

AWAKENING THE 'FORGOTTEN FOLK': MIDDLE CLASS CONSUMER
ACTIVISM IN POST-WORLD WAR I AMERICA

BY

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Introduction

The doctor sat patiently with a revolver in his hand. His seat was familiar, one that he had taken frequently over the past few days. It faced the front door of his apartment, which he had barricaded with numerous chains and a piano. Dr. L.C. Zeigler did not live in a dangerous neighborhood, but on May 1, 1921 the Rogers Park section of Chicago's North End had become filled with tension. Like many of his white collar neighbors, Zeigler and his landlord had developed an acrimonious relationship during the previous months. The trouble began when Zeigler's landlord informed him that he would increase his rent by 60 percent at the end of the lease. Infuriated, Zeigler publicly criticized his landlord in the press and through window placards. He was not alone. Collectively, white collar tenants who were part of the self-proclaimed "middle class" Rogers Park Tenants Protective Association displayed placards that referred to their landlords as "rent hogs" and "profiteers." The Association declared a "rent strike" for May 1, hoping that their collective refusal to move out would flood the municipal courts with forcible detainer cases, and prompt the local and state governments to enact rent reform. On May 1, Zeigler fired a shot at a new tenant attempting to move into his residence. Unharmed, the new tenant fled and Zeigler continue to wait.¹

Throughout the 1910s, Americans encountered substantial price increases for the "necessaries of life." Between 1913 and 1919, retail food prices escalated by 86 percent and average rents rose by 11 percent from 1914-19 (but with substantial fluctuations occurring in 1919-20). Retail clothing and other dry goods prices exhibited even more

¹ Chicago *Tribune* 3/7/1921, 3/21/1921; Chicago *Daily Journal* 5/9/1921.

drastic trends, increasing by an average of 223 percent from 1915 to 1919. Meanwhile, middle class salaries remained stagnant. Whereas the average working class wage rose by approximately 55 percent between 1913 and 1919, white collar salaries incurred no positive change.² By the immediate postwar period, middle class Americans were livid. One white collar worker exclaimed to his local newspaper, “The position of the salaried worker is growing intolerable...our resentment increases and grows more bitter from that very fact.” John R. Patterson, a librarian and president of the Rogers Park Tenants’ Protective Association reflected this “bitterness.” Testifying before a Senate Committee on Reconstruction and Production, Patterson declared that Americans “forget” the hardships of “the so-called middle class, the so-called white collar class...the class that is suffering.” In his well publicized book *Return of the Middle Class* (1922) contemporary commentator John Corbin, an ardent supporter of the middle class, identified the middle class as the “Forgotten Folk.” Victims of the postwar political economy, the middle class disproportionately suffered from skyrocketing prices for food, clothing, housing and other commodities. In Corbin’s eyes, this was “the tragedy of the new poor.”³

² An un-inclusive estimate of middle class income change from 1913-1919 suggests approximately a 26 percent decrease in income. See Appendix 1 for explanation.

³ United States Senate, Select Committee on Reconstruction and Production, *Reconstruction and Production: Hearings Before the Select Committee on Reconstruction and Production, United States Senate, Sixty-sixth Congress, Third Session, Pursuant to S. Res. 350 Authorizing the Appointment of a Committee to Inquire Into the General Building Situation and to Report to the Senate Before December 1, 1920, such Measures as May Be Deemed Necessary to Stimulate and Foster the Development of Construction Work in All Its Forms* (Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1921), 941-944. Data calculated from: U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, “The Cost of Living in the United States” *Bulletin of the Bureau of Labor Statistics* 357 (May 1924): 457; “Relative Retail Prices of Food,” in Department of Commerce, Bureau of Foreign and Domestic Commerce, *Statistical Abstract of the United States 1921* (Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1922), 631. For dry goods prices, see U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, “Retail Prices 1913 to December 1919” *Bulletin of the Bureau of Labor Statistics* 357 (February 1921): 58. Retail prices of dry goods were not taken by the Bureau of Labor Statistics in 1913 or 1914. Date range: May 15, 1915-October 15, 1919; Chicago *Tribune* 8/13/1920; John Corbin, *The Return of the Middle Class* (New York: C. Scribner’s Sons, 1922), 15.

Middle class Americans vilified laborers as a culprit for their consumer woes. As middle class Americans read daily reports of a growing number of working class strikes for increased earning power, they reflected on their own struggles to meet rising living costs. Many middle class Americans suggested that each strike or pay raise for manual laborers inflated prices for consumers. To make matters worse, throughout the beginning decades of the twentieth century, consumer goods increasingly blurred many cultural class distinctions between white collar workers and the working class. Mass produced clothing, single-family homes with a variety of furnishings and new forms of entertainment became affordable for a wider range of Americans, leading to middle class resentment of working class indulgence. As Corbin declared, “The war had obliterated untold billions of the world’s wealth; yet never in times of fat prosperity were luxuries more eagerly consumed. But not by the salesman brain worker, nor yet the professional man- the educator, the physician, the clergyman.” While the rich remained rich and laborers seemingly enjoyed a better lifestyle, Corbin queried, “But what distinction have the Forgotten Folk with which to feed their inward pride?”⁴

Elite profiteers shared an equal part of the blame for high prices in the eyes of middle class consumers. A 1920 *New York Times* article noted that both organized labor and the “profiteer” had ground middle class Americans into a “pulp.” The statements of white collar citizens reflected similar outrage over the exploits of profiteers. Newton M. Allen, a Los Angeles real estate broker, wrote the Los Angeles City Council to suggest that the government “send every profiteer to jail.” According to Allen, ending

⁴ John Corbin, *The Return of The Middle Class* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1922), 9, 11.

