

WHAT DID IT TAKE TO MAKE FDR'S NEW DEAL HAPPEN, AND WHAT WILL IT TAKE TO MAKE BERNIE SANDERS'S NEW NEW DEAL HAPPEN?

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[Also see "[Why Does the American Ruling Plutocracy
Hold Elections?](#)"]

[Also see "[Let's Get Off the Treadmill of Defeat](#)"]

[Also see "[Revolutionary Community Organizing](#)"; it's
about what you can actually do!]

Franklin Delano Roosevelt's famous 1930s New Deal was a major victory of working class people against the ruling Big Money upper class of the 1930s. It is a victory that we still benefit from: everybody who collects Social Security (or

whose parents do) and everybody who has ever relied on unemployment compensation, among many others.

But what made FDR (and the Big Money ruling class he persuaded to go along with him) push through the New Deal?

The answer to this question is one that few Americans today know. The myth we are taught is that FDR "gave us" the New Deal because he was, well, just a wonderful person and knew that millions of Americans needed a new deal because of the suffering they were enduring during the Great Depression.

The truth is quite different. Here it is in FDR's own words:

"I want to save our system, the capitalistic system," FDR told an emissary of the archconservative newspaper publisher William Randolph Hearst. To do so, Roosevelt said, *"it may be necessary to throw to the wolves the forty-six men who are reported to have incomes*

in excess of one million dollars a year.” [Read the source [here](#).]

The context of FDR's New Deal was not FDR's supposed benevolence towards the working class but, on the contrary, his and his fellow upper ruling class members' fear of the working class.

But what, exactly, were the upper class leaders afraid of? Answer: revolution. To fully appreciate how afraid they were of the possibility of revolution in the United States at this time, it is necessary to know what the working class was doing in the period just before and then during the 1930s. This is our history, but we are not taught it. What follows here is a summary of this history, taken as an excerpt from my book, [The People As Enemy: The Leaders' Hidden Agenda in World War II](#). (The footnote numbers are those in book, and these references are also provided here below.)

[Begin excerpt]

1919

In the United States the peace following the end of WWI immediately released workers from feelings of loyalty to the government and gave them a sense of freedom to challenge not only individual business owners, but the federal government itself. Less than two weeks after the WWI armistice, in January 1919, 35,000 Seattle shipyard workers went on strike against their employer--the U.S. government. The workers "appealed to the Seattle Central Labor Council to call a General Strike." The *Seattle Times* wrote, "A general strike directed at WHAT? The Government of the United States? Bosh! Not 15% of Seattle laborites would consider such a proposition." But "within a day, eight local unions endorsed the strike," then 110 locals within two weeks. For six days virtually nothing happened in the city except as approved by the General Strike Committee. The acting governor decided his National Guard were inadequate and phoned Secretary of War Newton Baker who then sent in 950 sailors and marines to reinforce the Mayor's specially sworn in 2,400 deputies

who, together, intimidated the workers into ending the strike. Seattle Mayor Hanson declared, "the so-called sympathetic Seattle strike was an attempted revolution. That there was no violence does not alter the fact...The intent, openly and covertly announced, was for the overthrow of the industrial system here first, then everywhere." [184]

Two months later in April a movement for an eight hour day "swept the New England textile districts," leading to a strike by 120,000 workers. A pro-company labor investigator described the upheaval as, "a strike for wages carried on in a revolutionary atmosphere. That is, there are serious questionings of the justice of the existing economic order. In addition to that there is a feeling on the part of the strikers that the government is against them. To many of them American government is personified by [the Town of] Lawrence [Massachusetts] police."

The same month women telephone operators went on strike against the federal government

which "retained wartime control of the telephone companies." The men struck in support, and an observer wrote, "I do not believe that an industrial issue has ever before penetrated every village, hamlet or town of New England as has this strike of telephone girls."

In September, Boston policemen voted 1,134 to 2 to strike after 19 policemen were fired in retaliation for the policemen's association affiliating with the AFL (American Federation of Labor). The National Guard was called in and the entire police force was fired. *The Wall Street Journal* wrote, "Lenin and Trotsky are on their way." [185]

The strike wave spread to many cities including Chicago and New York City. Then, on September 22, 1919, 350,000 steelworkers went on strike. The Sheriff of Allegheny County in Pennsylvania, the heart of the industry, "issued a proclamation forbidding outdoor meetings anywhere in the county" and in most steel centers local authorities forbade even indoor meetings.

