

From the Jazz Age to the Uprisings of the 1930s

In most of our textbooks, the 1920s and the 1930s are the most mythologized years of the twentieth century. While it is true that 1920s were a “roaring” good time for some people, it is equally true that the decade was bleak for many others. The reality is that the 1920s was a decade of sharp contrasts, in which social liberalism was counterbalanced by social conservatism, conspicuous consumer consumption was also characterized by materialistic excess, and corporations and skilled workers became increasingly prosperous at the same time that unskilled workers and farmers plunged into poverty and despair. There were plenty of social, political, and economic warning signs that all was not well, but those in power ignored them until the economic realities exploded into the stock market crash and the Great Depression.

The 1930s are also mythologized in our traditional discussions of the era. Indeed, while we see the government come to the aid of many Americans during this period, we must also note that Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s (FDR) New Deal largely focused on recovery and relief measures—measures that helped corporations, labor unions, and organized farm groups, but did little to meet the needs of ordinary hard-working Americans. As Howard Zinn points out, FDR made the Depression bearable for some, but he did not make it go away. When our students listen carefully to the voices from the 1920s and 1930s, they hear tragic stories of desperate and angry people who have experienced broken dreams and hearts, have been dispossessed of all they hold dear, and have resisted conservative government responses at a time when radical measures were needed. And when they hear these voices, our students break through the mythology of the era and gain a more balanced understanding of these troubled times.

Document-Based Questions

F. SCOTT FITZGERALD

1. F. Scott Fitzgerald describes the “flimsy structure” of the 1920s as “the most expensive orgy in history” and as an era that existed in “borrowed time.” What does he mean, and how does he support these assertions?
2. Do you agree with Fitzgerald that it was premature to write about the Jazz Age in 1931? Do you think this article lacks perspective? When does an event or an era become history?
3. What does Fitzgerald think about the federal government’s reactions to the May Day riots of 1919 and its subsequent Red Scare activities? Why does he believe that most Americans did little to question governmental responses?

YIP HARBURG

1. Why do you think Roosevelt made this the theme song for his presidential campaign? Do you think it was a successful campaign tactic? Explain.
2. What do the lyrics of this song tell you about ordinary working Americans during the Great Depression? What had they done for the United States, and what did they expect?
3. Were the expectations of the people for whom the song was written fair during a time of deep economic depression?

PAUL Y. ANDERSON

1. Do you think Paul Anderson’s coverage of the Bonus March was balanced and fair? Explain.
2. What was the government’s explanation for its response to the Bonus March? Do you think the Bonus Marchers posed a threat to the government or the public good?
3. What is your opinion about the government’s response to the Bonus Marchers? Was the government’s response to the Bonus Marchers “one of the deadliest boomerangs in political history”? Explain.

MARY LICHT

1. Why do you think the Communist Party was a leading force in the defense of the Scottsboro “boys”? How do you think the Party’s involvement may have influenced the outcome of the case?
2. Why do you think that the parents agreed to have the International Labor Defense (ILD) rather than the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) represent their sons? Might the outcome of the case have been any different if it had been conducted by the NAACP? Explain.
3. How did continuous resistance to southern racism and agitation in regard to the Southern legal system influence the lives of the Scottsboro “boys”? What might have happened to them without these voices of resistance?

NED COBB (“NATE SHAW”)

1. Why did Ned Cobb stay in the South, even though he knew “I was in a bad way of life here”? Do you think he was typical of many black southern sharecroppers? Why, or why not?
2. According to Cobb, what were the most effective means used to get him, as well as other black sharecroppers, to join in the Sharecroppers Union? Why were he and others willing to risk their lives by becoming involved?
3. Describe the various divide-and-conquer strategies that Cobb explains were used by the white men. Why do you think they no longer held any power over Cobb?

BILLIE HOLIDAY

1. Do you think Abel Meeropol’s poem would have been as successful if Billie Holliday had not recorded it as a song? Explain.
2. Why do you think Holliday’s record company refused to allow her to record this song in 1937?
3. Why do you think Holliday’s recording remains so powerful today? Do you think that the song would have an equally powerful effect if it were re-recorded by a contemporary singer? Explain.