profiteering “is one of the greatest [issues] before the American people today.” In a letter to the Office of the U.S. Secretary of Commerce, Edwin Quackenbush, a school principal from Highland Park, Michigan, pinpointed the excessive profits of coal operators as a reason for high prices. Across the United States, individuals like Quackenbush and Allen identified both big capitalists, such as American Woolen Company President William Wood and speculating middlemen as profiteers and contributors to the high cost of living.⁵

In this climate, middle class consumers undertook an unprecedented attempt at organization to assert their vision of a just economy and to protect their pocketbooks. They formed “home garden committees” and pressed for municipal markets to combat rising food prices. They founded “wear overalls clubs,” in which members agreed to don only the garb of diligent labor, to bring down the cost of clothing. Middle class Americans also organized the first “middle class” tenant associations to protect themselves from rent increases, and even attempted to establish a “middle class union” to unite all middle class consumer organizing movements. Observing the growing power of the middle class, Vice President Thomas R. Marshall declared, “There is a great middle class in America who have had nothing to do with these special privileges [of high wages and profits] otherwise than that they happened to live in the Republic when they were granted.” But, “they are rapidly coming together”; they are “The Awakening Middle

⁵ Herbert Hoover to E.J. Quackenbush 8/10/1922, Folder: coal prices and profiteering August, Box 108, Hoover Commerce Papers, Herbert Hoover Presidential Library, West Branch, IA; United States Census, Year: 1920; Census Place: *Los Angeles Assembly District 64, Los Angeles, California*; Roll: *T625_108*; Page: 2B; Enumeration District: 230; Image: 1017; United States Census, Year: 1920; Census Place: *Highland Park, Wayne, Michigan*; Roll: *T625_801*; Page: 2B; Enumeration District: 698; Image: 521; *New York Times* 5/23/1920; Records of the City Council of Los Angeles 11/4/1919, Los Angeles City Clerk’s Office, Records Management Division, Los Angeles, CA.

Class.” John Corbin concluded his introductory chapter to *The Return of the Middle Class* by optimistically exclaiming, “in the years since peace began to rage among us, the sheer might of economic pressure has forced ‘the public’ to a sense of its rights- and its power.” Through anti-high price agitation and “buyers strikes,” “the Forgotten Folk are remembering themselves.”⁶

Consumer Society and Consumer Organizing

As middle class Americans confronted an emerging consumer economy, they developed a distinctive consumer identity. They established a set of their own righteous values centered on industriousness and thrift that defined what was fair in the marketplace. Whether condemning the laziness or spend-thriftiness of labor organizations, the unproductiveness of middlemen, or the greed of elites, they sought to universalize their sense of fairness in a consumer economy. Rather than protesting low salaries, white collar Americans saw high prices as the true injustice of the postwar political economy- where capital and labor “took its toll in larger bites” and “clamored for more.” It was this consumer identity that shaped their conceptions of themselves as part of a large and potentially powerful middle class.⁷

Many recent works have documented how consumption has played a crucial role in the process of class formation for the late nineteenth and early twentieth century

⁶ Thomas R. Marshall, “The Awakening Middle Class” *New York Times Magazine* 10/5/1919; John Corbin, *The Return of The Middle Class* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1922), 12.

⁷ *Congressional Record* (Washington D.C.: GPO) 3/31/1920, pg. 5036 (Hereinafter *Congressional Record* (Washington D.C.: GPO) = *Congressional Record*); *New York Times* 8/23/1919; *New York Times* 8/30/1920.

working class. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, organized labor increasingly fought for a “living wage” to enable themselves as a class to gain greater access to consumer goods, as well as to necessities. Lawrence Glickman argues that this “consumerist turn” significantly influenced working class formation, “transform[ing] the meaning of class consciousness.” In the same vein, other historians have chronicled how laborers used consumption as an organizing strategy to achieve better working conditions, higher wages, or lower prices. This scholarship has featured analyses of union label campaigns, consumer cooperatives, tenant organization, and food riots as working class consumerist responses to low wages, difficult working conditions, rapid price changes and food and housing shortages in the early twentieth century. In peak moments, these strategies played important roles in leading working class Americans toward greater class consciousness and organization.⁸

However, historians have yet to apply these principles to the early twentieth century middle class or, more poignantly, to suggest that the middle class even attempted to organize as consumers on a large scale, in defense of their own exclusive interests in this period. Rather, scholars have discussed more limitedly how middle class Americans in the early twentieth century shared a culture of consumption around markers of a middle class lifestyle. Marina Moskowitz argues that middle class Americans aspired to a

⁸ Dana Frank, *Purchasing Power: Consumer Organizing, Gender, and the Seattle Labor Movement, 1919-1929* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994); William Frieberger, “War, Prosperity and Hunger: The New York Food Riots of 1917” *Labor History* 25:2 (1984): 217-39; Dana Frank, “Housewives, Socialists, and the Politics of Food: The 1917 New York of Living Protests” *Feminist Studies* 11:2 (Summer 1985): 255-285; Joe Sullivan, *Marxists, Militants, & Macaroni: The IWW in Providence’s Little Italy* (Rhode Island Labor History Society, 2001); Joseph A. Spencer, “New York City Tenant Organizations and the Post-World War I Housing Crisis” in Ronald Lawson and Mark Naison ed., *The Tenant Movement in New York, 1904-1984* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1986), 51-93; Lawrence B. Glickman, *A Living Wage: American Workers and the Making of Consumer Society* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997), 95-98.

