

## **So Now Mr. President, We Are Looking for Something African Americans, the Social Security Act, and the Great Depression**

To the Senate, governed by a body of well educated men that are elected to make law for both races to live under: Now, I see a bill posed now in Congress about old age pension[s] and it [is] all for one race. Now, you are a body of men to look for the Ethiopian as well as the caucasian races. . . . [T]he Ethiopian race is the foot stool, and when he get[s to] the age of 65 years, he or she need[s] help to live on in this country.<sup>1</sup>

We the *colored* citizens of Plainfield Union County played our part in the overthrow of the Republican Party. . . . This club put life in the Democratic party of Plainfield. . . . So, don't forget us, who have been in this country since 1619, and helped Geo Washington, ran Cornwallis to England. We helped you in all wars. So now Mr. President[,] we are looking for something.<sup>2</sup>

For most of the country's 12 million African Americans, the Great Depression of the 1930s brought with it unemployment, extreme poverty, and a loss of even the meager economic opportunity secured through the 1920s. But this destruction and despair also gave birth to a moment of possibility and a glimmer of hope for a wholly different place in the United States. The crash of the economy profoundly shook the country's class structure, and differing groups of Americans began to ponder the economic platform on which life in this country was built. Even more important, significant numbers of working people began to openly question their place in the economic hierarchy that kept the racial divide in place. Cries to "share the wealth" rang across the land, and as many as 20 to 25 million people—out of a national population of 123 million—petitioned Congress to enact the Townsend plan to redistribute the wealth of the

land to all of the people, they said, who had earned it. The ranks of leftist political organizations promoting the rights of workers swelled, and the interracial Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) was founded. Perhaps astonishingly, none of the mass movements of mostly white people in this period officially subscribed to a doctrine of white supremacy, and some even encouraged interracial collaboration.<sup>3</sup>

Possibilities also existed in the arena of federal policy. Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal had already shown promising signs that, for the first time since the Reconstruction era, racial justice might fit into some small corner of the federal agenda. Early New Deal programs had not been promising on the whole: they did not alter the discriminatory treatment established by institutional segregation. On the other hand, the directors of the Federal Emergency Relief Administration (FERA) made efforts to combat discrimination, and a diverse spectrum of families was kept alive by government assistance. Roosevelt had named Mary McLeod Bethune, a dark-skinned African American woman, to his cabinet, and more leaders of "Negro" churches and other organizations were pledging their allegiance to the Democratic Party, creating a voting bloc that could not forever be ignored. The expansive reach of the New Deal was reordering society, and some of the more radical leaders of African American communities recognized that they had the potential to cause a dramatic reconfiguration of the social order. But that same reach could also, in the words of Ralph Bunche, "cement the Negro in a permanent position of segregated inferiority in the society."<sup>4</sup>

The Social Security Act was instrumental in determining whether and how this moment of opportunity would be seized. FDR had committed his administration to establishing a permanent safety net. If that safety net had been modeled after the temporary program and built in barriers to discrimination, it would have inevitably eroded, rather than strengthened, the economic disparity between communities on the basis of race, and therefore perhaps the seeming permanence of the racial divide. Three proposals were introduced in Congress to create foundational programs for this permanent system, and each expressed different perspectives about the purpose of social welfare and the obligations of governments to citizens; each had a different plan for the coverage of African Americans. The passage of the Social Security Act concluded this moment of opportunity and laid the seedbed for what has followed.