"In Gary, Indiana the National Guard occupied the city and forbade parades." Attorney General A. Mitchell Palmer "warned publicly that the strike harbored the threat of Bolshevism." [186]

On a Sunday night in the week of July 4, in the Belleville sub-district of Illinois, 2,000 coal miners adopted a resolution that read: "In view of the fact that the present-day system of Society, known as the capitalist system, has completely broken down, and is no longer able to supply the material and spiritual needs of the workers of the land, and in further view of the fact that the apologists for and the beneficiaries of that system now try to placate the suffering masses by promises of reforms such as a shorter workday and increases in wages...therefore be it resolved, that the next National Convention of the U.M.W.A. [United Mine Workers of America] issue a call to the workers of all industries to elect delegates to an industrial congress, there to demand of the capitalist class that all instruments of industries be turned over to the working class

to guarantee that necessities, comforts and luxuries be produced for the use of humanity instead of a parasitical class of stockholders..."[187]

Four months later, on November 1, 425,000 coal miners went on strike for a 30 hour week and a 60 percent wage increase. President Wilson sent federal troops into the "coal fields of Utah, Washington, New Mexico, Oklahoma, and Pennsylvania." When United Mine Workers President John L. Lewis ordered the miners back to work, declaring "We are Americans, we cannot fight our government," the coal miners ignored him and stayed out for nearly a month.[188]

1920-21

In May 1920 a coal strike in Matewan, West Virginia spread throughout the state leading to a three hour gun battle between strikers and guards brought in "to prevent infiltration of union men." the strike continued to August 1921 when the

workers decided to use force to get through the guards, deputies and troopers who were preventing them from entering and spreading the strike to other counties. The workers formed a "citizens army" march of 4,000 led by war veterans, accompanied by nurses in uniform, and armed with every weapon they could obtain, and they battled deputies defending the non-union counties. President Warren G. Harding sent "2,100 troops of the 19th Infantry, together with machine guns and airplanes," to defeat the "citizens army." [189] The airplanes were armed with gas bombs and machine guns," [190] and although the strikers backed down before the planes were used, the federal government was forced to reveal to these West Virginia coal miners that, if necessary for the protection of capitalist power, it would bomb American citizens just as it had bombed foreigners in the First World War (and as it would bomb civilians on an unimaginable scale in a future World War.)

Enormous revolutionary impulses were released by the restoration of peace immediately following the conclusion of WWI. The American ruling elite was frightened; so frightened that it resorted to the kind of actions that were dangerous because they risked revealing to the general public how undemocratic was the real exercise of governmental power in the country. Not only were government military forces ordered to attack Americans, and the right to assemble revoked, but other laws that made the country appear to be a democracy were flagrantly ignored. U.S. Attorney General A. Mitchell Palmer conducted the infamous "Palmer Raids" against radicals and leftists in 1919. He struck without warning and without warrants, smashed union offices and the headquarters of Communist, Socialist, and other radical organizations, and arrested over five thousand people, deporting two hundred and forty-nine. Also revealing, Congress refused to sit the duly elected socialist from Wisconsin, Victor Berger. Such heavy-handed actions were not necessary

dufing the just concluded war. For America's ruling elite, war was not the problem; peace was.

1930s

When the peacetime economy led to the Great Depression in the 1930s, revolutionary impulses among American working people grew even stronger. Organizations of the unemployed formed in cities across the country. In Chicago alone the Unemployed Council had 22,000 members. The Unemployed Councils implicitly rejected the rights of private property. When landlords tried to evict tenants who couldn't pay the rent, the Councils used mass direct action to stop the evictions.[191]

General MacArthur, Officers Eisenhower and Patton, And the National Guard Attack the Enemy--Americans

The biggest fight against an eviction, however, was probably one that occurred July 28, 1932 in the nation's Capital. Twenty thousand veterans of WWI, many unemployed and homeless, camped

out in the Capital to demand payment of bonuses they had been promised. On that day, the future military "heroes" of WWII made their debut in history. Gen. Douglas MacArthur, with Maj. Dwight D. Eisenhower and one of his officers, George S. Patton Jr., following orders from Secretary of War Patrick J. Hurley, led four troops of cavalry, four companies of infantry, a mounted machine gun squadron and six whippet tanks, lined up on Pennsylvania Avenue near 12th Street in Washington DC, in an attack on thousands of Americans who had become known as "Bonus Marchers." Veterans who raised their arms against soldiers on horseback had their arms cut by sabers. Others were hit by the flat of the sword. In some instances ears were cut off.

