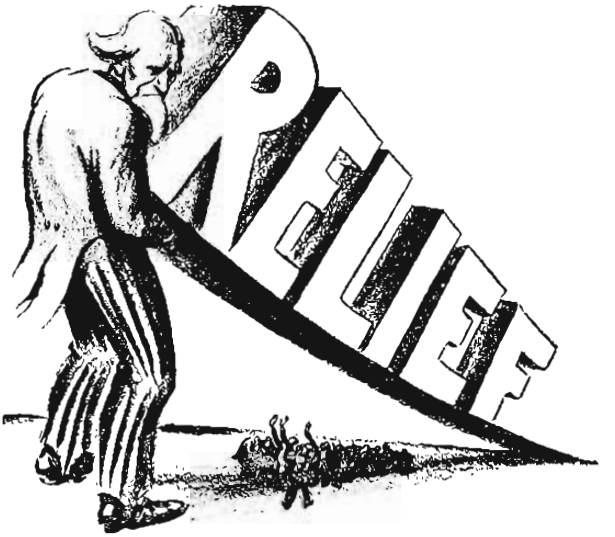
POLITICS and



in Minneapolis During the 1930s

RAYMOND L. KOCH

THE GREAT DEPRESSION that overshadowed the 1930s brought New Deal reforms which in turn had widespread impact on local government. In particular there was a rapid expansion of public relief departments, with attendant unrest, in larger cities. A study of the turbulent situation in Minneapolis offers insight into the serious difficulties encountered in the almost overnight development of public welfare services. The one overriding factor behind the troubles was the intense pressure for immediate action due to the severity of the economic collapse and the ensuing unemployment. The fact that people had to be kept from starving influenced many of the actions of various organizations and individuals, especially politicians and social workers, throughout a harrowing decade.

At the outset of the 1929 crash, Minneapolis did not experience the immediate rise in unemployment that the Eastern cities did and consequently weathered the winter of 1929–30 remarkably well. The traditional philosophy of relief-giving — that private charitable agencies should care for the temporarily unemployed — prevailed then in Minneapolis as elsewhere.

By the fall of 1930, however, the number of unemployed requesting aid from the Family Welfare Association, the largest cash assistance private agency in Minneapolis,

---

Mr. Koch is assistant professor of history at Eastern Illinois University. This article is from his University of Minnesota doctoral dissertation on "The Development of Public Relief Programs in Minnesota, 1929–1941."

rose at an alarming pace. The Union City Mission, after the onset of an early October cold wave, bedded more than a thousand homeless and jobless men nightly. A similar development occurred at the Salvation Army's Industrial Home where scores of men were forced to sleep under newspapers because of a scarcity of blankets. As a result, by the end of 1930 private agencies were swamped with the first victims of the depression despite the fact that such agencies had long borne only a small proportion of the total cost for cash assistance. The public relief department still shouldered the greatest cost for needy cases, including resident unemployed and aid to dependent children (or mothers' allowances as the program was then called). Estimates of the total number of unemployed in Minneapolis ran as high as 35,000 in January, 1931.[1]

After the fall elections of 1930, which saw the Farmer-Labor party gain prominence at the state level of politics with the election of Floyd B. Olson as governor, pressure for action on relief needs rapidly increased from organizations of unemployed persons which had sprouted immediately after the great crash.[2] The day after Olson's first inaugural speech, a group of Twin Cities Communists arranged a march to the Capitol and staged a demonstration for unemployment relief. They were led by Karl Reeve, district organizer of the Communist party in Minneapolis and leader of a local chapter of the Trade Union Unity League, a Communist-front organization. The group distributed a circular that blasted the American Federation of Labor and the Farmer-Labor party and even accused Olson himself of being a "henchman of the Steel Trust." Several weeks later the Trade Union Unity League scheduled William Z. Foster, a leading national Communist figure, to speak on March 2, 1931, in the Minneapolis Gateway district, a haven for transients and local homeless and jobless individuals. Mayor William F. Kunze banned the speech, but the league tried to hold a meeting anyway. The result was the "Gateway riot," as it was called the next day after police broke up the assembled group.[3]

As the depression intensified with every passing week during its second year, private agency social workers and administrators realized they could no longer assume responsibility for cases ignored by the public relief department. The government — the common social instrument of all the people — was the only effective means of alleviating the situation. So, as pressure mounted on local politicians, tension developed in Minneapolis beween the city council, the board of public welfare, and the division of public relief. Although the relief division dated back to the 1890s, the welfare board dictated city relief policies. The board included the mayor, three councilmen, and three lay members. The mayor appointed the latter six for four-year overlapping terms, subject to city council ap-

---

[1] *Minneapolis Journal*, October 19, sec. 2, p. 2, 15, October 20, p. 15, 1930; Alvin H. Hansen, Nelle M. Petrowski, and Richard A. Graves, *An Analysis of Three Unemployment Surveys in Minneapolis, St. Paul, and Duluth*, 5–7 (University of Minnesota, Employment Stabilization Research Institute, *Bulletins*, vol. 1, No. 6 — August, 1932).

[2] Several such groups were active in Minneapolis. The major ones were the United Relief Workers Association, the Unemployed Council, the Workers Alliance (which subsequently absorbed the first two), and the Federal Workers Section of Minneapolis Teamsters Local 574 (in the later 1930s, 544), which after 1935 expanded to include not only the unemployed but also direct relief clients and WPA workers. An excellent brief statement on organizations of unemployed in general is Helen Seymour, *When Clients Organize* (American Public Welfare Association, Chicago, 1937).

[3] A copy of the circular is in the unemployment file, Olson Papers, 1931, Governors' Archives, in the Minnesota State Archives. For a description of the Trade Union Unity League, see Irving Howe and Lewis Coser, *The American Communist Party: A Critical History*, 255 (New York, 1962). For background on the Minnesota political scene during the 1930s, see Arthur Naftalin, "A History of the Farmer-Labor Party in Minnesota," unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Minnesota, 1948 (copy in the Minnesota Historical Society), and George H. Mayer, *The Political Career of Floyd B. Olson* (Minneapolis, 1951). *Minneapolis Journal*, March 3, 1931, p. 1 describes the Gateway riot. Unless otherwise noted, all newspaper citations in this article occur on front pages.

proval. While the board was the official policy-maker, the council voted the relief appropriations to be distributed by the board, a function that in many instances proved to be an effective control device.[4]