**Racial Inequality and the Great Depression**

Dear sir[:] I am writing you for some information. I am out of work and have a wife and four small children. I have registered at the Unemployment office and also at the W.P.A. office and they have not give[n] me any thing to do and I have not got any thing to go up on for my little children. I have no food and no money at all and no work and cant find nothing at all to do. I have beg[ged] them for work at the W.P.A. office at Port Allen and the office people do not give me any straight talk at all. If I was call[ed] to go to war they would give me straight talk at once if they kneeded me. Now dear sir I am much in need so I am begging you please help me . . . if I could find any work at all I would not ask the government for any help at all.<sup>5</sup>

As the words of this “colored” man from Walls, Louisiana, convey, in the mid-thirties the vast majority of African American families were under siege. In the ghettos of northern cities and southern plantations alike, most of these families lived precariously. Initially, they turned to extended families and churches, but these communal resources were quickly exhausted. In northern areas after 1933, they relied on FERA for survival, supplemented by help from the local Urban League or “Negro charities.” However, they typically lived without access to health care, and relief grants did not provide enough to meet all of a family’s needs. In 1935 most families in rural African American communities still lived without electricity and indoor plumbing. They received less assistance in all forms than their northern and urban counterparts and struggled even more for the basics of physical survival.

Like this Louisianan, “colored” men and women throughout the country expressed a willingness to do any kind of paid work in order to survive, but they were often unable to find even the most demeaning, underpaid jobs. Centuries of racial discrimination had worked to keep them in job categories where their labor could be most easily exploited and they themselves could be kept most financially insecure. When the depression hit, race lines hardened, and all African Americans were vulnerable to being fired from even this work to make room for white workers. After Franklin Roosevelt’s election in 1932, they began to turn to the federal government in unprecedented numbers, asking for help in obtaining work so they could care for their families.

The depression caused a crisis because of the history that preceded it. The wealth produced by the labor of African Americans continued to be stolen after the slaves were freed, and generations of black families struggled to build their lives with no economic base, no family and community resources for down payments on houses, business starts, or college educations. The struggle continued even through the flush decades of the 1910s and 1920s, because opportunities for earning were so limited by discrimination and segregation. Young African American men who migrated north found some openings in manufacturing, the mechanical industries, transportation, and trade; in 1930 roughly a quarter of all “Negro” workers were employed in such jobs, primarily in northern states. But even these apparent gains did not signify a major shift in economic opportunity. African American men were let into industry, but only into its bottom rungs. They were hired by ironworks and meatpacking plants, not to weld or butcher, which were skilled jobs, but to spend long days cleaning furnaces in scorching heat, or mopping blood off of a cutting room floor, for very low wages.<sup>6</sup> As E. Franklin Frazier summed it up during the boom year of 1927, “There are two types of business in New York in terms of Negro hiring policy: those that employ Negroes in menial positions and those that employ no Negroes.”<sup>7</sup>

Even these jobs were lost to white workers during the depression, when unemployment rates spiked. Since the end of the Civil War, northern African American families had relied heavily on women’s work as domestic servants for survival, and they continued to do so in these years. Domestic service was the largest category of employment for all women, though the field was particularly dominated by the descendants of slaves. In 1935 one-fifth of all “Negro” workers were domestics. Older women typically worked in slightly better-paid institutional settings, and younger women were subject to the greater insecurity, and sometimes sexual harassment, that went with work in private homes.<sup>8</sup> Wages fell with the economy. In southern states, women earned between \$2 and \$4 dollars for a week of 12- to 14-hour days scrubbing floors, cooking over hot stoves, cleaning toilets, ironing, and changing diapers. In northern states, even fledgling domestic workers’ unions considered \$10 per week “good” pay. Estimated yearly earnings in 1934 were \$579 for women cooks, \$788 for male cooks, and \$559 for housekeepers. These figures are miniscule compared to the average salaries of upper-middle-class professionals and others, including most upper-level New Deal administrators, who earned \$5,000–\$10,000

per year, an income considered to be merely “comfortable.” They are extremely low when compared to the 3.7 million families living in “moderate” comfort, earning \$3,000–\$5,000 per year, or even those 9.9 million families at a “minimum comfort” level earning \$1,500–\$3,000, including social workers employed by private agencies. The bulk of African American urban working women—especially those who were sole earners—was among the poorest of the 11.7 million families living on “subsistence and poverty” wages, with incomes of less than \$1,500 per year.<sup>9</sup>

Though African Americans in northern cities typically experienced less overt forms of social discrimination than those in the rural South, their economic opportunities were still strictly controlled. Social segregation in the North did “not cover the whole gamut of interpersonal relations” but was “spotty.”<sup>10</sup> Intermarriage was restricted, but not forbidden; dancing and swimming were generally segregated activities, but not eating and drinking. White society could exert tremendous social pressure to maintain de facto segregation in these areas, but generally its efforts were not supported by law and could be subverted in various ways.