Two were killed and many wounded.[192] As horses pounded toward the veterans, reporters at the White House were told the Secret Service had learned that those resisting eviction were "entirely of the Communist element." "Thank God," said President Herbert Hoover, "we still

have a government that knows how to deal with a mob." [193]

In Pennsylvania, unemployed coal miners ignored the private property rights of the mine owners and dug small "bootleg" coal mines on company property, producing in this fashion in 1934 "some five million tons of coal and employing 20,000 men." The coal companies fought the "bootleggers" with company police but the miners fought back. The companies had no public support, and couldn't even convince juries to convict the "bootleggers." [194]

Seeing working people taking matters into their own hands and ignoring the rights of private property, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt crafted the "New Deal" to convince them that their problems would be solved by corporate and government leaders. But not all workers were convinced.

On May 9, 1934 longshoremen on the West Coast went on strike, "cutting off nearly 2,000

miles of coast land." The strike spread to teamsters, sailors, marine firemen, water tenders, cooks, stewards, and licensed officers. On the forty-fifth day of the strike the San Francisco Chief of Police sent 700 policemen to the docks with tear gas and riot guns to break the picket lines of 5,000 strikers. A reporter wrote, "it was as close to actual war as anything but war itself could be." Two strikers were killed and 115 hospitalized. That night the governor of California ordered in 1,700 National Guard soldiers with armored cars and machine gun nests and ordered them to shoot to kill. By July 16 there was a general strike in San Francisco of 130,000 workers which spread to Oakland and then up the Pacific Coast. Authorities brought in 4,500 National Guard troops including infantry, machine guns, tank, and artillery units.

The *Los Angeles Times* wrote: "The situation in San Francisco is not correctly described by the phrase 'general strike.' What is actually in progress there is an insurrection, a Communist-

inspired and led revolt against organized government. There is but one thing to be done-- put down the revolt with any force necessary." FDR's National Recovery Administration chief, General Hugh S. Johnson, went to San Francisco and declared the general strike a "menace to the government" and a "civil war." [195]

On May 23, 1934, nine hundred National Guard troops with machine gun units were required to suppress a strike in Toledo, Ohio during which two workers were killed and fifteen wounded. [196] On May 27 a teamsters strike in Minneapolis developed into a violent confrontation between most of the city's working class against the entire police force supplemented by an extra 500 men sworn in for the occasion. Twenty to thirty thousand people showed up at the market, many armed with lead pipes and clubs, and they drove the police out of the market and continued to battle them all over the city. By nightfall there were no police to be seen in Minneapolis, and strikers were directing

downtown traffic. On July 20 police attacked the strikers, wounding sixty-seven people including thirteen bystanders, two fatally. That night an enormous protest meeting ended in a march on City Hall to lynch the mayor and police chief, but was stopped by National guard troops. A mass funeral for one of the pickets drew between fifty thousand and one hundred thousand workers, and this convinced the governor, who claimed to support the strike and to be a "radical," to declare martial law. The governor arrested all the strike leaders, which led to more leaders emerging from the rank-and-file to continue the strike with even greater determination. The governor was forced to back down and release the strike leaders, and a month later the employers capitulated to the strike demands.[197]

Meanwhile, on July 16, 1934, twenty thousand textile workers in Alabama began a strike that spread throughout the South and East Coast until by September 5 325,000 textile workers, many of them women, were on strike and using "flying

squadrons" to spread the strike from mill to mill, often battling guards, entering the mills, unbelting machinery and fighting non-strikers. *The New York Times* warned, "The grave danger of the situation is that it will get completely out of the hands of the leaders...The growing mass character of the picketing operations is rapidly assuming the appearance of military efficiency and precision and is something entirely new in the history of American labor struggles. Observers...declared that if the mass drive continued to gain momentum at the speed at which it was moving today, it will be well nigh impossible to stop it without a similarly organized opposition with all the implications such an attempt would entail."