Mounting demands for relief gave Farmer-Labor candidates their best issue in the 1931 city elections. Farmer-Labor endorsed William A. Anderson replaced conservative William F. Kunze as mayor, and the party's representation increased on the Minneapolis city council. Following the Farmer-Labor victories, the welfare board was deluged with complaints about lengthening relief lines, delays in processing applications, and inadequate food orders. Richard S. Tattersfield, long-time superintendent of the division of public relief, came under heavy attack for showing more interest in conserving public funds than in supplying the needy. He resigned effective September 15, 1931, and was succeeded by his chief critic, Alderman Melchior U. S. Kjorlaug, who, unlike Tattersfield, was trained in social work.[5]

The shift of superintendents marked the beginning of a decade-long effort to achieve greater efficiency and effectiveness in processing relief applications. Kjorlaug undertook department reorganization and promoted the adoption of professional casework techniques. Several trained social workers were added to the staff. Also, the intake department took steps to insure at least a measure of privacy during its interviews.[6]

Mayor William A. Anderson

The combined efforts of public and private welfare agencies helped Minneapolis to emerge from the winter of 1931–32 in better condition than many other cities. However, local resources were nearing depletion. Social workers warned that larger expenditures would be needed for the coming year. The arrival of spring failed to decrease unemployment. Families who had already skimped along at a minimum level of subsistence were, in increasing numbers, forced to make their first application for relief. While most private relief-giving agencies had nearly doubled their budgets over the previous year, they could not begin to keep up with demands. In the face of mounting tax delinquencies and persistent agitation by taxpayers' associations for reduced government spending, municipalities had to spend more and more for relief. In 1932 Minneapolis issued over two million dollars in bonds for direct relief alone. The year 1932 also proved to be the last in which private agencies shared any important part of the cost of unemployment relief. The Family Welfare Association of Minneapolis in that year was allocated over $600,000 from the Commu-

---

[4] For information about the administrative structure of the relief department, see Florence W. Hutsinpillar and Clara Paul Paige, *Report of the Division of Relief of the Department of Public Welfare, Minneapolis*, June, 1931, issued in mimeographed form by the United States Department of Labor, Children's Bureau, and Division of Public Relief, *Historical Review: Four Years of Depression 1931–1934*, a mimeographed report prepared for the Minneapolis board of public welfare.

[5] *Minneapolis Journal*, July 23, p. 17, September 4, 1931.

[6] Under Tattersfield, applications for assistance were taken over the counter in full view and hearing of others in the cramped quarters. Tattersfield would scribble "Same old bum," "Chronic indigents," and other comments on case records. See Hutsinpillar and Paige, *Report*, 56.

Relief Superintendent M. U. S. Kjorlaug

nity Chest, most of which went to aiding jobless families. In 1933 this sum dropped below $500,000 and kept on dropping thereafter to a low of $200,000 in 1938.[7]

Left-wing dissidents intensified their activities in 1932, further compounding the tense relief situation. By summer large numbers of the unemployed were appearing at City Hall, invading council meetings and heckling aldermen whose proposals dissatisfied them, particularly those who suggested a work relief program. Objecting vigorously to any work arrangement, they favored direct relief only, and that preferably in cash. Late in June, when the relief division was faced with an imminent shutdown owing to the inability of the board of estimate and taxation to sell relief bonds at less than the prevailing interest rate, the *Minneapolis Journal* ran an editorial condemning relief division policies which, it said, had led to its current plight. "Beneficiaries now boo and jeer backers of the groceries-for-work system because they were encouraged for many months to believe that the groceries were rightly theirs without any adequate return in labor." Inevitably, the editorial went on to cite instances of "sponging" in which several heads of families were found to have some means of support other than direct relief. The *Journal* misplaced the blame, however, since the relief policies were established by the board of public welfare, not the division of relief. Ultimately, the policies of the board were controlled by the city council, which determined the amount of money to be spent and in what manner it should be granted.[8]

The summer relief crisis reached a peak on July 8, 1932, when approximately seven hundred "hunger marchers" demonstrated again in front of City Hall. They demanded a five-million-dollar appropriation for city relief, an eight-dollar-a-week grant to unemployed workers, and a slum clearance program. Invading the city council chambers, the demonstrators listened to two Farmer-Labor aldermen protest Mayor Anderson's reappointment of one of the conservative members of the board of public welfare — Mrs. H. S. Godfrey — to another four-year term. One of the aldermen, Albert G. Bastis, was a vitriolic politician who contributed considerably to the relief turmoil for the next few years. Bastis declared that the mayor's appointee did not understand the relief problem and that the welfare board was obsolete. He also accused private agencies of making money on the transients, since these agencies charged the city for the price of meals given to homeless men seeking aid. Bastis created a sensational disturbance several weeks later at another council meeting when he

[7] Division of Public Relief, *Historical Review*, 7; Family Welfare Association, *Agency Report*, vol. 18 of *Community Survey of Social and Health Work in Minneapolis*, appendix I, table 1 (Minneapolis Council of Social Agencies, 1938).

[8] *Minneapolis Journal*, June 27, 1932, p. 18. By 1932 many professional social workers, public and private, favored some type of work relief program.

brought in a sack of stale bread and other food in various stages of decomposition, saying it had been given to a woman by the relief department. When Alderman Frank H. Brown ventured to challenge Bastis, his remarks were "met by catcalls and imprecations from the rear of the room . . . . 'That is exactly what we get,' 'eat it yourself and see,' and other such cries were heard above the din." Such skirmishes turned out to be the preliminary events of a battle that would continue for a number of years as the Farmer-Labor party increased its membership, both on the council and on the board of public welfare.[9]

IN RETROSPECT, 1932 was no doubt the year of discontent. The state and national governments had refused to act. Left-wing agitators were active everywhere. Social workers had long since abandoned the belief that local relief agencies could handle the crisis. Consequently, relief operations in Minneapolis throughout the winter of 1932–33 continued on the precarious pay-as-you-go system. When the situation grew drastic, the relief department threatened to close down, forcing the city council to issue bonds to provide relief for one more month. Relief rolls increased sharply in November with the arrival of bitterly cold weather. Union City Mission reported that it was serving 1,800 homeless men daily. The Community Fund drive fell short of its goal, and a resoliciting campaign had to be initiated to meet its budget. Meanwhile, several studies of city relief operations were being conducted. One report presented to the council recommended the division of the city into four relief districts and a complete reorganization of the relief department. Another study prepared by a committee which included University of Minnesota sociologist F. Stuart Chapin in-

Relief Superintendent Richard Tattersfield

dicated that the relief department was inadequately staffed and placed the blame on the lack of leadership exerted by the board of public welfare. This report pointed out that in September the fifteen investigators each averaged 311 visits, and then they reached only 4,662 cases out of a total of 8,611 families on the relief roll. Professional social workers insisted that 150 visits per month should be the maximum for adequate service. While this recommendation was heeded and the staff increased, the proportionate rise in family cases (to over 13,000 by March, 1933) cancelled out any decrease in the number of visits assigned to each investigator.[10]

The Minneapolis mayoralty campaign in May, 1933, centered almost entirely on the relief issue. Incumbent Mayor Anderson lost the support of his own local Farmer-Labor Association, which contended that he had failed to improve relief standards. The Farmer-Laborites backed Thomas E. Latimer, who had served as an attorney for one of the local organizations of unemployed. Conservatives backed Alexander G.