This was not the case when it came to housing and education, issues that more directly determined the ability of African American communities to establish an economic base. In northern cities, all people identified as “Negro” were concentrated in the slums. They were prevented from moving by the artificial creation of housing shortages in these areas and by discriminatory codes that kept rents unjustly high. Segregation in housing served to maintain a system of economic exploitation. It was imposed informally through the unacknowledged agreement of the housing industry that the presence of a single African American family in a neighborhood lowered property values. Residential segregation enabled institutional segregation—through schools and hospitals, for example—which in turn facilitated the continued ghettoization of African American professionals and the substandard education of African American children.<sup>11</sup>

In many ways, the North appeared to African Americans to be less discriminatory than the South, as they were free to ride integrated subways with diverse commuters in New York City, speak directly to white merchants, and drink at the same water fountains. Yet the economics of race in the North had much of the same outcome as the economics of race in the South: the maintenance of an underpaid, vulnerable group of laborers.<sup>12</sup>

African Americans living in the South fared no better, even before the depression. More than 9 million of the country’s almost 12 million Afri-

can Americans still lived in southern states, two-thirds of these in poor rural areas. Most were agricultural laborers who were kept indebted to the owners of the land that they worked. In 1934 the average income for all African American families in two Georgia black belt counties was less than two hundred dollars per year. “Negro” tenants and sharecroppers were structurally prevented from getting ahead; plantation owners would not allow them to sell their own crops and often paid them in scrip rather than cash, which could be redeemed only at typically overpriced plantation stores.<sup>13</sup>

The plight of rural African American southerners was made much worse by changes in the agricultural landscape. Through the 1920s industrial farms had begun to gobble up family farms, turning farmers into industrial-style laborers. In 1934 only a tiny fraction of the 6.3 million farms in America were large-scale, yet they employed more than a tenth of all farmworkers. Farm foreclosures created a surplus of labor and led to a drop in agricultural wages—from \$47 per month in 1920 to \$15 in 1933. After the depression hit, workers flooded the farm market, exacerbating the low wages. As opportunities for farmwork decreased, unpaid family laborers tripled.<sup>14</sup>

Southern agriculture had only begun to move in the direction of the more large-scale industrialized farming that dominated agriculture in the West. The larger western farmers were creating associations to monopolize the canning and processing of foods like vegetable oils. These associations took advantage of the depression to accelerate the process of driving smaller farms out of business. In response, the more industrialized farmworkers in the West engaged in a series of strikes in the mid-1930s. These strikes, which in 1933 “swept California agricultural districts,” were “the most extensive strikes of their kind” in the United States, involving 65 percent of the state’s entire crop value for that year. Most of the strikes were led by the Cannery Agricultural Industrial Workers Union, but others were directed by independent, mostly Mexican and Chicano unions.<sup>15</sup>

In 1935 African American agricultural workers were almost completely contained within some of the lowest paid and most vulnerable sectors of farming, trends that only worsened their situation. They were barely represented either among the country’s three million farm owners, who were mostly white, or among the hired laborers on western industrial farms, also exploited labor, who were mostly immigrants from Mexico, Japan, and the Philippines. In the South, African Americans dominated

tenant farming and sharecropping, a peasant farm system where workers used plantation land and then split their harvest with landowners. Sharecropping occupied 44 percent of “Negro” agricultural workers, but only 16.4 percent of white agricultural workers; in 1935, 70 percent of the country’s two million tenant farmers were African American.<sup>16</sup> Life for tenant farmers and sharecroppers could be brutal. Families lived in shacks and subsisted on cornmeal and pork fat; even small children typically did strenuous labor, often from dawn to dusk. It was especially hard for African American tenant farmers, who were the first to lose their farms when competition increased, and sharecroppers, who even in the good times received much lower wages than their white counterparts for the same work.<sup>17</sup>

