

Hunger Marchers in Washington

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Summary: Narrates the events surrounding a workers protest march in Washington, D.C., organized by the Communists. Contrasts the press-fed frenzy of the authorities with the well-planned, disciplined, and non-violent demonstrators. (DDLW #39).

If the “capitalist press” and the police of Washington, D.C., had been coached in their parts, they could not have staged a better drama from the Communist standpoint than they did in the events of the last week in Washington when the Hunger Marchers advanced on the Capitol.

Drama was what the Communist leaders of the march wanted, and drama, even melodrama, was what they got. They weren’t presenting their petitions to Congress with any hope of obtaining cash bonuses and unemployment relief. They were presenting pictorially the plight of the workers of America, not only to the countless small towns and large cities through which they passed, not only to the Senate and the House of Representatives, but through the press to the entire world. And in addition they were demonstrating, to the proletariat, the power of the proletariat.

They were saying, “Come, submit yourselves to our discipline, – place yourselves in our hands, you union workers, you seamen, you unemployed, and we will show you how a scant 3,000 of you, unarmed, can terrorize authorities and make them submit to at least some of your demands!”

It does not matter that the victory won was only that of marching to the Capitol. To those unarmed marchers who for two days and two cold nights lived and slept on an asphalt street with no water, no fires, no sanitary facilities, with the scantiest of food, surrounded by hysteria in the shape of machine guns, gas guns, tear and nauseous gas bombs, in the hands of a worn and fretted police force, egged on by a bunch of ghouls in the shape of newspaper men and photographers, – to these marchers, the victory was a real one. They had achieved their purpose.

They had dramatized for the workers themselves their plight, and they had given them a taste of power. They might be booed by police, sneered at by the Vice President, they might be hungry, unshaven, shivering and exhausted, but they felt a sense of power when they saw a whole capital, the center of their country, mobilized against them.

When they had finally gained permission to march this morning, they set out jauntily, defiantly, conscious of victory, though even as they were escorted through the streets they were prisoners even as they had been prisoners since Sunday on blockaded New York avenue, between the Government-owned hillside and the miles of railway tracks on the other side.

They were victors in that they had forced a stupid press to play into their hands and give them columns and pages of dramatic publicity. They were victors in that they had coerced the press to egg on the police to a brutal and stupid show of force.

I do not blame the harried police, the firemen, the reserves, even though they cursed and bullied and taunted the marchers as though they were trying to provoke a bloody conflict. I blame the yellow press which for a few ghastly headlines, a few gruesome pictures, was ready to precipitate a useless massacre of a group of unemployed human beings, who were being used as "Communist tactics," as "shock troops" in the "class struggle."

It is true that the Hunger March was led by Communists. But it is also true that ninety per cent of the marchers were union men and women who were not Communists but were accepting for the time being the leadership of the militant Unemployed Councils which are affiliated with the Communist party. No other leaders present themselves, they argue. Nothing is being done for us. We will accept this leadership and accept the means offered by them to dramatize our plight.

I went through Union Square in New York Wednesday morning just as the Hunger Marchers were getting ready to pull out for Washington. It was sunny but very sharp and cold and the fresh-ploughed sod of the park had a frozen, barren look. About twenty-five trucks were lined up at the north end of the square and a few thousand "comrades" were gathered around to see off their friends, the delegates chosen from the various Unemployed Councils of New York. The march on Washington was organized by the National Committee of these Unemployed Councils, and for the past weeks delegates had been setting out from all over the United States, from California, from Washington, Oregon, and all the middle western States.

Details of the plan of the march were given a month ago in the Daily Worker, the Communist newspaper. For the past months collections had been taken up at all Communist meetings to finance the march, and the trucks were hired for \$100 apiece for nine days to take the delegates to Washington and back again. According to the published plan of the march, the delegates were to get to Washington, demonstrating on the way in town and village, parade in Washington, present their petition, and turn about and return to their homes, in the same organized fashion. Discipline was to be maintained, violence was to be avoided, food and lodging were to be requested from the cities on route and from Washington, but all preparations such as the hiring of halls, rooms for the delegates and food were to be made beforehand.

Carl Winter, the secretary of the Unemployed Council of New York is a mild, serious man of thirty-five or so, said by his companions to be a good organizer and a respected leader. He is a modest man, and refused to speak for or be photographed by the news reel men, urging Anna Burlak, Karl Reeve, and Ben Gold to go before the cameras. Anna Burlak is a tall, blond, handsome girl of twenty-two, a leader of the textile workers of New England, and as she says, not a Communist.

