

Documents and Archives

Granting "A Square Deal:"

The *Brandon Unemployed Worker* and the Political Education of Brandon's Jobless During the Great Depression

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In 1931 the Brandon Unemployed Council was created in Brandon.¹ Led by local members of the Communist Party, it was designed to organize and to assist the growing numbers of jobless workers in the city. Throughout the thirties it was a highly visible and active organization. By the middle of the decade two thousand people were estimated to be members of the Council.² In December 1935, the Council's executive committee initiated the publication of a bi-monthly newsletter called the *Brandon Unemployed Worker*. Designed to compete with the conserva-

tive *Brandon Daily Sun* in shaping the debate on the treatment of the unemployed in Brandon, the *Worker* appealed to "all citizens who are in favour of granting the most maligned section of the community *A Square Deal*."³ Unlike the *Sun*, which supported the municipal government's decisions and policies, the *Worker* criticized various actions of the City Council. The *Brandon Unemployed Worker* also had an educative and organization function for the unemployed. It provided a forum for the consideration and advocacy of alternative, practical solutions to the economic crisis of the depression.

The inadequacy of relief provided by the City was a central theme of the *Unemployed Worker*. Many reports of Brandon's inadequate relief situation were published in the *Worker*. In January 1936, a reporter complained that property-owning people in Brandon were refused relief if they had not been in the city for a year.⁴ As well, the *Worker* stated that the average meal value for those on relief was two to three cents. In comparison, Saskatchewan "PAYS FIVE CENTS PER MEAL FOR THE PRISONERS IN HER JAILS."⁵ The editors directly addressed the readers, saying, "We maintain the present relief allowances, averaging 2½ to 3 cents per meal..., is not enough to maintain growing children, despite every sacrifice the parents make."⁶

While bringing the severity of the relief problem to the public's attention, the *Worker* also demonstrated to those readers who were on relief that there were solutions to their problems. It continually argued that "the first duty of any municipal council is to provide for the people of the city."⁷ Proposals for new relief funding were suggested. In February 1936, the *Worker* reported that "THE INTEREST RATE (on city bonds) WHICH HAS REMAINED THE SAME ALL



Stan Forkin, Editor of the *Brandon Unemployed Worker*.

Errol Black coll.

THROUGH THE DEPRESSION IS THE ONLY PLACE...WHERE FURTHER REDUCTIONS CAN BE MADE."⁸ The reader's attention was drawn to the city government of Calgary which was "contemplating the interest rate on City Bonds" in order to pay relief.⁹

The *Worker* also reported on the activities of the Brandon Unemployed Council. It portrayed the actions of the Unemployed Council in sympathetic terms. Frequently these reports provided direct comparison of the actions of the Unemployed Council with those of City Council. In the issue of 4 January, for instance, it was reported that an unemployed delegation appeared before the mayor on Sat. 21st. The mayor and Mr. Rumball, relief administrator, bitterly protested the crowding of the... City Hall by masses of ragged and hungry citizens.¹⁰

Reports such as this one demonstrated to the newsletter's readers that the City Council was unfair in its treatment of relief recipients. Furthermore, readers were encouraged to attend the Unemployed Council meetings and accompany its members to the City Council meetings so that they could learn more about their precarious situation in the capitalist economy.

Although the *Worker* ceased publication in June of 1936, its contributions to the political education of its audience were significant. Readers were informed that there were alternative solutions to their existing economic crisis. They were also exposed to a different political agenda than that espoused by the *Brandon Daily Sun*. Appealing to those who were most affected by the depression, the *Brandon Unemployed Worker* contributed to the creation of a new critical consciousness among the city's jobless workers in the midst of the Great Depression.

Notes

1. McKee Archives, Brandon University, RCMP Files, #96-A-00078, p.1663.
2. *Brandon Unemployed Worker*, 14 March, 1936.
3. *Ibid*, December 1935.
4. *Ibid*, January, 1936.
5. *Ibid*, 29 February 1936.
6. *Ibid*, 18 January 1936.
7. *Ibid*, 11 April 1936.
8. *Ibid*, 5 February 1936.
9. *Ibid*, 9 May 1936.
10. *Ibid*, 4 January 1936.



Unemployed workers ride the rails in 1935 as part of the "On to Ottawa" trek.