The generally poor economic position of African Americans was exacerbated by the depression, which began with the stock market crash in the fall of 1929. Yet widespread unemployment had been a fact of life among them for at least three years before then: it had already affected those “last to be hired and first to be fired” by the end of 1926. The widespread competition for jobs created by the depression made life even harder. In 1930, 40 percent of all African American workers were unemployed compared to roughly 25 percent of the country’s total workforce.<sup>18</sup> The jobs of these workers were not just evaporating; they were being replaced in droves by unemployed white workers. As one “Negro newspaper” reported, “Nearly every job that has been classified as a Negro job is being contested for by other workers.”<sup>19</sup> White workers were even taking over city garbage collection and scavenger wagons, as well as moving into socially demeaning jobs such as those of hotel porters and domestic servants.<sup>20</sup>

More devastating, perhaps, was the destruction of African American-owned businesses throughout the country and with it the loss of an incipient economic base. In the early thirties New York City’s Harlem experienced the massive failure of locally owned businesses; afterward the mostly Jewish immigrant-owned businesses that bought them out refused to hire Harlem residents.<sup>21</sup>

African American workers were barely organized at the time of the drafting of the Social Security Act, a result of their economic vulnerability and discriminatory union practices. Throughout the twenties and thirties they were unable to overcome one of the chief obstacles to union representation: their exclusion from the American Federation of Labor (AFL) affiliate unions. Some individual “Negro unions,” most notably the

Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, won concessions from employers through organized efforts in the early 1930s; the interracial Southern Tenant Farmers Union was founded in the summer of 1934 to give voice to farmworkers who were being squeezed out by planters. The International Ladies Garment Workers Union (ILGWU) organized African American women garment workers after 1933, and local unions affiliated with the Communist Party went to great lengths, in some cases, to reach out to African American workers. But generally, even after the founding of the CIO in November 1935, African American workers had no place from which to negotiate with employers. For example, domestic workers in Cleveland attempted to organize in early 1934 as the Household Workers Welfare Association, and two hundred women initially joined. However, they were derailed when the AFL refused their application for a charter.<sup>22</sup> A report claimed that only seven unions for domestic workers were active in 1939, and that none of them offered unemployment or disability assistance.<sup>23</sup>

One of the cruelest consequences of employment discrimination was that it limited the options and strategies available to African Americans as they struggled to provide for their children. Forty percent of African Americans were eighteen or younger in the mid-1930s.<sup>24</sup> In many northern cities, black children with widowed mothers could get help through Mothers' Pension programs or other private programs, though in the poorer South, programs were either nonexistent or channeled limited funds to white widows and their children. In the Deep South, children in rural areas routinely worked alongside their parents in the fields or factories, and school was a luxury.

In 1937 many African Americans expressed their urgent need for jobs through a census taken by the U.S. government of the nation's unemployed. The census, financed by FERA, was designed to gather information on the "numbers, classes, geographical distribution, and occupations of unemployed persons" to use in the development of programs for re-employment, relief, and social security. But many of those canvassed believed that the purpose of the census was to place them in a work program or otherwise help them find a job. The respondents, who were well represented by African Americans, overwhelmingly voiced a desperation for work. One man wrote: "Sire I am a colard man and is cripple in Both of my feets and not able to do Standard work so I am asking for help in the name of jesus. . . . I will Be more than glad for you to get me A disability license in order that I can Earn a living for my family[.] I have tried to get