“standard of living” that consisted of owning a variety of consumer goods for display in specific areas of the home as “a measure of the middle class.” Advertisements, fiction, magazines and other cultural mediums represented and popularized these “shared” markers of middle class identity to construct “a national community with a shared standard of living.” In her analysis of the *Ladies Home Journal*, Jennifer Scanlon similarly suggests that the popular women’s magazine encouraged middle class female readers to abide by middle class norms, which centered on expanding their role as consumers and maintaining their position as caretakers of the home. In her recent survey of modern American consumer society, Regina Lee Blaszczyk synthesizes these arguments by asserting that early twentieth century Americans held a “consumer identity kit”- consisting of the magazines they read, the houses in which they lived, the clothes they wore, and the other goods they consumed- that influenced them to identify with members of their own class.⁹

These works have added significantly to our understandings of middle class consumer identity, but they have not explored this identity as a basis for collective action and organization. A shared middle class consumer identity created a set of norms and expectations based on the ability to afford a middle class lifestyle. It provided the underpinnings for organized protest when the postwar economy challenged the middle class’s ability to afford a way of life that differentiated them from the working class. In

⁹ Also emphasizing how consumption furthered Americans’ collective identity, Charles McGovern argues that in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, “Americans came to understand spending as a form of citizenship, an important ritual of national identity in daily life.” This contrasts with William Leach’s argument that consumer society destroyed people’s sense of collective obligation. Charles McGovern, *Sold American: Consumption and Citizens, 1890-1945* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 3; William Leach, *Land of Desire: Merchants, Power, and the Rise of a New American Culture* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1993).

this moment, middle class Americans used an emerging consumer identity as a vehicle that could be mobilized toward collective action.¹⁰

Scholars have, indeed, suggested that consumer society has influenced the ability of individuals and groups to exercise power politically and culturally, for better or worse. For example, Lizabeth Cohen, T.H. Breen, John Fiske, Janice Radway and T.J. Jackson Lears, have noted the emancipatory power of material culture, noting that groups and individuals take their own meanings from consumer culture, including subversive ones. Breen and Cohen have even argued that consumer identities laid the ground work for the group identity formation necessary for the major political and social movements of the American Revolution and the New Deal Era labor movement, respectively. However, some scholars have suggested that historians have underappreciated the controlling aspects of a consumer society. David Steigerwald argues that any empowering use of consumer culture ultimately occurs within “political and social restrictions or by the marketplace.” Particularly by the twentieth century, Steigerwald contends, Americans largely lived within parameters set by the U.S. consumer economy.¹¹

¹⁰ Meg Jacobs does “cast doubt on the traditional view of twentieth-century American consumer society as profoundly depoliticizing,” but makes this point in reference to consumers as a whole. Jacobs mentions examples of middle class consumer politics, but does not provide an in-depth analysis of the class-based (antipathetic to labor and capital) organizing potential of consumption for the middle class in the early twentieth century. Meg Jacobs, *Pocketbook Politics: Economic Citizenship in Twentieth-Century America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 3-4; Marina Moskowitz, *Standard of Living: The Measure of the Middle Class in Modern America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004); Jennifer Scanlon, *Inarticulate Longings: The Ladies’ Home Journal, Gender, and the Promises of Consumer Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 12; Regina Lee Blaszczyk, *American Consumer Society, 1865-2005: From Hearth to HDTV* (Wheeling, IL: Harlan Davidson, 2009).

¹¹ Lizabeth Cohen, *Making a New Deal: Industrial Workers in Chicago, 1919-1939* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990); T.H. Breen, *The Marketplace of Revolution: How Consumer Politics Shaped American Independence* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004); John Fiske, *Understanding Popular Culture* (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1989); Janice A. Radway, *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991); David Steigerwald, “All Hail the Republic of Choice: Consumer History as Contemporary Thought” *Journal of American History*

Nevertheless, their relationship to the consumer economy was what united white collar individuals around a common cause- the high cost of living (HCL). John R. Patterson and Dr. H.C. Zeigler, whose activism as disgruntled tenants began in this chapter, represented two of the many white collar residents of Chicago's North End neighborhoods who came together to defend the lifestyle of the middle class from the HCL. In Patterson's words, the North End Chicago tenants as a "middle class" "feel that they are fighting for the preservation of the home, for a wholesome community, in which to bring up their children, and they are living up nobly to the well-known reputation of the female species." High rents and high prices threatened their ability to afford nice homes in middle class neighborhoods and pay for the other markers of a middle class lifestyle. As Patterson remarked, the "profiteer" gave "the people of the middle class one urgent grievance in common."¹²

Fittingly, when Zeigler's quarrel with his landlord escalated, he enjoyed the collective support of his white collar neighbors. In response to Zeigler's repeated public condemnations of him, Zeigler's landlord placed a poster in his window reading, "For Rent- Second floor, after April 30. Do not desire present tenant to stay there after, under any conditions." Upon the appearance of this new poster, residents of the neighborhood flocked to the street and sidewalks surrounding Zeigler's home. One account proclaimed, "Passing motorists stopped their machines. Traffic was soon at a standstill. Crowds congregated." One man shouted, "Three rousing cheers for Dr. Zeigler." Another man

93:2 (September 2006): 397; T.J. Jackson Lears, *No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture, 1880-1920* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1994).