I talked with George Granich, one of the delegates on the march and the pay-off man for the truckmen. "The New England bunch got in last night," he said, "and they were offered accommodations at the Municipal Lodging House by the city. But to get these accommodations it was necessary to go through all sorts of red tape, and the giving up of one's clothes to be fumigated, so everyone went down to the Manhattan Lyceum and slept wrapped in their blankets on the floor. These delegates are all picked anyway, to withstand hardship on the march. They're a strong bunch and ready to sleep on the trucks if they have to."

An attempt had been made to bar members of the "oppressed races" from the march ("the hundred-per-cent American police would have had it in for them," Granich said), and though several Chinese delegates were refused permission to march, the Seamen's groups insisted on bringing along Filipino delegates. The marine workers who occupied the first trucks were a colorful group, made up as they were of all races. The sailors with their tight-fitting dungarees, woven belts, wind-breakers and pulled-down woolen caps looked like the posters the Russian government puts out of international types.

The line of march as planned lay through Jersey City, Elizabeth, Newark, New Brunswick, Trenton, Philadelphia, Wilmington, Chester, Baltimore and on to Washington.

I did not follow the progress of the Western group going into Washington, but the progress of the northern group was typical. There was no trouble for the marchers in any of the cities on the way until they reached Wilmington. There they were holding a meeting in a church and Ben Gold, one of the leaders, was making a speech, when suddenly windows were broken simultaneously on either side of the hall and tear gas bombs were thrown in. The meeting was in an uproar and milled out into the streets in anything but orderly fashion, as was natural. There the police took the opportunity to club and beat the marchers. Ben Gold, after being badly beaten, was jailed, and the march went on without him.

On Sunday, with the Hunger Marchers approaching Washington, the city, according to the papers, was in a state bordering on hysteria. There were riot drills of the marines at Quantico; guards at the White House, Capitol, Treasury, plants of the electric and gas companies, arsenals of the National Guard and the Sixth Marine Reserve. The police force, the National Guard, the American Legion, countless volunteers, supplemented by 370 firemen, all were armed with machine guns, tear gas, nauseating gas, revolvers, sawed-off shot guns, night

sticks, lengths of rubber hose. The newspapers with scareheads and photographs of the radical “army” fanned the flame of hostility, and of actual fear. When I went out with some newspaper men to meet the marchers and to visit their final encampment, I was struck by the fact that perhaps the most frightened of all were the newspaper men. They implored their editors to authorize the purchase of gas masks (thirty dollars apiece) and they kept a good distance away from the marchers, and with their eyes peeled for the best means of escape should anything happen.

In addition to the marchers, groups of liberals came to the city to give their moral support to and to add their petitions to those of the 3,000 marchers. There were delegates from the League of Professional Groups which was formed before the National election to support the Communist candidates and which is now continuing its propaganda in support of the Communist movement. Members of this delegation included Malcolm Cowley, one of the editors of the *New Republic*, Matthew Josephson, magazine writer and author of several biographies, James Rorty, poet, John Hermann, novelist and winner of the Scribner prize this year, Michael Gold, writer, Charles Rumford Walker, former associate editor of *The Atlantic Monthly*, and others.

When the news came out that the marchers were being held prisoners in the half-mile stretch of roadway, fifty-feet wide, this group of liberals joined forces with the National Committee for the Defense of Political prisoners to take legal action to free them. A writ of habeas corpus was taken out and an injunction asked against the city commissioners.

Various women’s organizations, pacifist groups, the Fellowship of Reconciliation, the Quaker Church, and others protested against the ludicrous and uncalled-for show of force.

Only one paper in Washington, the Scripps Howard paper, the *Daily News*, gave a calm, unhysterical account of the situation. It suggested editorially that the marchers were within their rights in wishing to present their petition and that such imprisonment of the marchers and show of force was both unnecessary and unconstitutional.

The other papers screamed of the “mad fanaticism” of the marchers, “fanned to wild fury by the inflammatory speeches of the leaders.” The *Star* spoke of razor blades secreted in the shoes of the marchers which could, if kicked with properly, sever arteries of the police. They hinted “they may be armed.” And they went on in this way through edition after edition, Sunday and all day Monday.

Then Tuesday morning, this morning, it was announced that the marchers were to parade and to leave tonight. And so, after this permission to parade had been refused them steadily before and since their entry into Washington, they did parade, just as they had set out to do, just as the campaign had been mapped out for them in the *Daily Worker* a month before. The plan was delayed, but not defeated.

The papers did their best to make a riot out of it and failed. They merely presented the Communist leaders in the eyes of the discontented unemployed of America as powerful leaders who could carry through successfully a planned and disciplined demonstration. And the Washingtonians who lined the streets by the thousands to watch the procession, laughed tolerantly at the songs and slogans, and said admiringly, "They sure have got gumption, standing up against the police that way."