a disability license and they see my condishon But they fail to give them to me.”<sup>25</sup> Letters requesting “assistance” generally defined that term as help getting paid work. As one respondent said: “Kindly see if you cannot find some kind of Employment for Me. I am physicaly able and cap-able to fill the Position’s asked for. . . . This is my third time to appeal for financial assistance of the Government hoping [I] may be more successful this time.”<sup>26</sup> Even mothers with overwhelming domestic burdens asked for work. One woman had been “trying to get some work for over 6 year & they wont pay any attencion to me I am a widow woman & have no help whatever & they cut me off of the relief April, 1937. . . . I can work & wants work. . . . [I] have got my name down in every employment office in town.”<sup>27</sup> A mother with an “education up to the first year in high school” needed a job to feed her eight hungry children: “[I]f you do not give me or my husbin some work I could not live[.] I go days and two days without a thing to eat[.] Children crying[,] I am hungry[,] what shall I do[?]” . . . I could not get no job to do a thing for you all white people.”<sup>28</sup>

The first round of New Deal programs sought to provide jobs and job protection, but African Americans rarely benefited from them. The cotton acreage reduction program of the Agricultural Adjustment Agency (AAA) hurt sharecroppers, tenant farmers, and other agricultural laborers, though it benefited southern plantation owners and northern industrial corporations that owned plantations in the South. Sharecroppers and tenant farmers received only a tiny share of government compensation for decreasing farm production, and many were evicted as a result. Generally, the larger the farm, the greater the benefit that farm owners realized through AAA.<sup>29</sup> African American workers were also structurally discriminated against through National Recovery Administration (NRA) codes. The codes allowed employers to pay different wages to workers for the same work and excluded occupations dominated by “Negroes,” including domestic service. The NRA also exacerbated the displacement of African American workers in job categories that required higher wages for all workers. A minister in Alabama reported that employers frankly acknowledged that “if they must pay higher wages they will pay it to white folk.”<sup>30</sup> Following the implementation of a particular discriminatory NRA code, Adrienne Baxter, of Danville, Illinois, pleaded for help from President Roosevelt in August 1933: “It is painful to think that the labor by which the negro earns his daily bread, often becomes a long suicide . . . out of so many of the rich and powerful, no one thinks of the mortality

which decimates his brothers, thus forced to eat homicidal bread. . . . I beg of you on bended knees and plead with you to give your attention to this dreadful situation that [is] happening in Danville, Illinois.”<sup>31</sup>

The most vulnerable workers, especially agricultural and domestic workers, were funneled by the federal government into FERA. One government report claimed that agricultural workers were more represented on Emergency Relief than any other group in 1934; according to another report, close to half of the workers on relief in many American cities were domestic servants.<sup>32</sup> Emergency Relief was a godsend to African American families during these years, as they had been excluded from other forms of assistance. In northern states they generally received relief in amounts appropriate to their poverty and greater than their representation in the population.<sup>33</sup> However, these workers obtained relief in lieu of the jobs that they sought through government work programs like the Works Progress Administration (WPA) and the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) or assistance through NRA to help them keep working.

But an opportunity was on the horizon in the form of public pressure to encourage government to take a firmer stand in the provision of social welfare. A second demand was growing not just for work, but for the benefit that accompanied work: old-age pensions. And many of the voices that called for social welfare also demanded that it be distributed equitably among all citizens.

### **Three Plans for Social Welfare**

The Social Security Act was only one of three bills presented to Congress during the seventy-fourth session seeking to create a permanent welfare system. The other two, the Lundeen Bill and the Townsend Bill, represented mass movements of people who organized and sent petitions demanding that Congress enact their respective plans. All three bills sought to influence the larger economy through the social welfare systems they created. Because they were based on very different understandings of the political economy and human nature, the welfare systems that they designed would have far-reaching and very different impacts on American society.