¹² Janesville, WI *Gazette* 6/4/1920.

declared, “We want Doc. Zeigler. Bing him on. Speech! Hurray for Doc. Zeigler.” Zeigler came to his window and aired his grievances. An applause followed. A local hero, Zeigler remained steadfast in his refusal to move out. Two weeks later, when Zeigler awoke to find his window broken and his poster missing, he created a new window placard with a brasher message: “Warning- This sign is hung with hairspring automatic guns, suspended at each corner and can be discharged only by an attempt to steal the sign again.” While most of Zeigler’s fellow middle class tenants did not resort to such extreme measures, Zeigler and his white collar neighbors came together because of they had developed a common middle class consumer identity.¹³



Dr. H.C. Zeigler, pictured on the right. Zeigler’s landlord placed the sign pictured on the left in his window after Zeigler displayed a sign in his window complaining of the rent increase. The landlord’s sign read, “Second floor For Rent, after April 30. Do not desire present tenant to stay thereafter, under any conditions.”

¹³ Chicago Tribune 3/7/1921, 3/21/1921; San Antonio Evening News 6/9/1920.

¹⁴ Chicago Tribune 8/11/1901 and 3/7/1921.

As Corbin's words and Zeigler's actions demonstrate, white collar Americans formulated their grievances and forged their group identity as a "middle class" in the context of this growing consumer economy. They used their "consumer identity kit" that signified a middle class identity as a basis to organize when the economy seemed to no longer work in their favor. However, a consumer identity was not their only one as a middle class. It was no coincidence that white collar Americans collectively fought the high cost of living by parading in overalls, calling buyers "strikes," and picking up shovels and digging up their backyards.

Producer Identities:

Middle class Americans combined consumerist and producerist discourses, symbols, and styles of protest to shape their class identity in the postwar period. While organizing as consumers, middle class citizens championed the values and symbols of diligent production. They condemned a supposedly indolent working class for lacking proper producerist values even as their primary grievance was the impact that strikes and underproduction had on middle class *consumer* needs. According to these voices, workers in unions ranging from the politically moderate American Federation of Labor to the radical Industrial Workers of the World- or the "I-Won't Workers" as one middle class sympathizer labeled them- went on strike for wages that would bring them lives of luxury at the expense of the middle class. Middle class Americans continued to embrace a nineteenth century middle class producer-centered worldview that celebrated honest hard work and thrift as they came to terms with their political identity as consumers.

During this important moment of transition in middle class identity, the middle class incorporated producer values into their new consumer identity.¹⁵

In their consumer organizing efforts, middle class citizens appropriated the symbols and strategies of productive labor from the working class. They chose overalls, a symbol of hard work, as the centerpiece of their anti-high cost of clothing activism. In localities ranging from New York City to Lansing, Michigan white collar Americans formed “wear overalls clubs,” and paraded in overalls down the streets, vowing to wear them until prices returned to reasonable levels. Overalls club members promoted the value of diligent production as they put on the “uniform of manual labor” to “signal for America to return to work.” White collar Americans also formed the first middle class tenants unions and called “rent strikes,” a strategy hitherto only used by the working class to fight escalating rents. Perhaps most representative of middle class attachment to producerism, “tiring of their unenviable role of helpless consumers,” they “turned the tables on the food purveyors by turning producers” and planted their own gardens.¹⁶

Middle class citizens’ romanticization of producer values drew on an evolving nineteenth century classical liberal ideology that placed the producer at the forefront of the political economy. As Kathleen G. Donohue has argued, nineteenth century Americans, regardless of class positioning, “were all but unanimous in their conviction that the producer was the proper identity around which to organize a political

¹⁵ Charles Henry Meltzer, “The Intermediate Millions” *North American Review* CCIX (Feb 1919): 233.

¹⁶ *Indianapolis Star* 5/10/1920, *New York Times* 4/17/1920, *Los Angeles Times* 2/8/1920.

economy.”¹⁷ Extravagant consumption stood in direct contrast with producer values. It represented a sign of moral laxity and lack of commitment to hard work and discipline, so much so that the “consumer” was largely a pejorative term. The middle class, in particular, embraced industriousness and thrift as indispensable moral virtues. As Daniel Rodgers notes, Americans’ emphasis on the “work ethic was in its origins a middle class affair.” Following this general celebration of hard work and production, Americans joined organizations around this producer identity. Citizens in the “old middle class” of skilled laborers and owner-operators- and even many in the emerging white collar class of clerks, lawyers, doctors, and other professionals were no exception. The membership of the late nineteenth century producer-oriented craft union The Knights of Labor, for example, consisted of attorneys, salesmen and others in the white collar class, in addition to its primary membership of artisans and wage earners. Middle class Americans, like the working class, defined economic fairness both by their commitment to hard work and their belief that diligent labor deserved just compensation.¹⁸

As a young man in his twenties during the 1890s, Dr. H.C. Zeigler was preoccupied with defending his rights as a hard working producer. Zeigler saw himself as a producer of brain work and, like a coal miner, steelyard worker or a blacksmith, he

¹⁷ Kathleen G. Donohue, *Freedom from Want: American Liberalism and the Idea of the Consumer* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003), 8.

¹⁸ For discussion of a producerist identity for nineteenth century middle class Americans, see Daniel T. Rodgers, *The Work Ethic in Industrial America 1850-1920* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 14-17; Rodgers underscores the importance of “praise for work” and championing industriousness to mid-nineteenth century middle class notions of morality; Melton Alonza McLaurin, *The Knights of Labor in the South* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1978), 42-3. MacLaurin notes how the Knights of Labor, one of the most significant national labor organizations of the 1870s and 80s, “developed the ‘mixed’ assembly, which took full advantage of the order’s liberal membership policy...Often they contained any number of professionals, clerks, salesmen, and other white-collar employees, in addition to manual laborers...” Also, see Kathleen G. Donohue, *Freedom from Want: American Liberalism and the Idea of the Consumer* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003).