[9] *Minneapolis Journal*, July 8, p. 1, 8, July 22 (quotations), 1932.

[10] *Minneapolis Journal*, November 25, December 7, p. 1, 26, 1932; Division of Public Relief, *Historical Review*, 6.

Mayor A. G. ("Buzz") Bainbridge

("Buzz") Bainbridge, a local theater manager and director of a stock company known as the Bainbridge Players. Anderson and Bainbridge survived the primary, while the Communist candidate, Morris ("Red") Karson, for all his popularity among the unemployed groups, polled only 978 votes. Following the primaries, Bainbridge stridently attacked the failure of the board of public welfare to carry out a large work relief program. He advocated a compulsory work program and a complete reorganization of the relief department. Anderson, who tried to steer a middle course between Bainbridge's position and the radical demands of the Farmer-Laborites, was defeated easily by 10,000 votes in June. Thus, while the remainder of the country had swung to the political left in the 1932 elections, seven months later Minneapolis elected a conservative mayor.[11]

Bainbridge erased all doubts about his intentions when, a month after his election, he presented his reorganization plan. Under the guise of economy, he proposed that the relief department's entire investigative staff of fifty-seven social workers be abolished. Bainbridge argued that the police department could better handle investigations. Trained social workers, he declared, were not required in public welfare administration. Bainbridge also contended that Minneapolis had become a haven for "floaters from all over the country" and that the relief department's paternalistic policies toward unemployed transients cost the city an unwarranted thirty cents a day for each case. The new mayor proposed that all aid to nonresident transients be stopped by October 1. A majority of both the board of public welfare and the relief department resolutely objected to Bainbridge's scheme, and the investigative procedure remained intact. The squabble, however, opened up a split between Superintendent Kjorlaug and the mayor, who presided over the board. The feud flared publicly in September when Kjorlaug charged that the relief department had become a "political football" because of Bainbridge's irresponsible charges. Kjorlaug called for a public investigation of his department to clear its name. The mayor responded by demanding Kjorlaug's resignation on the grounds that the superintendent was "temperamentally unfitted for the position."[12]

The dispute was augmented when several workers in the department informed the mayor of procedures they considered unsatisfactory. One social worker, Mrs. Blanche B. van Poll, even congratulated Bainbridge on his election victory. This proved too much for Kjorlaug, who suspended her for ninety days. Throughout the controversy, Kjorlaug could count on support from a large majority of his staff, the board of public welfare, and several prominent civic organizations and church

[11] *Minneapolis Journal*, May 9, June 13, June 14, p. 1, 6, 1933. Another factor in Bainbridge's election was that he was a "wet," while Anderson had earlier vetoed a beer ordinance for Minneapolis.

[12] *Minneapolis Journal*, July 18, September 9, 1933.

leaders. Eventually Bainbridge retreated from his adamant demands. By winter, 1933, the development of the National Recovery Administration and the creation of the Civil Works Administration had diverted newspaper headlines away from the mayor's scrimmage with the relief department.[13]

The burst of publicity over the relief situation (it made front-page news throughout most of July, August, and September) had both good and bad effects. On the positive side it made many private citizens and most public officials aware of the difficult problems faced by the relief department. For all of Bainbridge's fulminations against relief policies, his battle with Kjorlaug served to educate the mayor on matters he knew little about. By 1934 the fuss simmered down, and Bainbridge took a more moderate position on relief policy. The dispute also produced careful and more reliable checks on outside income of clients, a classification of transients, and an improved rent policy. The rent issue provided one of the major causes of the periodic "invasions" of the relief offices by client organizations which protested the eviction notices renters all too often received.[14] With the advent of the federal relief programs (Minneapolis received its first shipment of surplus commodities in October, 1933), unemployment demonstrations decreased. Left-wing agitators could not stir up as much sympathy for their marches when stomachs were filled. In addition, a number of civic associations and religious groups became more interested in relief conditions. Such "awareness" served to form at least a measure of public support for the relief department.

The unfortunate aspect of the debate was the continued exploitation of the relief question by city politicians — both liberal and conservative. Ultimately, it was the relief client who suffered. There was little doubt even in the most "liberal" of minds that a small percentage of the clients constituted a "professional relief class" that schemed and contrived to get a living out of relief without any effort to seek work. These usually formed the nucleus of groups which demonstrated at City Hall, where left-wing agitators could count on them for support. By far the largest number of cases, however, were heads of families who would have preferred work could they have found it and who applied for relief only as a last resort against starvation. This group seldom made newspaper headlines.

THE RAPID EXPANSION of the relief load from 1931 to 1935 was reflected in the size of the department itself. Its 1930 staff of seven had grown to more than 350 by the close of 1935. The average monthly case load was around two thousand during the winter of 1930–31; by December, 1934, it was over 21,000. In the meantime a detailed system of investigative procedures and a comprehensive set of written personnel qualifications had been established. This process of reorganization was accomplished by Kjorlaug, who labored long and hard to bring order and efficiency into his administration.[15]

The year 1935 saw the program involved in another political crisis. Certain politicians — especially those with a large number of needy constituents — had long exerted pressure on relief officials to place their "boys" on the relief rolls. This pressure increased in 1934 after the outbreak of the sensational and violent truck strike, with many of the pickets demanding and getting public relief.[16]