Both the Lundeen and Townsend measures intended not only to provide security to workers, but also to redistribute the country's wealth. Yet the Worker's Unemployment and Social Insurance Bill, or Lundeen

Bill, was the only one of the three to create a system that unambiguously protected against racial discrimination. Introduced by Ernest Lundeen, a Farmer-Labor Party representative from Minnesota, the bill sought to create an unemployment insurance program that would be funded by significantly taxing the incomes and estates of wealthy citizens, basically redistributing wealth between rich Americans and members of the working classes. It was only two pages and five hundred words long, therefore vague regarding the design of the program it would create.

But the Lundeen Bill was not at all vague regarding its intent to provide for African Americans. It stated that unemployment benefits “shall be extended to all workers, whether they be industrial, agricultural, domestic, office, or professional workers, and to farmers, without discrimination because of age, sex, race, color, religious or political opinion or affiliation.”<sup>34</sup> The measure was endorsed by five international AFL unions, six state AFLs, and three thousand AFL locals, as well as by “substantially all” independent radical unions and unions for the unemployed. Fraternal and veterans societies were also major supporters, as well as a lengthy list of Communist-affiliated organizations. Petitions containing over a million signatures in favor of the Lundeen Bill were presented to Congress on three separate occasions. A *New York Post* poll of its readers concluded that 83 percent preferred the Lundeen Bill over either the Social Security Act or the Townsend Bill.<sup>35</sup>

Some government administrators were very concerned about the equal treatment that different categories of workers received in the Lundeen Bill. Alex Nordholm, a staff member of the Committee on Economic Security (CES), which drafted the Social Security Act, worried that, “[w]ith one stroke of the pen skilled toolmakers, lawyers, doctors and ditchdiggers are to be treated alike in the matter of benefits?” The bill, he argued, regarded “workers” and “farmers” as “synonymous” and extended unemployment coverage to sharecroppers and even unpaid farm family members. Nordholm, who headed up the CES research on the Lundeen bill, estimated that the federal government would have to confiscate all individual and corporate incomes over \$5,000 and 100 percent of the estates of decedents to pay for it. Nevertheless, he acknowledged that even at present levels of unemployment, all Americans could probably be provided for in this way.<sup>36</sup>

Like the Lundeen Bill, the Townsend Bill may have been more of a statement of philosophy than a polished plan of action. The heart of the

Townsend plan was a 2 percent tax to be levied on all financial transactions that would be paid into a fund from which every U.S. citizen aged sixty-five and older would receive a pension of \$200 per month. For recipients, the only stipulation was that they spend the pensions within thirty days to keep the money circulating in the economy. It was understood that this plan would enhance employment by encouraging older people to retire; it would also give them a vital financial role in their families and communities. The measure's larger goal was to redistribute wealth through the transaction tax, gradually emptying "eastern banks" (which, Townsendites argued, had caused the country's economic problems by hoarding wealth) and returning that wealth to the people who had earned it. There were various national and local societies created during this period to advocate for old-age pensions, but the Townsend movement was by far the biggest. The movement loomed large in Washington, and, Edwin Witte confided to a friend, "[a]ll members of Congress are afraid of the Townsend people."<sup>37</sup> Supporters of the plan had secured enough votes to substitute the Townsend Bill for the Social Security Act on the House floor; they were only prevented from doing so by the passage of a gag rule that prohibited the addition of amendments to the Social Security Act. At the movement's peak period, Congress received 1,500 letters a day from individual supporters and Townsend clubs, and an estimated 20–25 million people signed petitions.<sup>38</sup>

In spite of its size, the Townsend movement has received little attention from historians and deserves more than it will get here. The movement has been framed by Alan Brinkley's work on two other popular protest movements in the 1930s, one led by Huey Long and the other by Father Charles E. Coughlin, and seen primarily through the eyes of its contemporary detractors as "an impossibly expensive and unworkable delusion" promoted by a starry-eyed physician and a professional huckster.<sup>39</sup> Yet to be written is a history of the movement on its own terms. The ideology behind the Townsend movement, as represented by the publications it left behind, appears to have been undergirded by a critique of the country's economic structure drawn from Christian ethics, democratic patriotism, and socialism. Its leadership may have been questionable, but the issues raised by its membership are revealing.