LANGSTON HUGHES

1. These two poems were written six years apart. Are the topics and tones any different in the poem written in 1934 and that written in 1940? Explain.
2. What is the difference between Roosevelt, the landlord, and the police? Were any of the three more likely than the others to listen to Hughes' voice? Why, or why not?
3. Both poems are riddled with a sense of futility. Why, then, do you think Langston Hughes continued to write? When do you think people began to listen to him? Explain.

BARTOLOMEO VANZETTI

1. Why do you think Bartolomeo Vanzetti was found guilty and sentenced to death? If he had been arrested for a similar crime ten years earlier or ten years later, do you think the outcome would have been the same? Explain.
2. Vanzetti challenges his listeners in the courtroom to ask themselves if the war brought about greater "moral good," "spiritual progress," "security of life," "respect for human life." Were these things promised to Americans when we entered World War I? Explain. Do you think most Americans believed that these promises were met by the war's end? Why didn't Vanzetti believe that they were met?
3. Why do you think that Vanzetti ends his statement by saying that he would "live again to do what I have done already"? What has he "done"?

VICKY STARR ("STELLA NOWICKI")

1. Many Americans would describe Vicky Starr's experience with the Young Communist League (YCL) as brainwashing. Would you agree? Why, or why not? If you were in her situation, might you have been persuaded to join the YCL? Why, or why not?
2. Do you think people should be guaranteed the right to organize in a union? Why was it so important to workers like Starr—so important that they risked their lives to defend their right to organize? Do you think union organization is as important to most workers today? Why, or why not?

3. What role is Starr play in her union? Do you think women play similar roles today?

SYLVIA WOODS

1. Why did Sylvia Woods get in trouble for refusing to sing “The Star Spangled Banner” or recite the Pledge of Allegiance? Do you think her reasons were valid? Explain. Could and should this happen to a child in school today?
2. How do Sylvia Woods’ experiences with work and labor unions compare and contrast with those of Vicky Starr? What accounts for the disparities?
3. How does Woods “sell” the union to non-union members? What were her goals as a union steward? Why was her union able to keep the workers together two years after the plant had closed down? Why do you think she was so effective in her role? How do her attitudes change as she continues her involvement in the union?

ROSE CHERNIN

1. What do we take for granted today that working-class Americans did not have in the 1930s?
2. How and why could Chernin have been “happy” during a time filled with so much misery? Is there any time in your life when you felt the same—happy in the face of great misery?
3. As an organizer, Chernin told the unemployed that they were asking the government to either give them jobs or support them in some way. Was this Socialism? Explain.

GENORA (JOHNSON) DOLLINGER

1. Genora Dollinger compares working inside General Motors to slavery. Do you think she substantiates this comparison? How and why? How might the other voices in this chapter respond to such a comparison?
2. What constitutional violations does Dollinger describe in her recollections? What violations against humanity does she describe?

3. How did the authorities of Flint use divide-and-conquer strategies to break the strike and to rationalize their response to the strikers?

JOHN STEINBECK

1. Why do you think *The Grapes of Wrath* resonated with so many Americans? Do you think it was controversial when it was first published? How and why?
2. How does Tom's explanation about his soul reflect what many of the union members and organizers in the chapter explained about the power of organization? Do you agree? Explain.
3. Do you think Tom and Casy are dreamers or realists? What drives them to take the actions they do? How are their choices similar to the choices made by the other people you read about in this chapter?

WOODY GUTHRIE

1. Why do you think this song—which was quite critical of the nation in the 1930s—became one of the greatest symbols of American patriotism?
2. What is Guthrie's message?
3. What is Guthrie's vision of social justice? What role does private property play in his vision?

Main Points in *Voices*, Chapter 15, "From the Jazz Age to the Uprisings of the 1930s"

After reading Chapter 15 in *Voices*, students should be encouraged to identify what they believe to be the main points therein. Following are five possible main points.

1. The 1920s and 1930s were decades of sharp economic, social, and political contrasts between the very rich and the very poor.
2. During this twenty-year period, the Communist Party, IWW, and other organizations were actively involved in resisting racist economic, political, and social practices across the nation.

3. Racism, nativism, sexism, and extreme patriotism permeated the atmosphere of post-World War I America.
4. Union membership, no matter how risky, offered workers hope for better working conditions.
5. The New Deal ushered in a period of unprecedented reform—reform that was largely brought about by widespread political resistance.