Toronto Star Collection

BRANDON UNEMPLOYED WORKER

No. 8. Sat. March 28 1936. Organ of Brandon Unemployed Council. Box 133 P.O.

SPECTACULAR MEETING OF CITY COUNCIL CALLS SPECIAL MEETING ON RELIEF GRIEVANCE CASES.

BRANDON, March 28th. Both city Council meetings in March were packed with men and women who tried desperately to show the Council the starving condition of their families due to the heavy relief cuts. At the last meeting, held Monday the 16th, more than half of those present were mothers who pleaded for food for their children. Such a scene has never before taken place in the history of the City. For two hours many women and men spoke of the deplorable conditions in their homes since the Relief Administrator has been put in charge, and since J.G. Grant has been made Chairman of the Relief Committee. The Council appeared to be impressed by this delegation of mothers who are mainly concerned about securing enough food for the maintenance of the 1600 children who comprise the greater number of those dependent on civic assistance. Despite the quibbling of the Mayor and Ald. Grant, it was decided that a special meeting of the Council be held to deal with some of the emergent cases refused sufficient food by the Relief Committee. The only opponent to this decision was Ald Grant.

The special meeting was not called until Tuesday, March 24th, when 31 cases, previously turned in by the unemployed organisation, were brought under review. The unemployed Grievance Committee were present for the purpose of dealing with the Council on the cases, according to agreement of the regular Council meeting. Unfortunately the special meeting was attended by the Mayor and only six aldermen, the majority being members of the Relief Committee whose decisions were being appealed. This being the case, the results were a foregone conclusion. It was soon apparent that the cases were to be "railroaded" thru and the Relief Committee Decisions upheld. This became a certainty when the Grievance Committee members were attacked and criticized when they attempted to intercede for the recipients. The Mayor, after asking a few questions, compelled the Grievance committee and recipient to leave the room until a secret decision had been reached by the Council. After the first four cases had been given the rawest possible deal in this way, the Grievance Committee and the rest of the 31 cases withdrew from the City Hall as a protest against the "cut and dried" tactics of the Council. The meeting continued and revenged itself upon the recipients by urging deportation for some and further food cuts for others. MANY OF THESE CASES HAD BEEN RECEIVING A FOOD ALLOWANCE OF LESS THAN THREE CENTS PER MEAL AND ONE WAS RECEIVING LESS THAN TWO CENTS PER MEAL FOR A FAMILY OF TEN. DURING THE PAST FEW DAYS TWO DEATHS HAVE OCCURRED IN RELIEF FAMILIES LIVING ON THE REDUCED ALLOWANCE.

APPEAL TO BRANDON CITIZENS!

TO THE CITIZENS OF BRANDON WHO PLACE HUMANITY BEFORE DOLLARS, WE MAKE THIS APPEAL. THRU OUR PAPER DURING THE LAST THREE MONTHS WE HAVE TOLD THE STORY OF THE MERCILESS RELIEF CUTS IMPOSED UPON US BY THE RELIEF COMMITTEE. LACK OF SPACE HAS PROHIBITED US FROM TELLING MORE THAN A SMALL PART OF THE STORY. EVERY HOUR THE SITUATION BECOMES MORE DESPERATE. FATHERS AND MOTHERS LOOK HOPELESSLY AT ONE ANOTHER AS THEIR CHILDREN CRY FOR FOOD. THE CHILDREN UNDERSTAND ONLY THAT THEY ARE CONTINUALLY HUNGRY, THAT FATHER HAS BEEN REDUCED IN RELIEF, AND THAT THE POTATOES HAVE BEEN FROZEN IN THE CELLAR DURING THE COLDEST WINTER IN MANY YEARS.

THE FATHER KNOWS THAT HE HAS DONE ALL HE COULD DO TO FIND WORK, WITHOUT SUCCESS, AND THAT THE MAYOR'S PRE-ELECTION PROMISE OF "WORK & WAGES" HAS BEEN FORGOTTEN. THE BROKEN-HEARTED MOTHER STARVES HERSELF FOR HER CHILDREN.

WE NOW ASK ALL SERVICE ORGANIZATIONS, CLUBS, CHURCH SOCIETIES OR PRIVATE INDIVIDUALS TO TAKE UP THIS MATTER WITH THE COUNCIL/ WE WILL HEARTILY WELCOME ANY PERSON OR GROUP SINCERELY WISHING TO FIND OUT THE TRUTH AND WILL CONDUCT THEM ON A TOUR OF THE HOMES OF THE UNEMPLOYED TO PROVE THE STATEMENTS MADE IN OUR PAPER/ ADDRESS YOUR INQUIRIES TO BOX 133, POST OFFICE.