The Townsend movement's main assault was on resource hoarding by the wealthy. Over and over, Townsendites asked their representatives, "Why should a small percent of the people of this great America possess

over 90% of all of the wealth, which the two past generations have produced?" They insisted that they had a right to the wealth produced by the country, not on the basis of their individual contribution, but collectively as workers and as Americans. They asked the CES:

Has it ever occurred to your economic committee that the two preceding generations have builded [*sic*] these United States from a veritable wilderness into the greatest technologically developed country on earth? Has your committee ever stopped to consider that had it not been for the labor, the intelligence, the human sacrifices, the endurance of all the hardships that are connected with frontier life that the United States of America would still be a wilderness and that all of the millions and billions of wealth created during these two generations would never have existed?<sup>40</sup>

Rank-and-file unions often supported the Townsend plan, weaving their own analyses of class-based oppression with the plight of the aged. They argued that the "unemployable" class was created through the disposal of middle-aged and older people, which led to pauperism.<sup>41</sup>

The diverse makeup of the movement has not yet been fully researched, though we do know that some "Negro" and racially mixed Townsend clubs existed.<sup>42</sup> Generally, old-age pension movements across the country appear to have leaned toward class solidarity as opposed to racial solidarity. Members of the Old Age Pension Society of Biloxi, Mississippi, critiqued the exclusion of agricultural and domestic workers from the Social Security Act, saying: "No white man will be paid a decent wage while there is cheap colored labor. . . . This is the only 'colored problem' that we have: and state malipulation [*sic*] of unemployment insurance and pensions could easily perpetuate southern poverty."<sup>43</sup> The National Old Age Pension Association, another old-age pension movement usually referred to as the "Pope Plan," claimed in its official publication that if "any state, county or district, in its administration of the Old Age Pension, seek to mistreat or leave out any deserving old man or woman, white or black, then the National Old Age Pension Association and the NATIONAL FORUM will start a fight which will be too rough even for a den of lions or a hell full of devils. The aged black man or negro 'mammy' can suffer as much from hunger and privation as can a white person."<sup>44</sup>

Townsendites drew on a contemporary discourse, associated with the Technocratic movement, asserting that ample wealth existed for everyone,

and poverty was caused through inefficiency and unequal distribution. According to one historian, this assumption was “widely accepted” among economic and political thinkers in the 1930s. These included Stuart Chase, who contended that increased efficiency would enable all Americans to live comfortably on \$5,000 a year, the salary level for middle- and upper-middle-class professionals, and John Maynard Keynes, who described the depression as a crisis of abundance, not of scarcity. The Technocratic movement claimed that efficiency and redistribution would lead to reduced workweeks and an increased standard of living for all Americans. Townsend followers drew on the Technocratic argument that the “machine age” was dangerous to employment and production because it led to an undue accumulation of wealth in the hands of a few. Using the metaphor of the human circulatory system, they argued that money had been “frozen in financial channels” that cut off circulation to the whole body and prevented fair distribution throughout.<sup>45</sup>

Unlike the Townsend Bill, the Social Security Act was not born from a movement of average Americans; unlike the Lundeen Bill, it did not have the endorsement of a particular sector of society. The Social Security Act was drafted by government experts in the fields of economics and social welfare. It was complex and not generally understood by the public before its passage. Of the three bills, the Social Security Act was the only one that discriminated against African American workers.