The governor of South Carolina declared martial law on September 9, announcing that a "state of insurrection" existed. Fifty strike squadrons of 200 to 650 strikers moved south in the Carolinas on a 110-mile front, undeterred by National Guardsmen with orders to "shoot to kill." On

September 5 a striker and a special deputy were killed in a two-hour battle at a mill in Trion, Georgia, and three pickets were shot, one fatally, in Augusta.[198] The violence spread to New England, and by September 12 National Guard troops were on duty in every New England state except Vermont and New Hampshire. That evening a crowd of 2,000 was fighting National Guardsmen in Woonsocket, Rhode Island. Guardsmen fired 30 shots into the crowd, hitting four, one fatally. The crowd was outraged, grew to 8,000, and was only quelled by two more companies of National Guardsmen who put the city under military rule. Governor Green of Rhode Island declared that "there is a Communist uprising and not a textile strike in Rhode Island," and then declared a state of insurrection. At the same time, Washington [note, this means FDR, the "friend of the working class"!] mobilized detachments of regular army troops prepared to leave for Rhode Island "at a moment's notice." [199]

On September 17 an "army of 10,000 National Guardsmen was mobilized in Georgia, South Carolina, North Carolina, Alabama, and Mississippi, supplemented by 15,000 armed deputies" for the purpose of breaking the textile strike. But the strikers didn't back down and their numbers grew to 421,000 by September 18. Georgia Governor Eugene Talmadge declared martial law. National Guardsmen began mass arrests of flying squadrons and held them without charge in a concentration camp where Germans had been held during WWI. "By September 19, the death toll in the South had reached thirteen." On the 22nd the conservative leaders of the United Textile Workers Union called off the strike with the excuse that a government Board would investigate conditions in the mills.[200]

No doubt all of these events of 1934 weighed heavily on FDR's mind when, in May 1935, he told an emissary of William Randolph Hearst, "I want to save our system, the capitalistic system; to save it is to give some heed to world thought

of today. I want to equalize the distribution of wealth." [201]

Faced with a working class insurrection, Roosevelt pushed Congress to enact the National Labor Relations Act to channel labor militancy into safe orderly collective bargaining. But his strategy was not completely successful. Rubber workers in Akron, Ohio had become disgusted with their sellout union and the National Labor Relations Board, and developed the tactic of the sit-down strike to guarantee that rank-and-file workers and not union leaders would be in control. By 1936 "a week seldom passed without one or more sit-down" strikes in the Goodyear rubber plant, and workers had as much power in the plant as the company. [202] Then auto workers began using the sit-down strike at General Motors plants on such a large scale that in the first 10 days of February 1937 GM produced only 151 cars in the entire country. [203] The largest sit-down occurred at the plant in Flint, Michigan where Governor Frank Murphy called out the

National Guard. Thousands of workers traveled hundreds of miles to join and support the Flint sit-down, and auto plants in Detroit and Toledo were shut down just due to the exodus. A crowd of 10,000 workers occupied Flint, and surrounded the plant armed with 30-inch wooden braces from the factory. Fearing an armed assault by police, union war veterans had a plan to "muster an armed force among their own number" to "take over the city hall, the courthouse and police headquarters, capture and imprison all officials and release union men."

On February 11 General Motors agreed to recognize the United Auto Workers Union, whose leadership then called off the strike.[204] But in the next four months there were 170 sit-downs in GM plants because the sit-downs were really not mainly about union recognition; they were a struggle over whether workers or capitalists were going to have actual power in the plants over issues from the speed of the line, to safety and hiring and firing.[205]

Following the GM sit down, workers sat down at Chrysler. Chrysler Corporation "secured an injunction ordering the 6,000 sit-downers to leave, but as the evacuation hour came near, a huge crowd of pickets gathered--10,000 at the main Dodge plant in Hamtramck; 10,000 at the Chrysler Jefferson plant; smaller numbers at other Chrysler, Dodge, Plymouth, and DeSoto plants; 30,000 to 50,000 in all--demonstrating the consequences of an attempted eviction." *The New York Times* underscored what was at stake, writing, "It is generally feared that an attempt to evict the strikers with special deputies would lead to an inevitable large amount of bloodshed and the state of armed insurrection." [206]