demanded “fair” compensation for his honest and diligent labor. In one instance, Zeigler took a family to court for not paying him for his hard work. He had agreed to become a personal physician for a wealthy widow of a theater man, under the understanding that she would leave him with a substantial inheritance upon her death. Zeigler cared for her diligently for five years and even followed her to Pasadena, where she passed away. When her family usurped the inheritance, Zeigler sued. Zeigler’s lawyers called witnesses who declared that Zeigler had “worked hard,” submitted evidence referring to him as a “hard worker” and painted one of the widow’s relatives (a potential beneficiary) as an “unworthy” “spendthrift.” This depiction of one of the defendants as a greedy consumer contrasted with the plaintiff’s portrayal of Zeigler’s genuine work ethic. The court decided to award Zeigler part of the money. On another occasion during his mid-twenties, Dr. Zeigler again revealed his producerist values. When Zeigler advertised for a wife in a local paper, he asserted that a potential wife would have to respect his “thorough execution of [his] work with meritorious completeness” and live in sync with his productive pace.¹⁹ In these words, Zeigler broadcasted his own strong work ethic and also required it from a potential wife. He believed that his own self-worth and advancement resided in his commitment to hard work. Like Zeigler, white collar Americans and members of the “old middle class” in the late nineteenth century sought to both exemplify industriousness through their own work and by demanding maximum

¹⁹ Zeigler’s words mirror what Daniel Rogers calls nineteenth century middle class Americans’ preoccupation with “industriousness.” Daniel T. Rodgers, *The Work Ethic in Industrial America 1850-1920* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978).

productivity from others. At the turn of the century, Zeigler, like many middle class Americans, appeared to see himself more as a producer than a consumer.²⁰

However, by the 1910s and 20s, popular liberal writers began to consider how to construct the political economy to meet the consumer's needs.²¹ Writers and middle class citizens themselves increasingly understood the consumer to have legitimate and defensible interests. According to this view, prices as much as wages determined the fairness of the political economy, and individuals such as Zeigler and Patterson could legitimately define themselves as consumers, as much as producers. When strikes or wage increases threatened to cause higher prices, commentators increasingly stressed how consumers needed protection. What laborers defined as fair compensation could imperil the pocketbooks of consumers. Writers continued to champion thrift and production, but often did so in the name of the consuming public. The tension between producerist and consumerist worldviews permeated academic journals, magazine and newspaper articles, and letters to the editor. Postwar middle class consumer activism reflected this tension, as middle class Americans fought for their rights as consumers while wearing the garb of labor and calling for greater production that would, in theory,

²⁰ Chicago Tribune 6/1/1896, 4/22/1905, 4/28/1905; See also, *Lord Clarence H.E. Zeigler vs. The Illinois Trust and Savings Bank, Exr., Appellee*, Supreme Court of Illinois, 245 Ill. 180; 91 N.E.; 1910 Ill. Lexis 1989, Lexis Nexis Legal. Eau Claire Weekly Telegram 9/9/1904; Daniel T. Rodgers, *The Work Ethic in Industrial America 1850-1920* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 16-17.

²¹ Meg Jacobs notes that participation in a mass consumer economy was the defining point of twentieth century political ideology, a change from nineteenth century political ideology that emphasized the independence and virtue of small producers. Indeed, Jacobs argues for an important continuity in twentieth century American politics, that the "purchasing power" question always remained at or close to the "center of American politics." This dissertation suggests that middle class Americans held onto producerism as an important part of their identity into at least the post-World War I period. Middle class consumers held onto producer symbols and values even as they protected their rights as consumers. Meg Jacobs, *Pocketbook Politics: Economic Citizenship in Twentieth-Century America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 2-3.

stabilize prices. They, as consumers, would define whether the working class held true to the producer values of industriousness and thrift.

Middle class consumers used older producerist values to set themselves brazenly apart from the working class during a period of massive labor unrest. In the immediate postwar period, Americans witnessed a substantial upsurge in the number of strikes. In 1919, 4,160,000 workers, or 22.5 percent of all workers went on strike, more than triple the percentage of the previous year. Throughout the United States, industries were encumbered by local and nationwide strikes initiated by unions of steel, textile, railroad and other types of workers. The work stoppages led Assistant U.S. Attorney General Francis P. Garvan to reflect, “The year 1919 will be remembered as a year of strikes.” In letters to the editor, fraternal lodge bulletins, diaries and personal correspondence, white collar workers pointed to the laziness, underproduction and greed of the supposed producing-class as a reason for high prices. As an article in the magazine *Outlook* noted, “This country is getting tired of and disgusted with the arrogance, lawlessness, and studied laziness of Organized Labor.” One doctor’s journal declared, the “vast and substantial middle class” has “paid for every strike, it is this class which pays out of its pockets the increase in wages which the laborer wins.” Similarly, a white collar worker in Virginia wondered, “Must we take still more from our meagerness to add to his increase?” Corbin summed up these feelings, writing, “Labor is organized, class-conscious; it takes its own abundantly” from “the great range of folk between.” The solution, according to many middle class Americans, was to organize around the symbols

of production, demonstrate their own producer values and strike as consumers until the working class lived up to a middle class paragon of hard work.²²

In contrast to recent scholarship, this dissertation demonstrates how middle class Americans established themselves as distinct from the working class. In recent years, historians have underscored the fluidity between the middle and working classes. Robert Johnston emphasizes the general ties between the Portland middle and working classes throughout the Progressive Era and into the 1920s, united through anti-vaccination and single tax movements and even through the actions of the Portland Ku Klux Klan. Meg Jacobs, while noting a latent tension between organized labor and the middle class, argues that in the early twentieth century, striking workers had the support of the middle class when they referenced high prices. According to Jacobs, “a mutual antipathy toward the overweening power of trusts provided the basis for alliance.” By contrast, this dissertation suggests that because many white collar Americans believed that high wages and labor unrest contributed to high prices, they identified labor unions as a distinct enemy, equal to that of corporate trusts. My dissertation emphasizes the borrowing of popular cultural symbols between classes, but also the ideology of antipathy for other classes that accompanied these practices. In sum, my dissertation chronicles the ideological and cultural separation of the middle class from labor and capital, while still analyzing the lines of power and culture that flowed between these groups.²³

²²John Corbin, *The Return of The Middle Class* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1922), 8; “Old Clothes and Lunch Baskets” *American Medicine* 26:4 (April 1920): 188; *New York Times* 8/15/1919; *Independent* 1/24/1920, p. 132, *Outlook* 10/1/1919, p. 208; David Montgomery, *Workers’ Control in America* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 97.