Main Points in *Voices*, Chapter 15, “From the Jazz Age to the Uprisings of the 1930s,” and in *A People’s History*, Chapter 15, “Self-Help in Hard Times”

If your students are also reading *A People’s History*, they should be encouraged to identify what they believe to be the main points in Chapters 15 in both books. Following are five additional points to be stressed when *Voices* and *A People’s History* are used together.

6. The 1920s were characterized by strong government control: the Red scare had rooted out Socialists and destroyed the IWW, the economy was stable enough to prevent mass rebellion, and a burst of nativist legislation and racist activities had disenfranchised immigrants and people of color.
7. The New Deal’s organization of the economy sought first to stabilize, and second to give “enough help to the lower classes to keep them from turning a rebellion into a real revolution” (*People’s History*, p. 393).
8. FDR’s goals for the New Deal were “concessions” that did not solve the problems of the Depression but instead created “an atmosphere of progress and improvement” (*People’s History*, p. 403) that restored the faith of many Americans in the economic and political system.
9. New Deal legislation was not responsible for recovery from the Depression because FDR did not spend enough money to generate rapid economic growth; that growth occurred only with the outbreak of World War II.
10. Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, prosperity was concentrated at the top of American society, while ordinary Americans without effective voices or political clout—African Americans, Mexican workers, women, sharecrop-

pers, and small farmers—suffered dramatic economic, social, and political losses.

General-Discussion Questions for *Voices*

While the following questions are designed for classroom discussion about all the voices read in Chapter 15, they can also be rewritten and included as evaluation tools.

1. What visions immediately come to mind when you think about the so-called Roaring Twenties? How do these visions contrast with the voices you have read in this chapter?
2. Where is the Lower East Side of New York City? What historic role has it played, and continues to play, for new immigrants to America?
3. Many of the voices you have heard in this chapter were Communists, Socialists, Anarchists, or people who sympathized with these views. Does knowing this change your opinion about their role as political dissidents? Explain.
4. Mary Licht wrote that circumstances “were hard in the North” but they were “desperate in the South where the Depression had really begun in 1927.” Why were things so much worse, and why did the desperation begin so much earlier, in the South?
5. What is a sharecropper? When, how, and why did the sharecropping system begin? Why was it largely confined to the South?
6. What examples do you find in this chapter of strategies used by those in power to divide-and-conquer others? Which were especially effective and ineffective? Why?
7. What was the Harlem Renaissance? What are the most enduring legacies of this period?
8. What is nativism? What is xenophobia? Why were nativism and xenophobia large components of the 1920s?
9. Is it illegal to be an Anarchist? To verbally oppose war? Why, or why not? Explain.

10. What is blacklisting? Do you think it common in the factories during this period? Do you think blacklisting should be legal? Do you think it is still used in workplaces? Explain.
11. What do you think are the primary grievances of United States workers in the twenty-first century? How do they compare and contrast with the grievances of workers in the 1930s?
12. How widespread were evictions during this period? How did the various people you read unite in order to help those who were evicted? Does eviction continue to be a major problem among the working poor? How and why?
13. Under the First Amendment, people have the right to peaceably assemble and to freedom of speech. How, then, could people be fired for union membership or support in the 1930s?
14. How did the experiences with labor organization compare and contrast between male and female union members?

General-Discussion Questions for *Voices* and *A People's History*

These general-discussion questions are additional questions for students who have read Chapter 15 in both books. For all questions, discussion must focus on ways the materials in both chapters help students formulate and articulate their answers.

15. Why was it difficult to achieve unity among union members about whether or not to go on strike during the Great Depression?
16. Why does Anna Louise Strong, the author of the poem printed in the *Seattle Union Record*, believe that the “SMILING SILENCE” is what businessmen do not understand? Why is it a “weapon”?
17. Why do you think the federal and state governments acted so severely against the strikers? Do you think the strikers posed a real threat to society?
18. What are some examples from the 1920s that support the belief that the age was full of prosperity and fun? Was this belief accurate?
19. What were the primary causes of the Great Depression? Why do you think

that most politicians “did not know what had happened, [and] were baffled by it”?