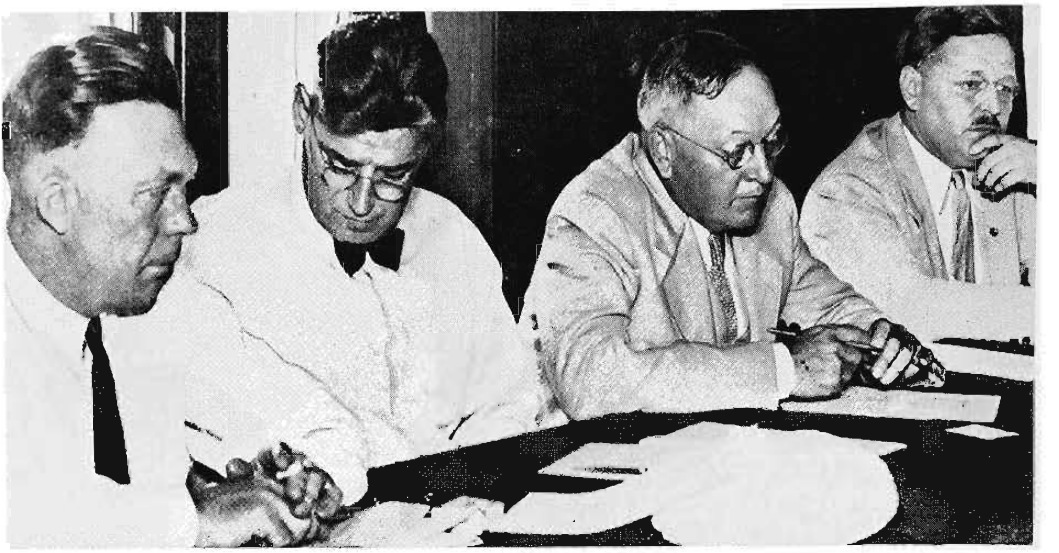
---

[13] *Minneapolis Journal*, September 12, 1933. For background on the NRA and the CWA, see William E. Leuchtenburg, *Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal, 1932–1940*, 64–66, 121 (New York, 1963).

[14] Division of Public Relief, *Historical Review*, 22–25.

[15] Harry Fiterman, "Relief Shown City's Greatest Problem," in *Minneapolis Journal*, April 20, 1936; Division of Public Relief, *Historical Review*, 6.

[16] The strike is dealt with at length in Charles R. Walker, *An American City: A Rank-and-File History* (New York, 1937).



Welfare board members in 1935 included (left to right) Aldermen Edwin I. Hudson and I. G. Scott, Mayor Thomas E. Latimer, and Dr. Albert J. Herbolsheimer.

The mayoralty campaign in the spring of 1935, like the one in 1933, was fought primarily on the relief issue. Farmer-Laborites again backed Thomas E. Latimer. While calling for substantial increases in relief allowances, they also demanded the dismissal of Kjorlaug. Incumbent Mayor Bainbridge campaigned mainly for economy — an unpopular issue — and he was ousted in the primary. Enough relief clients and jobless voters turned out at the polls early in June to elect Latimer over Charles F. Keyes. The election also gave liberals and Farmer-Laborites a majority on the city council, leading to a change in the composition of the board of public welfare. Two Farmer-Labor councilmen, Edwin I. Hudson and I. G. Scott, replaced board members who had lost their council seats. The third councilman on the board was its vice-chairman, William J. McGaughren, chairman of the Hennepin County Farmer-Labor Association, who, paradoxically, was considered a conservative in matters of relief. The lay members included local businessman I. S. Joseph, the only other conservative on the board, and two labor-backed members, Dr. Albert G. Herbolsheimer and Selma Seestrom, a member of the executive board of the Hennepin County Farmer-Labor Women's Federation. Mrs. Seestrom replaced Mrs. H. S. Godfrey, a long-time board member who resigned in August because (so she said) she was threatened with violence by relief clients for her opposition to increases in allowances.[17]

After the election the organizations of unemployed redoubled their efforts to insure that Farmer-Labor campaign promises would be carried out. One factor that undoubtedly contributed to the increased agitation for more relief was the sharp cutbacks in funds made by the Federal Emergency Relief Administration (FERA) during the spring and summer of 1935. Often clients eligible for work relief experienced a considerable delay in receiving assistance. They were not always put on direct relief immediately, and the Works Progress Administration (WPA) did not get under way as quickly as anticipated. The liquidation of the FERA took place by successive steps from month to month. The largest cut in the work program came in August. Many former work relief clients were thrust on

[17] *Minneapolis Journal*, June 11, August 7, 1935.

the direct relief rolls, placing an unexpected burden on the city.

The Farmer-Labor controlled board of public welfare assumed power on July 1, 1935. Two weeks later it publicized its program, calling for an increase of up to 130 per cent in family relief grants and a doubling of annual relief expenditures by the city council. Board member Joseph predicted that the plan would bankrupt the city in four months.[18] Early in August, however, the majority voted for increases in relief allowances averaging approximately 35 per cent.

Meanwhile, Mayor Latimer frantically held meetings with state relief officials. Along with representatives from St. Paul and Duluth, he asked the state executive council for more funds. The request was denied. Then Latimer asked the State Emergency Relief Administration (SERA) to allocate more money to Minneapolis. Again, help was denied. Moreover, federal and state relief officials threatened immediate withdrawal of financial support unless the board of public welfare rescinded its increased relief schedule. During this time city relief officials saw their funds rapidly dwindling away. The situation finally reached a crisis late in August when the city comptroller stopped honoring all relief orders because the allocated funds were gone. This placed Farmer-Labor officials in an exceedingly awkward position. They had, at the insistence of their constituents, increased relief allowances; yet because of that very policy their followers faced the possibility of receiving nothing. The board had no choice, so it rescinded the higher allowances on August 28. By this time several new WPA projects had taken some of the clients off the direct relief rolls.[19]

THE AUGUST EVENTS were only preliminary skirmishes for the major battle yet to come. For some time city officials had been criticizing the SERA policy of allocating proportionately more funds to the rural counties than to the urban areas. During the summer of 1935 the SERA made a vigorous attempt to force the rural counties to furnish more money — an effort that resulted in the withdrawal of eighteen southern counties from the SERA. With funds from the FERA rapidly decreasing, the SERA found it more

[18] *Minneapolis Journal*, July 16, 1935.

[19] *Minneapolis Journal*, August 13, 16, p. 1, 28, August 28, 1935. The state executive council was composed of the governor, attorney general, auditor, treasurer, and secretary of state.

From left: William J. McGaughren, I. S. Joseph, Selma Seestrom

and more difficult to keep pace with the increasing demands from city relief officials for assistance.

