could send more than one hundred people; one hundred was the limit for China.

The Ku Klux Klan was revived in the 1920s, and it spread into the North. By 1924 it had 4.5 million members. The NAACP seemed helpless in the face of mob violence and race hatred everywhere. The impossibility of the black person's ever being considered equal in white America was the theme of the nationalist movement led in the 1920s by Marcus Garvey. He preached black pride, racial separation, and a return to Africa, which to him held the only hope for black unity and survival. But Garvey's movement, inspiring as it was to some blacks, could not make much headway against the powerful white supremacy currents of the postwar decade.

There was some truth to the standard picture of the twenties as a time of prosperity and fun—the Jazz Age, the Roaring Twenties. Unemployment was down, from 4,270,000 in 1921 to a little over 2 million in 1927. The general level of wages for workers rose. Some farmers made a lot of money. The 40 percent of all families who made over \$2,000 a year could buy new gadgets: autos, radios, refrigerators. Millions of people were not doing badly—and they could shut out of the picture the others—the tenant farmers, black and white, the immigrant families in the big cities either without work or not making enough to get the basic necessities.

But prosperity was concentrated at the top. One-tenth of one percent of the families at the top received as much income as 42 percent of the families at the bottom. Every year in the 1920s, about 25,000 workers were killed on the job and 100,000 permanently disabled. Two million people in New York City lived in tenements condemned as firetraps.

Sinclair Lewis captured the false sense of prosperity, the shallow pleasure of the new gadgets for the middle classes, in his novel *Babbitt*.

Women had finally, after long agitation, won the right to vote in 1920 with the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment, but voting was still a middle-class and upper-class activity, and these women divided along orthodox party lines as other voters did.

Few political figures spoke out for the poor of the twenties. One was

Self-help in Hard Times

Fiorello La Guardia, a congressman from a district of poor immigrants in East Harlem (who ran, oddly, on both Socialist and Republican tickets). Receiving desperate letters from his constituents, La Guardia wrote to the secretary of agriculture about the high price of meat and received a pamphlet on how to use meat economically. La Guardia wrote back: "I asked for help and you send me a bulletin.... Your bulletins... are of no use to the tenement dwellers of this great city.... What we want is the help of your department on the meat profiteers who are keeping the hard-working people of this city from obtaining proper nourishment."

During the presidencies of Harding and Coolidge in the twenties, the secretary of the treasury was Andrew Mellon, one of the richest men in America. In 1923, Congress was presented with the "Mellon Plan," calling for what looked like a general reduction of income taxes, except that the top income brackets would have their tax rates lowered from 50 percent to 25 percent, while the lowest-income group would have theirs lowered from 4 percent to 3 percent.

A few congressmen from working-class districts spoke against the bill, such as William P. Connery of Massachusetts: "When I see a provision in this Mellon tax bill which is going to save Mr. Mellon himself \$800,000 on his income tax and his brother \$600,000 on his, I cannot give it my support."

The Mellon Plan passed. In 1928, La Guardia toured the poorer districts of New York and said: "I confess I was not prepared for what I actually saw. It seemed almost incredible that such conditions of poverty could really exist."

Buried in the general news of prosperity in the twenties were, from time to time, stories of bitter labor struggles. In 1922, coal miners and railroad men went on strike. That same year, a textile strike in Rhode Island among Italian and Portuguese workers failed, but class feelings were awakened and some of the strikers joined radical movements.

After the war, with the Socialist party weakened, a Communist party was organized, and Communists were involved in many labor struggles. They played a leading part in the great textile strike that spread through the Carolinas and Tennessee in the spring of 1929. The mill owners had moved to the South to escape unions, to find more subservient workers among the poor whites. But these workers rebelled against the long hours, the low pay. They particularly resented the "stretch-out"—an intensification of work.

In Gastonia, North Carolina, workers joined a new union, the

National Textile Workers Union, led by Communists, which admitted both blacks and whites to membership. When some of them were fired, half of the two thousand workers went out on strike. An atmosphere of anti-Communism and racism built up and violence began. Textile strikes began to spread across South Carolina.

One by one the various strikes were settled, with some gains, but not at Gastonia. There, with the textile workers living in a tent colony and refusing to renounce the Communists in their leadership, the strike went on. But strikebreakers were brought in and the mills kept operating. Desperation grew; there were violent clashes with the police.

One dark night, the chief of police was killed in a gun battle and sixteen strikers and sympathizers were indicted for murder, including Fred Beal, a Communist party organizer. Ultimately seven were tried and given sentences of from five to twenty years. They were released on bail, and left the state; the Communists escaped to Soviet Russia. Through all the defeats, the beatings, the murders, however, it was the beginning of textile mill unionism in the South.

The stock market crash of 1929, which marked the beginning of the Great Depression of the United States, came directly from wild speculation that collapsed and brought the whole economy down with it. But, as John Galbraith said in his study of that event (*The Great Crash*), behind that speculation was the fact that "the economy was fundamentally unsound." He pointed to very unhealthy corporate and banking structures, an unsound foreign trade, much economic misinformation, and the "bad distribution of income" (the highest 5 percent of the population received about one-third of all personal income).

A socialist critic would go further and say that the capitalist system was by its nature unsound: a system driven by the one overriding motive of corporate profit and therefore unstable, unpredictable, and blind to human needs. The result of all that: permanent depression for many of its people, and periodic crises for almost everybody. Capitalism, despite its attempts at self-reform, its organization for better control, was still in 1929 a sick and undependable system.

After the crash, the economy was stunned, barely moving. Over five thousand banks closed and huge numbers of businesses, unable to get money, closed too. Those that continued laid off employees and cut the wages of those who remained, again and again. Industrial production fell by 50 percent, and by 1933 perhaps 15 million (no one knew exactly)—one-fourth or one-third of the labor force—were out of work.