In 1937 400,000 workers engaged in sit-down strikes all over the country and in all sorts of jobs from municipal trash collectors to retail store clerks to grave diggers and even blind workers at the New York Association for the Blind. Michigan's Governor Murphy warned the state might have to use force to restore respect for the

courts and other public authority, to protect personal and property rights, and to uphold the "structure of organized society." [207]

The New Deal was meant to control and contain working class struggles that challenged capitalist power and social relations. But it was failing. The Wagner Act of 1935 was supposed to channel labor militancy into legalistic procedures, not sit-down strikes that conservative labor leaders found difficult to control. The Social Security Act of 1935 and similar legislation was meant to convince Americans that the government would make sure that capitalism worked for ordinary people and not just the wealthy. But many people weren't buying it. The populist U.S. Senator from Louisiana, Huey Long, may have been a charlatan, but his "Share the Wealth" Clubs claimed seven million members; they backed a radical plan to guarantee an annual income for every American, and they thought FDR's reforms did not go nearly far enough. In fact FDR was frightened by "Democratic polls that suggested

that Long's threat to run as an independent for the 1936 presidential race could jeopardize Roosevelt's reelection prospects." [208] (Long was assassinated before this could happen.)

FDR and his fellow elite knew that nothing could be taken for granted. For example, in 1934 the race for Governor of California was supposed to have been between the Democratic Party's George Creel--formerly the head of President Woodrow Wilson's Committee on Public Information during World War I and more recently FDR's West Coast chief for the National Recovery Administration--and the Republican incumbent Governor, Frank Merriam. What actually happened shocked the entire political establishment. The author and long-time socialist, Upton Sinclair, sparked an immensely popular movement called EPIC--End Poverty in California--which called for the State of California to "use its powers of eminent domain or confiscatory taxes to seize idle factories and vacant farmland" (of which there were plenty

because of the Depression) to establish a "network of cooperative agricultural and manufacturing colonies" in which the state's 700,000 unemployed workers would "produce and exchange their products in a giant cash-free network." Eight hundred EPIC clubs sprouted up across the state in working class neighborhoods. They operated a weekly newspaper "which was distributed by the hundreds of thousands in local editions" and they "operated speakers' bureaus, research units, women's clubs, youth clubs, and drama groups" as well as "radio broadcasts, plays, and rodeos," and they "drew big crowds to a lavishly staged EPIC pageant that depicted the lessons of production for use."

On August 28, in the primary election results, Upton Sinclair "captured the Democratic nomination with more than 436,000 votes, more than any primary election candidate in California history, more than all his Democratic opponents combined, and more than the Republican he would face in November.

The voters had "turned the Democratic Party over to a former Socialist." Only an extraordinary and unprecedented attack on Sinclair by both the traditionally pro-Democratic newspapers owned by William Randolph Hearst as well as the "progressive" McClatchy *BEE* newspapers and the *Los Angeles Times* owned by conservative Harry Chandler, joined by Hollywood moguls like MGMs Louis B. Mayer, in an orchestrated smear campaign, prevented Sinclair from winning the governorship. Sinclair's vote doubled to 879,537 versus 1,138,620 for the incumbent and 302,519 for a third party candidate. Twenty-four of the EPIC candidates did however win seats to California's 80 seat assembly.[209]

The ruling elite had a working class insurrection on its hands, and they needed some way to decisively contain it. If ever the ruling class in the United States had a strong motivation to restore the "good old days" of a nation-versus-nation war, when the government could convince

workers that national unity trumped issues of class and that strikes and radical demands "undermined national security," it was now.

[End excerpt]

WHAT CAN WE LEARN FROM THIS HISTORY OF THE NEW DEAL?

In light of this history of the circumstances (imminent revolution!) that led FDR to persuade his upper class fellows to implement his New Deal, one thing is patently obvious. In the absence of the increasingly revolutionary "in the streets" actions of American working class people, there would NEVER have been an implemented New Deal, whether or not FDR had been elected president.