The majority on the board of public welfare, spurred by Hudson and Scott, now tried a new tactic. In a concerted effort to gain control over the distribution of all relief funds, including state and federal, the board in October denied desk space in the central relief office to SERA's official representative, Edna Dumaresq. Miss Dumaresq's responsibility was to see that city officials did not misappropriate federal and state funds. Hudson and Scott charged that the SERA social service director, Benjamin E. Youngdahl, was trying to run the board. Youngdahl responded by intimating that the SERA would hold up its monthly allocation to Minneapolis if Miss Dumaresq were not immediately reinstated. The dispute brought out into the open the long-simmering conflict between the right and left wings of the Farmer-Labor party. Latimer publicly favored Youngdahl's position — as did the two conservatives on the board, McGaughren and Joseph. Paradoxically, Youngdahl believed in strong central control — the very thing that the conservatives had always objected to in federal programs. To the conservatives, however, the greater evil at the moment was the blatant attempt of local politicians to gain control of city relief funds.[20]

This direct confrontation of federal versus local authority was further complicated by an announcement from Washington that all federal relief aid to the states would cease on November 15. Since the WPA could not employ all of those eligible for work relief, the city council now had to appropriate even larger sums for direct relief. While the welfare board stumped hard for the sale of additional relief bonds, the city council remained obstinate. Council conservatives, weary of the antics of the board and of Hudson and Scott in particular, now saw their chance for revenge. During the 1930s the city council numbered twenty-six aldermen, two from each ward. Only eleven were conservative in 1935, but they could block a bond issue as it required eighteen votes to pass. Consequently, the conservatives declared they would not vote for the sale of any more relief bonds until the council majority (a coalition of Farmer-Laborites and liberals) removed Hudson and Scott from the board of public welfare. There the matter stood — deadlocked — with the conservatives holding the trump card, since relief bonds would have to be issued eventually.[21]

Meanwhile, Youngdahl engaged in a power play of his own. In the spring of 1935 the SERA, following federal instructions to get more local financial participation, had made an agreement with the welfare board. The substance of it was that the state agency would pay direct relief costs for 1935 above the sum of $1,719,000, which the city board agreed to appropriate. When the dispute erupted in October, Youngdahl, after a preliminary investigation, decided that Minneapolis had not lived up to its contract. When the board increased its individual relief grants in August, it spent more than the original agreement had called for. Beyond that, the board had spent over $75,000 for items the SERA did not consider direct relief, such as mothers' pensions, burials, and housing for homeless men. Youngdahl thus refused to release any more funds to the welfare board. This prompted Hudson to retort: "If Youngdahl is running this board and the relief department, we ought to know it right now." On Monday morning, November 18, the Minneapolis relief department did not open its doors. Hudson and Scott were now trapped; their ward constituents could receive no relief funds. After a hasty conference between the antagonists, the board agreed to reinstate Miss Dumaresq, after which the SERA released $250,000 to the board.[22]

City funds, however, were still being held

[20] *Minneapolis Journal*, October 23, 1935, p. 16.
[21] *Minneapolis Journal*, November 1, 8, p. 1, 28, 1935.
[22] *Minneapolis Journal*, November 14, 17, p. 1, 2 (quotation), November 18, 1935.

up by the council conservatives. On November 20 the majority liberal bloc attempted to transfer appropriations from the council's permanent revolving fund to the relief department, but City Attorney Richard S. Wiggin (a Farmer-Laborite) overruled this action. He said it was contrary to the city charter. The next day Kjorlaug cut direct relief to food and fuel items only, giving nothing for rent, clothes, or electricity. The board was now confronted with the effects of its own folly. While claiming to represent the interests of relief clients, Hudson and Scott had succeeded in reducing the already inadequate grants to the barest minimum, leading to even more suffering for the recipients. The financial crisis eased somewhat when state Attorney General Harry H. Peterson (Farmer-Laborite) overruled Wiggin and allowed the council to "borrow" money from its revolving fund. This action automatically released additional SERA funds which were still being withheld pending the issuance of relief bonds by the city council. Although Peterson admitted his ruling was contrary to the city charter, he said that provision for the poor was paramount and overrode all other legal considerations. In December the bond question finally was resolved when five liberal aldermen joined the conservatives and ousted Scott and Hudson from the welfare board. The conservatives then quickly voted the necessary relief funds.[23]

The turmoil, however, did not cease. One of the Farmer-Labor campaign slogans during the 1935 mayoralty race had been, "Kjorlaug must go." The basic reason for this demand lay beneath the surface of customary political oratory; it struck at the very nature of social work itself. Although a competent and not unsympathetic administrator, Kjorlaug was a dedicated practitioner of the case-work method developed by Mary E. Richmond, whose emphasis on "adjusting the individual to his environment" had prevailed in social work during the 1920s.[24] After 1929 it became ludicrous to ask a relief client to adjust to an environment that had collapsed about him. Clients objected to the case-work approach. They wanted neither to be "adjusted" nor to be psychoanalyzed; all they wanted was their relief order. They got support from relief investigators, also called "visitors," who by 1935 numbered over a hundred. Most of them belonged to the Minneapolis Social Workers' Council, local branch of the national rank-and-file movement and essentially a trade union for bettering the lot of relief workers who labored long hours with large case loads for low salaries.[25]

Many Minneapolis rank-and-file visitors publicly opposed Kjorlaug's case-work policies. In response to their objections, the welfare board in August, 1935, appointed five special investigators (themselves members of the staff) to examine relief department activities. Apparently the Social Workers' Council was experiencing its own internal power struggle as left-wing relief visitors tried to gain control of the leadership. According to one report, when the "complaint committee" initiated its investigations, "panic and fear began creeping among the staff. In investigating the investigators it was meeting in semi-secret sessions with a few of the least responsible members of the S.W.C. Rumors, veiled threats, promises of better jobs, spying, intimidation served to disrupt morale." The complaint committee made its first report to the welfare board on November 16 at the height of the SERA controversy. Most of the 1,500 client complaints studied, the committee said, were caused by lack of prompt service, but many clients took strong exception to the case-work method of investigation. This report was one reason why the welfare board sus-

[23] *Minneapolis Journal*, November 20, 21, 25, December 20, 1935.

[24] See Clarke A. Chambers, *Seedtime of Reform: American Social Service and Social Action, 1918–1933*, 97–99 (Minneapolis, 1963).

[25] For general interpretations, see Jacob Fisher, *The Rank and File Movement in Social Work, 1931–1936* (New York School of Social Work, New York, 1936).