²³ Johnston responds to a long trajectory of scholarship on the middle class including C. Wright Mills’s *White Collar*, Barbara Ehrenreich’s *Fear of Falling: The Inner Life of the Middle Class*, Paul Johnston’s *A Shopkeeper’s Millennium*, Mary Ryan’s *Cradle of the Middle Class*, Karen Halttunen’s *Confidence Men*

The post-World War I middle class borrowed and refigured cultural symbols, at times as much from the working class culture below as from above. A number of recent works of early twentieth century American cultural history have argued that working class Americans have brought their own meanings to mass culture, marketed and produced from above. Nan Enstad, for example, argues that New York garment workers simultaneously embraced the seemingly oppositional categories of “worker” and “lady” by wearing mass-produced cheap and flashy imitations of elite dress while striking for better working conditions. Similarly, Lizabeth Cohen argues that Chicago workers were able to draw on mass culture to come together for New Deal labor organizing, and adapt it to their existing ethnic identities. These and other works have aptly shown how the

and *Painted Women*, Stuart Blumin’s *The Emergence of the Middle Class*, among others, that has, in varying degrees, treated the middle class as “fixated on its own status, greatly fears outsiders, and lives a privatized existence with an increasingly tenuous relationship to the large community at large.” In claiming that the boundary between the working and middle classes in early twentieth century America is untenable, Johnston fails to weigh the importance of a large body of labor history that not only documents class formation by, more or less, exclusively blue-collar workers on the shop floor, but also the development of working class consciousness through class-segregated patterns of residence and accompanying neighborhood activism. Also, although many middle class Progressive Era organizations worked on behalf of the working class, their relationship with the laboring class was tenuous and, at times, patronizing (see, for example, discussion by Dana Frank in Dana Frank, “Where are the Workers in Consumer-Worker Alliances? Class Dynamics and the History of Consumer-Labor Campaigns,” *Politics & Society* 31:3 (2003): 363-380). Additionally, early twentieth century consumer organizing was often stratified by class. In the post-World War I period, individuals identifying as “middle class” consumers largely condemned organized labor for driving up prices. Robert Johnston, *The Radical Middle Class: Populist Democracy and the Question of Capitalism in Progressive Era Portland, Oregon* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), 9; Barbara Ehrenreich, *Fear of Falling: The Inner Life of the Middle Class* (New York: Perennial Library, 1990); Paul Johnston, *A Shopkeeper’s Millennium: Society and Revivals in Rochester, New York, 1915-1837* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1978); Mary Ryan, *Cradle of the Middle Class: The Family in Oneida County, New York, 1790-1865* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981); Karen Halttunen, *Confidence Men and Painted Women: A Study of Middle-Class Culture in America, 1820-1870* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982); Stuart Blumin, *The Emergence of the Middle Class: Social Experience in the American City, 1760-1900* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989); Dana Frank, “Where are the Workers in Consumer-Worker Alliances? Class Dynamics and the History of Consumer-Labor Campaigns” *Politics & Society* 31:3 (2003): 363-380; Meg Jacobs, *Pocketbook Politics: Economic Citizenship in Twentieth-Century America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 41, 54. Kathy Peiss provides important insights into how culture can transmit from the bottom-up. See, Kathy Peiss, *Cheap Amusements: Working Women and Leisure in Turn-Of-The-Century New York* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1986).

working class has appropriated culture from above for its own purposes and goals. In addition to bringing their own meanings to popular culture produced from above (advertisements, magazines, new products, etc.) the post-World War I middle class appropriated cultural symbols and strategies from the working class. Rather than wearing overalls to honor the working class, or using the rent strike and middle class unions to express inter-class solidarity, middle class Americans borrowed the symbols and strategies of organized labor to criticize them. They chose these symbols because their meanings- emphases on hard work, production and fairness- best articulated their vision of a just economy.²⁴

Middle class Americans made the values of thrift, self-control, and hard work a part of consumer culture, rather than strictly antagonistic to it. Throughout the nineteenth century, consumption represented a lack of virtue and self control, which stood apart the values of hard work and thrift. One commentator noted in 1878, for example, admonished against indulgence in consumption “with unconscious liberality and for improper purposes, until it becomes a fixed habit not easily subdued.” By the post-World War I period, middle class Americans devised ways to incorporate these nineteenth century producerist ideals into consumer culture. When the overall movement became a major part of consumer culture, it represented a call for hard work and thrift that promised to bring lower prices to middle class consumers. As white collar workers flocked to stores to buy overalls, judges wore overalls on the bench, couples got married in them, and

²⁴ Lizabeth Cohen, *Making a New Deal: Industrial Workers in Chicago, 1919-1939* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990); Nan Enstad, *Ladies of Labor: Girls of Adventure: Working Women, Popular Culture, and Labor Politics at the Turn of the Twentieth Century* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999).