20. Why were the policies of Franklin Delano Roosevelt called a New Deal for Americans? Do you think they really did offer a new deal? Explain.
21. What investments had ordinary people—the people about whom Yip Harburg wrote in “Brother, Can You Spare a Dime?”—made in the United States? What were the dividends they expected? Did they have a right to expect such dividends? Why, or why not?
22. Why do you think most traditional textbooks do not discuss the Bonus March?
23. What kinds of “self-help” took place during the Great Depression?
24. What role did racism play in keeping the unions from really uniting?
25. What is the difference between a sit-down strike and a walk out? Which was more effective during this period? How and why?
26. How did the Wagner Act aid union organizing?
27. What ways of “controlling direct labor action” developed in the 1930s? How successful were such efforts? How did the coming of World War II weaken “the old labor militancy of the thirties”?
28. Why do you think that only the radicals—the Socialists, Communists, Anarchists, and labor leaders—tried to break the racial barriers that existed in the 1930s?

Evaluation Tools

SUGGESTED ASSIGNMENTS

These assignments can be adapted to meet any classroom need—homework, short- or long-term research projects, individual or group work. The end product should be flexible, depending on teacher interest and student abilities—papers, journals, oral reports, visual aides, and the like.

1. By 1932, a jobless army of men and women were “hoboing” or riding the

rails, even though the practice was dangerous and illegal. To find out more about this phenomenon, see the PBS *American Experience* production of “Riding the Rails” or read the transcripts available at www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/rails/filmmore/transcript/transcript1.html. Who rode the rails and why? What were the consequences of riding the rails? Why were teenagers so attracted to “hoboing”? What efforts were made to decrease hitching rides by rail, especially within the teenage population? Were these efforts successful? Explain.

2. Read more about the Bonus March of 1932. Be sure to read some first-hand accounts and perspectives from the marchers themselves, as well as reports by representatives from the military and the federal government. How do these views compare and contrast with the view of journalist Paul Anderson? Does your research tend to support or refute Anderson’s belief that the government’s response was “deliberately conceived” for the political purpose of making the leading issue of the campaign “Hoover versus radicalism”? Explain.
3. Read *The Great Gatsby* by F. Scott Fitzgerald. Why do you think many Americans believe that this book is essential reading for understanding the 1920s? What did you learn about the era that you did not previously know? Did you like the book? The characters in the book? Explain. What part of America is not examined in *Gatsby*? Does the book support the mythological belief in the Roaring Twenties, the decade-of-contrasts thesis, or both? Explain.
4. Learn more about Prohibition. What were the political maneuverings that preceded the passage of Prohibition? Who supported it, and why? Who opposed it, and why? Why did it take more than seventy years for such a law to pass? Why did it finally pass when it did? When and why was the amendment repealed? What were the short- and long-term consequences of Prohibition?
5. Learn more about immigration and the 1924 immigration Act. What was the impetus for imposing immigration quotas? What did the act entail? How did the political, economic, and social atmosphere in America during the 1920s contribute to the passage of this Act? Do we still have immigration quotas in America? What current immigration laws aim to limit immigration? Do you agree with our current immigration laws? What are the political impli-

cations of the decision made in 2003 to transfer the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) to the Office of Homeland Security?

6. Examine the role of union organization in the 1920s and 1930s. Why were unions so important to workers? Was it true that most unions and union leaders were socialists? What was the relationship between unions and socialism during the period? When and how did workers gain the right to organize? To strike? Under what conditions? What do you think the upper classes felt about union membership—and why did they feel as they did? How are unions viewed today? Would you join a union? Under what circumstances?
7. See the movie *Roger and Me* by Michael Moore. Then compare and contrast the experiences of Genora Dollinger in the 1930s with those of the workers in Flint, Michigan, in the 1990s.
8. Examine one of the strikes that occurred in the 1930s in great detail. Use a combination of primary and secondary documents to answer the following questions about the strike: What were the causes of the strike? What union was involved in the strike, and what was its role throughout? How did management respond? What assistance did management receive from local, state, and federal governments? How was the strike eventually broken? What were the short- and long-term consequences of the strike on the strikers? On the union? How did the primary documents you read broaden your understanding of this strike?
9. Learn more about the air-traffic controllers strike during the presidency of Ronald Reagan. How and why did the federal government respond to the strike? How did Reagan's response compare and contrast with the response by the federal government to strikes that occurred in the 1930s? What were the consequences of the air-traffic controllers strike for the strikers? On the strikebreakers? How are strikes in the twenty-first century similar to and different from those of the early and late twentieth century? What rights do today's strikers have that those of the 1930s did not?

SUGGESTED ESSAY QUESTIONS

- I. What historical myths surrounding the 1920s and 1930s does Howard Zinn reexamine? Which myths do you feel are most in need of reexamination?