Typical of the unrest at Minneapolis City Hall was this CWA demonstration in 1934.

pended Kjorlaug on December 4 for ninety days to "discipline" him for policies it said were creating turmoil within the relief staff. The board also recommended immediate reorganization of the relief department. Board conservatives Joseph and McGaughren opposed the suspension, as did practically all of the city's private social agencies. Kjorlaug himself refused to resign. At first the board tried unsuccessfully to return Richard Tattersfield to his old post and then appointed Norma Fodness, a former president of the Social Workers' Council, as acting relief superintendent. She, however, was not acceptable to the council.[26]

Beset by pressure from all sides, Mayor Latimer organized a citizens' committee of fifty prominent civic and labor leaders to investigate all city relief operations. Labor representatives soon split off to form their own investigating committee in conjunction with organizations of unemployed. Among other things, the labor committee recommended the "new system," recently installed by the welfare board in the north and northeast districts, which operated on the premise that granting of relief was primarily a financial transaction. It did not humiliate the client by prying into his personal life.[27]

Meanwhile, increasingly irritated over the state of affairs, SERA Administrator L. P. Zimmerman issued an ultimatum that Minneapolis would receive no additional funds unless all personnel changes in the relief department were submitted to the SERA for approval. Zimmerman also insisted that relief costs be reduced and that the administration of relief be purged of politics. But Mrs. Fodness, unmoved by SERA threats, said she would continue to make personnel changes. She proposed elimination of fifty-five investigators and twenty-one clerks and recommended salary increases of $70 a month for some of the remaining workers. This ignited a violent demonstration by

[26] The quotation is from "Shake-up in Minneapolis," in *Social Work Today*, 3:19 (March, 1936). The editors of this decidedly left-wing national organ of the rank-and-file movement attributed the article to "a committee of four members of the Social Workers Council." *Minneapolis Journal*, November 16, December 4, 7, 1935.

[27] *Minneapolis Journal*, December 19, 1935; January 7, p. 1, 6, 1936.

rank-and-file workers whose spokesman declared that the situation had become intolerable with such "snooping and sniping all the time." The board responded by halting staff reductions, removing Mrs. Fodness, and appointing a moderate Farmer-Laborite, Alderman Ole A. Pearson, relief superintendent. Although Joseph held out for Kjorlaug's reinstatement, most of the board felt the internal conflict within the relief department had become so vicious that he must leave. Kjorlaug finally gave up his battle and resigned late in February, 1936.[28]

AFTER PEARSON'S appointment the staff hoped for a breathing spell in the ferment over relief that had been making headlines since the summer before. But in April, 1936, the administration of relief again appeared in news stories that revealed what many citizens had long suspected.

Throughout the battle between relief workers, politicians, and the welfare board, the city attorney's office had been conducting its own investigation into relief operations. By April, Joseph A. Hadley, assistant city attorney, had uncovered enough evidence to bring charges against several relief department employees and clients for defrauding the city. Five investigators had posed as "clients," filling out orders to themselves and presenting the orders to merchants. Some transient clients were found

Norma Fodness, acting superintendent

to have sold books of meal tickets (given to them by the relief department) for "dehorn" liquor. In addition, nearly two dozen cases of irregularities were uncovered among merchants who handled relief orders.[29]

Pearson, determined that all cases of fraud be disclosed, backed the investigations. He himself ordered the relief department onto a five-day week after it became apparent that some clients who had obtained work still remained on the rolls and were coming to the department on Saturday to obtain relief orders. Pearson subsequently reorganized the payroll investigation division in order to examine as many city payrolls as possible to ferret out those relief clients who had acquired jobs. The investigations resulted in the sentencing of two clients, two merchants, and one relief employee to a year in the workhouse. Furthermore, a number of merchants had their licenses revoked, and several investigators resigned. The episode served to increase public criticism of the entire relief program.[30]

Pearson intensified his drive for administrative efficiency throughout the summer

---

[28] *Minneapolis Journal*, December 19, 1935; January 14, p. 1, 2 (quotation), February 13, p. 15, February 25, March 10, 13, p. 21, 1936. The welfare board obligingly gave Kjorlaug a clean bill of health on his administration record and praised him for his honesty. For a brief resumé of the battle leading to Kjorlaug's departure, see "Storm Over Minneapolis," in *Survey*, 72:44 (February, 1936). This was reprinted, with a few changes, in *Minneapolis Journal*, February 14, p. 6, 1936.

[29] For major accounts, see *Minneapolis Journal*, April 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 10, 11, 14, 15, 1936. About four hundred merchants were licensed to do business with relief clients on the basis that they give only those articles that were specified in the order. Some were found to have given items other than those specified.

[30] *Minneapolis Journal*, May 5, 1936.

of 1936. In July the welfare board ordered a reregistration of all clients on the rolls. This became necessary for two reasons: it was found that clients on WPA jobs had represented themselves as "artisans" (thus making them eligible for higher wages) when they were actually unskilled workers; and the old age assistance program (OAA) recently had been launched, providing help to many former direct relief clients. The procedure for reregistration, which applied a strict means test to close relatives, also required that the applicant take an oath and sign an affidavit that his resources, if any, were correctly represented. This precipitated a great outcry from clients — so much so that Attorney General Harry H. Peterson intervened to rule that the oath was not a part of the relief law and could not be enforced legally. During 1936 the Workers Alliance had emerged as the major organization representing the unemployed. Its leaders appeared at meeting after meeting of the welfare board during the fall of that year to insist upon a higher food allowance to counter fluctuations in food prices. Their persistence eventually brought a small victory; in December the board voted a 10 per cent increase in the amount allotted for groceries.[31]

BY 1937 INTERNAL relief department conflicts ebbed as Pearson worked hard to bring order and stability to his administration. Outside forces, however, were again at work. Communist control over the left-wing elements in the Hennepin County Farmer-Labor Association was evidenced when Mayor Latimer failed to gain his party's endorsement for the 1937 election. The previous year Latimer had charged publicly that Communists were infiltrating Farmer-Labor ranks, particularly in Hennepin County. Left-wingers responded to Latimer's charge with the demand that he be "thrown out of the Farmer-Labor party." The quarrel intensified during the summer of 1936 when the mayor tried unsuccessfully to remove Selma Seestrom, a left-wing favorite, from the board of public welfare. He thus identified himself with the right-wing Farmer-Laborites and in doing so lost considerable support from the unemployed groups. As a result of this turmoil the Farmer-Laborites gave their endorsement to Kenneth C. Haycraft, state director of old age assistance. Conservatives supported George E. Leach, who had been mayor of Minneapolis four times during the 1920s. The squabbling within the ranks of labor and the Farmer-Labor party took its toll on election day; Haycraft was soundly beaten by Leach. Farmer-Laborites did gain some satisfaction from the aldermanic races; the progressive bloc managed to retain control of the city council.[32]

By the spring of 1937 the national economy had shown enough improvement so that President Franklin D. Roosevelt ordered a sharp cut in WPA rolls. The slash had hardly been made when an acute recession sent the economy downward during the late summer and fall. The recession, coupled with the WPA cuts, thrust a host of families and individuals back onto the direct relief rolls. These events coincided with the return of Leach to the mayor's office. City officials, civic groups, and even moderate Farmer-Laborites such as McGaughren of the welfare board voiced fears about the eventual effects of the high cost of relief. Since Minnesota's recent laws covering old age assistance and aid to dependent children required considerable financial participation from local political units, city relief costs were rising to new heights in 1937.[33]

Efforts were made to lower the city's direct relief load, which continued to average between 12,000 and 15,000 monthly throughout 1937 despite the advent of the

---

[31] *Minneapolis Journal*, July 28, September 14, December 1, p. 1, 6, 1936.