overalls club members paraded in them, participants and commentators used nineteenth century producer values as a rally cry for the movement. The *Sun and New York Herald*, for instance, asserted, “To be in overalls in spirit means to get back to the fundamentals of economics, to the grass roots of Americanism, to the bed rock of honest and honorable, stout and clean manhood.” Middle class Americans borrowed culture from the working class, because a producer identity suited their own means, purposes and worldview.²⁵

Progressivism, the State and the Middle Class:

At first glance, Dr. L.C. Zeigler, the disgruntled tenant who barricaded his door, fired his revolver at new tenants, and threatened window poster robbers with automatic guns, had taken the most extra-legal and radical approach to solving his woes. However, Zeigler, along with many other middle class consumers in the immediate postwar period, ultimately looked to the government for support. When the Illinois State Government passed landlord-tenant reform, Zeigler, like many other middle class tenants, went to City Hall to claim his rights. Middle class Americans relied on voluntarism as an organizing strategy, along with an expectation of significant help from federal, state and local governments, to further their vision of economic fairness. This carried on a Progressive Era trend, in which the middle class both called on the state to regulate the economy and offered to provide much of the government’s needed organizational might. However, they also shifted the aims of this Progressive Era organizing tradition in important ways.

²⁵ Quote taken from Daniel Horowitz, *The Morality of Spending: Attitudes toward the Consumer Society in America, 1875-1940* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985), 18; Kingsport (TN) *Times* 4/27/1920.

Unlike middle class progressives, who organized on behalf of children, the working class or a broader public interest, this postwar middle class was disdainful of the working class and organized to advance their *own* interests.²⁶ Even though they claimed their values of industriousness and thrift to be universal, they expected relief for their pocketbooks and justice against labor unions and profiteers.

In the first decades of the twentieth century, middle class “progressives” brought society’s attention to a myriad of hardships that industrialization had levied on the working class. The expansion of industries ranging from coal to steel, substantial waves of immigration from southern and eastern Europe, and unparalleled rates of urbanization, caused sanitation problems in the cities, labor exploitation and unrest, municipal corruption and poverty. Coalitions of middle class reformers advocated justice for the working class, and particularly for indigent women and children. Reflecting on her experiences operating a settlement house and her efforts to persuade the Illinois State Government to enact an eight-hour-day for female factory workers, Jane Addams described the plight of workers that inspired middle class progressive activism. “One of the most painful impressions,” Addams wrote, “is that of pale, listless girls, who worked regularly in a factory of the vicinity which was then running full night time. These girls

²⁶ This is not to suggest that progressivism (in the pre-World War I sense) died out. Many middle class progressives continued to organize on behalf of the working class, even as an increasing contingent of middle class Americans- both among progressives and others who had not previously organized- became active to advance their own interests.

also encountered a special danger in the early morning hours as they returned home from work, debilitated and exhausted...”²⁷

Using the strategy of voluntarism, middle class progressives organized to promote social justice and “uplift” for workers and the poor. Many middle class reformers remained suspicious of centralized power, whether that of big business or the government, but nevertheless believed that forming organizations with officers and chains of command would be necessary to address the problems of industrializing and urbanizing America. Progressives reconciled this tension by relying on a model of voluntarism, in which individuals could freely join private associations and cooperate to achieve reform. As John Whiteclay Chambers notes, “Voluntarism offered a device that could mediate between social demands and the American traditions of individual autonomy, privatism, and cooperative groups.”²⁸

Nevertheless, concurrent with their reliance on voluntarism, progressives called for an expansion of state power. Progressives demanded a variety of state regulations, including workmen’s compensation laws, maximum work weeks, and better public park facilities. More importantly, their voluntary associations indirectly legitimized an activist state. Progressive Era middle class organizing provides an example of William J. Novak’s characterization of how the state has exerted its expansive power in subtle forms.²⁹ In conjunction with the support of federal, state and local governmental officials,

²⁷ Jane Addams, *Twenty Years at Hull House with Autobiographical Notes* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1910), 203.

²⁸ John Whiteclay Chambers, *The Tyranny of Change: America in the Progressive Era, 1890-1920* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2000), 151.

²⁹ Meg Jacobs similarly notes, “The functioning of large administrative states can be understood only by exploring the ways that they legitimize their authority, which can include delegating power to citizens.”

agencies, ordinances and laws, progressive organizations ran settlement houses, and attempted to clean up cities, control social behavior, enforce racial hierarchy, and regulate big business. Indeed, as Novak notes, “Rather than monopolize power, property, and policy in the hands of a central public sovereign, the American state less visibly distributed public goods and powers widely through the private sector- enforcing its public capabilities, expanding its jurisdiction, and enhancing its legitimacy in the process.” Significantly, federal, state and local governments also overtly regulated society through the law, public officials, and government institutions.³⁰

Within this broader movement, a number of middle class progressives also organized as consumers to lobby the state to regulate companies’ treatment of the working class. Of these organizations, the National Consumers League, founded by Florence Kelley in 1899, has received the most attention from historians. The League, according to one historian, aimed to “civilize capitalism” by mobilizing the shopping power of primarily white middle class women to convince governments and employers to end exploitative working conditions. In Kelley’s words, “Every effort of the National Consumers’ League throughout the twenty years of its history has related directly to labor (hours, wages and working conditions).” Other local organizations, such as the Providence Housewives League sought to promote the broader public interest by opposing the high cost of living and unsanitary foods. However, while some progressive organizations, such as the National Consumers’ League had used their power as

Meg Jacobs, *Pocketbook Politics: Economic Citizenship in Twentieth-Century America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 6.