Likewise, whether Bernie Sanders (or some other politician making similar new New Deal promises) is ever allowed by the ruling billionaire plutocracy to implement a substantial transfer of wealth from the billionaires to ordinary people will depend ENTIRELY on whether or

not there is an increasingly revolutionary "in the streets" movement in the United States. To believe that merely electing a Bernie Sanders will "do the job" is simply naive; it is naivete deliberately inculcated in Americans by the ruling plutocracy who ensure that we don't learn our actual history and instead grow up hearing fairy tales about how "we got Social Security and the New Deal by voting for a good politician."

The fact is that no matter who might have occupied the office of President in the 1930s, that person--even if a conservative Republican--would have confronted the same challenge: how to keep the capitalist system from being overthrown. And that president would have been just as likely as FDR to have implemented something similar to FDR's New Deal, for the same reason that FDR himself did.

When the ruling elite grant us reforms, it has nothing to do with the particular personalities or political beliefs of the politicians in power. When Congress passed the Civil Rights Act of 1964

abolishing Jim Crow, the politicians in Congress were the same racist ones that had earlier never even dreamed of abolishing Jim Crow. What changed was not the politicians but the massive and increasingly revolutionary Civil Rights movement "in the streets" that made them afraid of what might happen if they did NOT abolish Jim Crow. Read more about this [here](#).

The same thing explains why South Africa's formerly pro-Apartheid president DeKlerk in 1992 called for abolishing apartheid. There was a massive and world-wide ("in the streets") movement against apartheid that persuaded the Big Money class in South Africa that apartheid had become more of a problem for them than a solution.

If we want to make the ruling class fear what might happen if it doesn't make the United States more equal and democratic, then we need to build a revolutionary "in the streets" movement. If we concentrate **INSTEAD** on electing this or that politician, then one thing is for sure: The

billionaire ruling class will breathe a huge sigh of relief, and not even dream of handing over its wealth to ordinary people. (Read exactly why the plutocracy holds elections [here](#).)

WHAT CAN YOU DO?

One way you can help build a revolutionary movement "in the streets" is the same way I am doing it, which I discuss in my ["Revolutionary Community Organizing."](#) Give it some thought, OK?

184. Jeremy Brecher, *Strike*, South End Press, Boston, Massachusetts, 1997, pp. 121-7

185. *Ibid*, pp. 129-31

186. *Ibid*, pp. 138-40

187. *Ibid*, pp. 147-8

188. *Ibid*, p. 151

189. *Ibid*, pp. 153-5

190. A detailed account of this struggle (in which the striking coal miners wore red neckerchiefs and called themselves "red necks")--The Redneck War of 1921 by Michael M. Meador--recounts that the local sheriff actually did hire private airplanes that dropped homemade bombs on the strikers [<http://www.wvgenweb.org/wvcoal/red.html>]

191. Brecher, p. 160

192. Linda Wheeler, *Routing a Ragtag American Army*, Washington Post Staff Writer, <http://tinyurl.com/y358z5ll>

193. During WWII Hoover went on to advise Secretary of War Stimson on how the military could use the control of food to control starving people. Stimson praised Hoover's expertise in this field, remarking "Hoover stamped out Communism in this way in central Europe." [Gabriel Kolko, *Century of War: Politics, Conflicts, and Society Since 1914*, The New

Press, New York, 1994, p. 498] See also <http://tinyurl.com/y44skx8h>.]

194. Brecher, p. 162

195. *Ibid.*, pp. 169-74

196. *Ibid.*, p. 177

197. *Ibid.*, pp. 178-84

198. *Ibid.*, pp. 185-7

199. *Ibid.*, pp. 188-90

200. *Ibid.*, pp. 190-92

201. Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *The Age of Roosevelt*, Vol. III, *The Politics of Upheaval*, Houghton Mifflin Company, Boston, 1960, p. 325

202. Brecher, p. 203

203. *Ibid.*, p. 217

204. *Ibid.*, p. 221

205. *Ibid.*, pp. 222-3

206. *NYT*, March 19, 1937, cited in Brecher, p. 227

207. *NYT*, March 18, 1937, cited in Brecher, p. 227

208. Kevin Phiullips, *Wealth and Democracy*, Broadway Books, New York, 2002, pp. 71-2, citing William Leuchtenberg, *Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal* (New York, 1963). p. 80.

209. James N. Gregory, in the introduction to *Upton Sinclear's I, Candidate for Governor: And How I Got Licked*, University of California Press, Berkeley, California, 1934.