[32] *Minneapolis Journal*, March 9, p. 6 (quotation), 13, June 28, July 31, p. 15, 1936; June 15, 1937.

[33] Leuchtenburg, *Franklin D. Roosevelt*, 243; Minneapolis Council of Social Agencies, *Community Survey of Social and Health Work in Minneapolis*, vol. 1, sec. 5, p. 3 (Summary Report, 1938).

old age assistance program. Mayor Leach, pressured by civic groups that had supported him during the election, decided to inaugurate his own drive to reduce the relief rolls. He was supported by McGaughren, who suggested that clients should not own automobiles, telephones, and other such luxuries. Area farmers complained bitterly that the WPA had drastically reduced the available number of harvest workers, and McGaughren felt that all able-bodied single men on relief in Minneapolis should be forced to take jobs in harvest fields or be automatically cut off the direct relief rolls. Leach opened his drive by urging all civic organizations to find jobs for employable relief clients. He requested that at least one be hired in each of the thousand or more manufacturing establishments in Minneapolis. While it was a commendable idea and highly praised by the Civic and Commerce Associaion, only a handful of businesses hired relief clients. Leach also requested all the case records so that he could go through them and personally investigate any doubtful ones. As far as economy-minded citizens were concerned, this was another praiseworthy idea. The mayor learned, however, that case records were confidential; even he did not have access to them.[34]

The welfare board itself initiated economy steps. Since November, 1936, the board had allowed a monthly supplement of nine dollars to WPA workers. Originally, this supplement covered only fuel, but it was continued through the summer of 1937 as a food supplement, since WPA employees received equal pay (within each of its classifications) regardless of the number of dependents in each family. Early in August, however, the welfare board discontinued giving supplementary assistance to WPA workers. This action brought immediate protests from the Workers Alliance and the

Relief Superintendent Ole O. Pearson

Federal Workers Section of General Drivers Union 544, which threatened to lead a general march of WPA workers off their projects and onto the direct relief rolls unless the supplement was restored. The board not only stood firm on its decision but went even further. In September I. S. Joseph, board finance chairman, warned that relief spending must be cut immediately or Minneapolis would suffer a possible taxpayers' strike and almost certain financial ruin. Joseph's report prompted the board to enact a series of policy changes, the most stringent being the removal of all healthy single men under forty-five and all healthy single women under thirty-five from the relief rolls until December when they would then have to reapply for aid. Other new regulations included: the adoption of a clothing-according-to-need policy, replacing the old set clothing budget allowance; insistence on contributions from all employed unmarried children in relief households; removal of automobile owners from the rolls except in

[34] *Minneapolis Journal,* July 21, 28, 29, 1937. Leach also advocated a city sales tax to finance relief costs. See *Minneapolis Journal,* August 6, 1937.

Mayor George E. Leach

emergency cases; and refusal of relief to any client who was able to obtain credit.[35]

These policy changes were brought about by a number of factors. The turmoil within the relief department itself, the lenient attitude toward clients by many relief investigators, the complex of programs which led to considerable case duplication, client reluctance to take jobs (often in fear that wages would be garnisheed to pay debts) — all these produced a ground swell of public resentment against certain aspects of the mass relief programs. Many still harbored traditional beliefs about relief, feeling that it should be made as difficult as possible to get and that any allowance should cover only the barest of need. Hard-pressed taxpayers resented the use of relief funds to support such "luxuries" as radios, automobiles, telephones, or even a good suit of clothes. In addition, the influence of left-wingers among the organizations of unemployed (which exacted as much as twenty-five cents per month from relief client members) became increasingly distasteful to even those who were moderately liberal. McGaughren charged that "direct relief in Minneapolis has become a racket," that the leaders of relief organizations were attempting to build direct relief into a permanent activity, and that these groups actually tried to prevent clients from performing any work. No doubt most of the criticisms against relief clients were justified to some degree, but they applied only to a small percentage of the total case load. There were still thousands of individuals and families suffering great deprivation not of their own choosing. The simple fact remained that those desperately in need of economic assistance could not get jobs of any kind.[36]

The new regulations served only to increase agitation by organizations of unemployed. Five days after the restrictions became effective, representatives of the Workers Alliance and the Federal Workers Section of Local 544 held a stormy session with the welfare board in which they vigorously protested the new policies. The meeting ended with a promise by Leach that no needy person would be denied relief. Leach also agreed to ask state WPA Director Victor A. Christgau to increase WPA employment, although he knew very well that Christgau could do nothing because all state monthly quotas were determined solely in Washington. Relief Administrator Zimmerman, however, partially sided with the relief clients and threatened to withhold state funds unless the board of public welfare dropped its harsh policy against single men and women.[37]

In the face of the deepening recession and the WPA's refusal to increase its monthly quotas, organizations of unemployed increased their agitation. They were backed by the tacit approval of Governor Elmer A. Benson and his aides. In October, 1937, WPA workers on Minneapolis projects