2. Rose Chernin begins her essay with this statement, “The things we take for granted now, part of the American way of life, these were revolutionary ideas when we began to demand them in the thirties.” Using examples from the reading, explain the revolutionary ideas and actions that took place in the 1930s. How and why were they revolutionary? What things do we take for granted today that American workers did not have more than seventy years ago?
3. What were the advantages and disadvantages of union membership in the 1920s and 1930s? If you had been a member of the working-class, would you have joined a union? Why, or why not?
4. This period abounds with racism, sexism, and nativism. Using your reading as a guide, provide some examples of these maladies. Why were these characteristics so pronounced in the social, political, and economic lives of Americans between the two world wars? What role do these problems play in American life in the twenty-first century?
5. Rose Chernin wrote of her union involvement, “Life changes when you are together in this way, when you are united.” Using examples from the reading, support this statement by showing the type of organizing that truly united people during this period and how it changed their lives. In what way did such organization change the dynamics between employer and employee?
6. How is the phrase quoted by Genora Dollinger, “Once you pass the gates of General Motors, forget about the United States Constitution,” illustrated in the other voices of people you learned about in your reading? How did those who resisted such unconstitutional treatment change this situation? More than seventy years later, what remains to be done in terms of protecting our constitutional rights in the workplace?
7. Why do you think the words of such great authors, poets, and songwriters as John Steinbeck, Langston Hughes, Billie Holliday, F. Scott Fitzgerald, and Woody Guthrie resonated with some Americans but not with others? Using examples from the readings, explain how their messages were both similar and different. What common themes were especially descriptive of the 1920s and 1930s?
8. Using examples from your reading, describe the federal government’s reac-

tion to strikers across the nation during the Great Depression. Why do you think the federal government acted so severely against the strikers? Do you think the strikers posed a real threat to society? Explain.

9. Using examples from your reading, support the belief that the 1920s was a period of sharp contrasts. Do you think the 1930s could also be characterized by such sharp contrast? Explain.
10. What economic warning signs existed prior to the stock-market crash? Why do you think they were generally ignored? How did the federal government initially respond? How and why were FDR's policies designed to respond to the Great Depression referred to as a "New Deal"?
11. Using examples from the reading, support or refute this statement by Howard Zinn, "... the New Deal's organization of the economy was aimed mainly at stabilizing the economy, and secondly at giving enough help to the lower classes to keep them from turning a rebellion into a real revolution." Do you agree with Zinn that when FDR came to office, a real rebellion was occurring? Why, or why not?
12. Provide plentiful examples to support Howard Zinn's statement that "only the radicals made an attempt to break the racial barriers" during the 1930s. Do you think this statement is fair given the work that the NAACP, as well as other African American self-help groups, was undertaking? Explain.
13. Describe the role of women in the labor movement of the 1930s. How did their roles differ from those of men? Would the unions have been as powerful without the organizing influence of women? Explain.

SIMULATIONS AND OTHER CREATIVE APPROACHES

1. Stage a trial of President Herbert Hoover in which several Bonus Marchers have charged him with violating their First Amendment rights to freedom of speech, assembly, and petition.
2. Impanel a jury for the trial of Sacco and Vanzetti. Each juror must examine the case from every possible angle and make a statement to the whole jury about each individual decision. Afterward, the jury must reach a conclusion about the guilt or innocence of the accused and must recommend a sentence to the court.

3. Imagine what it must have been like to be a working-class teenager during the Great Depression. Your father has lost his job, your family is at risk of losing your home, and none of you—your parents and five brothers and sisters—has enough to eat or enough clothing to keep you warm during the winter. You decide to leave home so that your parents will have one less person to take care of. You promise your parents to write often while you are gone, and to tell them where you are, what you are doing, and how you are managing to keep yourself alive. Compose your letters for the duration of your time away from home.
4. Organize a union meeting that takes place in the 1930s. The leaders have a wide variety of issues to discuss with members, and members have many subjects they wish to discuss with the leaders. Conduct the meeting and make some decisions about actions that will be taken in the immediate future, as well as ways that leaders and members will sell union involvement to non-members.
5. Write a letter to your representative in Congress in which you discuss one of the largest problems for working people across America in the twenty-first century—lack of health care. Explain the problem, how it affects you and your family, and what you think should be done to alleviate the situation.