THE UNEMPLOYED WILL ONCE MORE PLACE THEIR CASE BEFORE THE CITY COUNCIL AT THEIR MEETING ON MONDAY, APRIL 6TH, 8 P.M., IN THE COUNCIL CHAMBER AT THE CITY HALL. WE ASK ALL SYMPATHETIC CITIZENS TO ATTEND THIS MEETING AND TO FORM THEIR OWN CONCLUSIONS.

BRANDON UNEMPLOYED COUNCIL.

BRANDON UNEMPLOYED WORKER

No. 10. Sat. April 25, 1936. Organ of Brandon Unemployed Council

STARTLING FIGURES ON INTEREST-PAYMENTS.

STAGGERING SUMS PAID TO BOND-HOLDERS WHILE RELIEF CHILDREN HUNGER.

CIVIC EMPLOYEES TAKE MORE WAGE CUTS.

BRANDON, APRIL 25: Official figures, released a few days ago, give startling confirmation to charges laid by the UNEMPLOYED WORKER, that exorbitant sums of money were being paid out to holders of Brandon City bonds despite the desperate financial condition of the city.

During the period 1907 to 1913 bonds were sold by the City in order to secure funds for civic improvements. The City received for these bonds a total of \$584,745.00. They are 30 year bonds and the City has already paid out in INTEREST the sum of \$737,787.50. The principal of course has yet to be paid, and when it is paid the taxpayers will have been milked of the colossal sum of ONE MILLION, FOUR HUNDRED SIXTY EIGHT THOUSAND, TWO HUNDRED FIFTY DOLLARS.

The tax-payers will not feel any better knowing that one of these bond issues was to secure money to buy land on which to build a public library. The amount secured was \$11,440.00, and up to December 1935 \$14,000.00, had already been paid in interest on the amount. When this particular bond issue matures, in 1943, the Bond-holders will have received from the city, \$32,500.00, on their eleven thousand four hundred forty dollar investment. AND STILL NO LIBRARY!

But this is not the whole story by any means. During the same period the City sold bonds to the amount of \$481,496.40, for the purpose of developing the Waterworks system. The interest on this money amounted to a total of \$622,682.50, by the end of 1935 and will continue to mount up until the City has paid out, on maturity of the bonds, \$1,278,050.00, in principal and interest.

Beside the figures given, the city has also floated other bond issues totaling many hundreds of thousands of dollars and the interest rate has gone UP since the war instead of coming down. The City is now preparing to float another bond issue of \$75,000.00., and in spite of the public clamor for the cutting of interest payments which amounted to \$562.00. per day in 1935, the City Council refuses to make the first move to lessen the pressure on the citizens, preferring instead, to cut relief and the pay cheques of civic employees.

RELIEF STILL REDUCED: CIVIL WAGE CUT.

As an "economy" measure the City Council has cut the monthly paid Civic employees 7% in wages. It is estimated that this will save about \$4,000. This lopping of the salaries of the Civic Employees, who have already suffered so many wage cuts and lay-offs, strikes the citizens as an unfair, "petty wise and pound foolish" policy in view of the enormous amounts paid out to the bond-holders. Beside the wage cut, appropriations have been reduced in the various departments to such an extent that the sanitation dept. has only enough in its appropriation to pay half the usual yearly cost. This will mean that some of these men may be forced onto the relief lists and will have to do the work anyway, since extra relief labor will have to be used to clean the lanes.

As to the general unemployed, the relief cuts are still in force. The City Council has voiced its determination to give no quarter to the recipients. Summer figures show that a family of three (Man, Woman, and child.) receives from \$22.00. to \$24.00. per month for the entire relief, including rent, light, fuel, meat, groceries, etc/, of which the City pays only 20%. Consequently, the terrific relief cuts imposed have saved the city comparatively little. The City has succeeded only in saving money for the Provincial and Dominion Gov'ts, who are paying the other 80% of the costs.

Announcements: An INTERNATIONAL CONCERT will be held at the Polish Sokol Hall 11th st N. on Sunday, April 26, 8 P.M. Proceeds UNEMPLOYED WORKER.