---

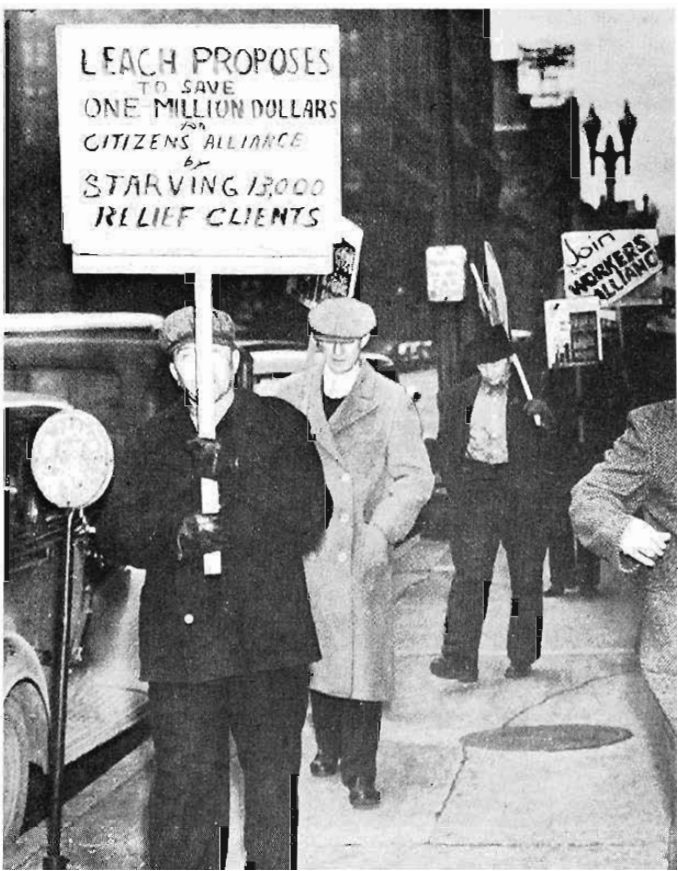
[35] *Minneapolis Journal*, August 6, p. 9, August 16, September 2, p. 1, 21, September 3, 1937.
[36] *Minneapolis Star*, October 5, 1937.
[37] *Minneapolis Journal*, September 8, 14, 1937.

threatened to strike unless the welfare board revoked its new regulations. Late in October the board did rescind the order barring single men under forty-five and single women under thirty-five from direct relief and the order prohibiting clients from owning automobiles. The problem of supplementary aid to WPA workers with large families still remained, however. WPA employees continued to protest by threatening strikes and insisting upon additional support. In December the welfare board voted to supplement WPA wages for needy families up to 25 per cent if necessary. Thus, if a WPA worker with a large number of dependents received a "security wage" of $55 (the maximum wage for an unskilled worker at the time), he could receive an additional sum of nearly $14 from the city relief department.[38]

THROUGH THE WINTER of 1937–38 the recession continued, causing the highest direct relief load in Minneapolis history. There was a peak of 17,654 relief cases in March. By this time President Roosevelt had requested and received increased appropriations for the WPA. Throughout 1938, as WPA quotas for each state rose, the direct relief load declined. How to finance direct relief remained a vexing problem. Aid from the state relief administration was limited to the appropriations passed by the 1937 legislature. The president of the Minneapolis board of estimate and taxation proposed that the Minnesota income tax be increased so that the state could allocate additional sums to the urban areas. The Hennepin County grand jury, conducting its own study of relief costs, suggested a halt to the issuing of bonds and proposed that relief be financed instead by a city sales tax, thus backing Leach's demand. Farmer-Labor Alderman Harold Kauth proposed that relief funds be raised by a public lottery. This brought an avalanche of criticism from churches, civic leaders, and conservative politicians. In the end, the city council reverted to form. It continued selling relief bonds.[39]

Under the leadership of Pearson, who remained superintendent throughout the 1940s, the relief department gradually worked its way toward a stabilized and effective administration. It was aided immeasurably by the development of a permanent federal program. Also of assistance was a department survey requested early in 1938 by the welfare board and conducted by the American Public Welfare Association (APWA). Among other things, the APWA study concluded that the relief granted was adequate but that the staff lacked knowledge of modern case-work techniques. "Many cases showed an inability to evaluate the situation from any viewpoint other

Relief clients picketed City Hall in December, 1937.



[38] *Minneapolis Journal*, October 28, p. 1, 28, December 7, 1937. The December meeting, attended by representatives of WPA workers, labor unions, and unemployed groups, was so stormy that a dozen policemen were called into the room to keep order.

[39] *Minneapolis Journal*, April 7, p. 1, 23, June 29, 1938.

than relief eligibility," the report said. It contended that visitors ought to aid clients in "problem-solving." The study also criticized a lack of co-operation with other agencies as well as the excessive paper work necessitated by the setup of four district intake offices. The welfare board welcomed most of the association's suggestions and gave Pearson authority to pursue reorganization as he deemed necessary. One result was a trend toward employing professional social workers and developing higher minimum qualifications for visitors.[40]

THE HISTORY of the Minneapolis relief department through the 1930s reveals the consequences of political intrigue in the development of a public relief program. The constant turmoil over the giving of assistance was enhanced by several factors present in the city's relief environment. Obviously, one factor was the general economic condition. Another was the influence of the Farmer-Labor party on the board of public welfare and in the city council. Organizations comprised of discontented relief clients and led by left-wing agitators exerted considerable pressure on the local Farmer-Labor party, and extreme left-wing members of the Hennepin County Farmer-Labor Women's Federation also became active in relief politics. A third factor contributing to the turmoil in relief administration was the "pay-as-you-go" system of financing. Relief bonds were issued irregularly by the city council on the basis of how much was needed for the next few months. Other unsettling ingredients were the uncertainty about the extent and duration of federal relief programs and the continual debate within the relief division between rank-and-file workers on one side and the more conservative supervisors on the other.

No one could have divined beforehand the extensive changes that developed during the 1930s. Most significant was the federal government's acceptance of responsibility for meeting the economic needs of distressed Americans. One historian has correctly noted that "the New Deal solved a few problems, ameliorated a few more, obscured many, and created new ones. This is about all our political system can generate, even in crisis."[41] Despite this pessimistic observation, relief programs did bring a measure of sustenance and order into the lives of thousands of Minneapolis residents. By keeping people alive, the New Deal and the Minneapolis relief department unquestionably achieved their most important and immediate goal.

This Omaha World-Herald *cartoon, captioned "Will he be able to cope with the Big Bad Wolf?" summed up relief agency troubles.* Survey *republished it in March, 1936.*

[40] American Public Welfare Association, *Public Welfare Survey of Minneapolis, Minnesota* (June, 1938), a mimeographed report on the Minneapolis division of public relief. The quotation is on p. 23.

[41] Paul Conkin, *The New Deal*, 106 (New York, 1967).

THE PHOTOGRAPHS on pages 156, 157, 160, 161 (right), 164, 165, 167, and 169 are reproduced through courtesy of the *Minneapolis Star and Tribune;* those on 161 (left and center) are from Division of Public Relief, *Historical Review;* all others are from the society's picture collection. The *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* cartoon on page 153 is from *Survey*, 72:2 (January, 1936).