The CES staff analyzed and produced reports on the Townsend and Lundeen proposals, and their critiques were very influential on Capitol Hill. The Townsend Bill, because of its widespread popularity, came under particular attack, and a team of CES staffers was designated to undermine it. The Lundeen Bill was also scrutinized. Edwin Witte declared that it was “a cruel travesty on the unemployed of the country, who are led by this propaganda to expect full wages while idle but actually would get nothing at all were the bill to be enacted into law.” He sought to derail its supporters by noting that the bill was endorsed by leftist organizations; indeed, Witte claimed that it was “excellent propaganda for the ‘front line trenches’ in the battle for communism.”<sup>46</sup>

Neither the Lundeen proposal nor the Townsend plan were ever brought to a vote in either house. Because of concern over the support for these bills, House Democrats passed a measure increasing the number of signatures necessary to bring a bill to the floor from 145 to 218. This measure was opposed by all Republicans, Farmer-Laborites, and Progressives, as well

as by the 70 Democrats who broke ranks with their party. A gag rule was then imposed to prevent either bill from being substituted for the Social Security Act through a floor amendment during consideration of the Act. The Social Security Act passed both houses of Congress in June 1935, and a negotiated final bill was signed into law by President Roosevelt.

The Social Security Act did create a national pension program, Old Age Insurance (OAI), later renamed Social Security, but that program was not available to most Americans. OAI was created for industrial workers and their families, and it did not cover workers whose jobs were seasonal, part time, or paid too little to allow for insurance contributions; some groups of workers were explicitly excluded in the Act, as discussed in the chapters that follow. The program created in the Act to respond to the demands of the Townsendites was Old Age Assistance (OAA), which would provide small grants—up to \$30 per month—to indigent older adults if they could document that they were poor. OAA was not a pension program that recognized the contribution of older citizens, but a welfare program that provided for society's dependents.

Resistance continued after the Act was passed. One of the biggest challenges of the Social Security Board between 1935 and 1939 was trying to convince states that they had to impose means tests—requiring proof of poverty—on people applying for OAA. Many Townsend-influenced states wanted to use OAA to establish a genuine pension program that recognized the contribution made by, not the poverty of, older Americans. The fights waged by states for what they called “flat pensions” culminated in the 1939 amendment debates. Texas succeeded temporarily in running its OAA program like a pension system based on age, not poverty, but when it ran out of funds six months later, the federal government insisted that only “needy” people be served.<sup>47</sup>

History has paid little attention to the Lundeen and Townsend Bills, the losers in the struggle to design the foundation of the U.S. welfare state, though the popularity of these plans suggests that they may have more closely represented Americans than did the Social Security Act. Both were constructed by people inexperienced in policy-making. Their economic formulas were simplistic, as were their plans to administer the programs that they created, for their framers did not have the resources of the federal government at their disposal. But each of these plans expressed an understanding of the meaning of work and citizenship that deserves our scrutiny. Both plans advocated equal recognition for all Americans—

bankers, meat packers, and housewives—whose labor, paid or unpaid, had “built the wealth of the country.” They sought to construct a social welfare system on the basis of citizenship, not according to one’s positioning in the labor market. In so doing, these plans would have challenged the country’s racial hierarchy by forging a direct relationship between the people and their government that was not negotiated through a discriminatory economic structure.

Today we regard the Social Security Act as the embodiment of liberal social policy, the program that has gone further than any other to provide real economic security for Americans. But in 1935, for the millions of the country’s most vulnerable workers, the Act’s passage signaled the defeat of more radical possibilities and the opportunities they presented to challenge racial divisions among working people. The cries for old-age pensions, for wealth redistribution, and for an end to hoarding were silenced by acceptance of the Social Security Act and the creation of Old Age Assistance. At the same time, the possibility for equalizing opportunity through the welfare state was also missed, and the gap in economic security widened between citizens assigned to different categories by race.

If a discriminatory old-age pension program did not represent the expressed will of the people, how did it come to be created? One logical place to look for an answer is with the southern Democrats who controlled both houses of Congress in the mid-1930s, lawmakers who had a vested interest in the scope of the Act and in the spectrum of people it would cover. We turn our attention first to them.