³⁰ William Novak, “The Myth of the ‘Weak’ American State” *American Historical Review* 113:3 (2008): 769.

consumers to achieve reform, most relied on other methods, including mobilizing voters, appealing for support from the government for charitable causes, or exposing poverty and political corruption in their writings or through direct protest.³¹

During World War I, the Federal Government encouraged virtually all Progressive Era organizations to give their voluntarism a consumerist orientation. Under the direction of the wartime U.S. Food Administration (USFA), individuals working together as official USFA volunteers and existing groups, ranging from the Los Angeles Ebell Club to the Royal Arch Masons of Connecticut, re-oriented their activities toward food conservation and policed prices in their communities. Many of the participating groups had hitherto paid little or no attention to consumption. Based on these activities and the progressive legacy of working for reform through the state, middle class Americans emerged from the war believing that they could control prices by organizing as consumers in conjunction with the government.

This dissertation suggests that in the postwar period, middle class Americans were deeply committed to state-centered voluntarism as a strategy to achieve a political economy that reflected the needs and values of the middle class. As part of new or existing voluntary organizations, middle class consumers informed government authorities of cases of profiteering in their communities and watched eagerly as the courts ruled on federal prosecutions of suspected profiteers. They wrote passionate letters to city

³¹ Florence Kelley to Smith (date not recorded), Reel 50, National Consumers' League Records, Vassar College. For discussion of middle class progressive consumer organizing on behalf of the working class, see Dana Frank, "Where are the Workers in Consumer-Worker Alliances? Class Dynamics and the History of Consumer-Labor Campaigns" *Politics & Society* 31:3 (2003): 363-379; Sybil Lipschultz, "Hours and Wages: The Gendering of Labor Standards in America" *Journal of Women's History* 8:1 (Spring 1996): 114-136; Landon Storrs, *Civilizing Capitalism: The National Consumers' League, Women's Activism, and Labor Standards in the New Deal Era* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2000); John Gilkeson, *Middle Class Providence, 1820-1940* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), 300-347.

officials, governors and senators with ideas of how to use the apparatus of the state to create a more just economy. When the state offered solutions, they lined up to play important roles, forming organizations to police profiteering, or to teach women how to exercise thrift. When middle class consumers organized on the grassroots level, they always looked to the state for a helping hand. Middle class tenants' associations pressed the local governments to help them arbitrate disagreements. Overalls club members asked for legitimization from federal, state and local governments and for them to take measures to bring striking laborers and clothing profiteers to justice. Home gardeners requested that governments help coordinate home garden meetings, reduce city water rates, provide discounted or free seeds, permit the use of vacant lots, and assist in attaining gardening advice from experts.

These voluntary groups of middle class citizens not only provided the organizational might for state programs to reduce prices, they also advocated for the construction and expansion of state apparatuses to enact their ideas into laws and programs. In particular, middle class tenants' associations demanded that local, state and federal governments pass landlord-tenant reform. On the eve of a tenants' march in Springfield, IL for the passage of laws that would limit landlords' eviction powers and stimulate more building in Chicago, John R. Patterson declared, "we have won public opinion, and it is upon the opinions of the people that the men who make our laws must act." Municipal market proponents also pressed local and state officials to widen the reach of city and state market departments by setting up and funding city markets. Both programs involved the expansion of state power that would only partially rely on middle class voluntarism to maintain them. In this way, they were characteristic of efforts to

expand state institutions evident in progressives' earlier push for the establishment of the Children's Bureau. Importantly, middle class calls for expanded local, state, and federal laws and agencies also resembled the activism associated with the myriad of New Deal programs that would emerge in the 1930s.³²

Many postwar middle class Americans also reshaped Progressive Era organizing trends by organizing for their own exclusive benefit. Progressive organizations persisted into the 1920s and largely continued to pursue pro-labor goals, but some activists expressed ambivalence over how emboldened labor organizations impacted the prices middle class Americans encountered for the necessities of life. More significant, a sizeable and vocal portion of the middle class that had been less directly tied to the Progressive movement (if at all) demonized labor and organized for their own benefit. While claiming to champion universal values of fairness, honesty and hard work, they organized to advance their own interests.

Middle class consumers generally expressed neither radical nor conservative political identities in their state-centered political activism in the postwar period. They worked with sympathetic politicians from both major parties.³³ While middle class consumers disapproved of the unfairness of the existing economy, they did not advocate a

³² See Kriste Lindenmeyer, *"A Right to Childhood": The U.S. Children's Bureau and Child Welfare, 1912–1946* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1997); See also Lizabeth Cohen, *A Consumers' Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America* (New York: Vintage, 2003), 5-109; *Chicago Tribune* 3/16/1921.

³³ Among the federal politicians who enthusiastically supported middle class consumer activism were Republican senators William Kenyon and Pat Harrison and Senate and House Democrats Nathaniel Dial and William Upshaw, respectively. At the state level, politicians, such as Idaho Governor David William Davis, Illinois State Senator Harold Kessinger, both Republicans, and Louisiana Governor John M. Parker, a Progressive Democrat, were sympathetic to middle class organizing. Local politicians, such as Republican Mayor of Los Angeles Fredrick T. Woodman, and Democrats Noel Mitchell and Robert Mulcahy, Mayor of St. Petersburg, Florida and Chicago Alderman, respectively, supported middle class consumer activism, and sometimes even led local movements.

radical overhaul of the system. They blamed strikers and profiteers for the high cost of living rather than the structural economic forces that lay at the root of the capitalist economy. The experiences of middle class Americans in this dissertation contrast with Robert Johnston's narrative of the early twentieth century middle class.³⁴ According to Johnston, middle class Americans in his case study of Portland Oregon, allied with laborers and promulgated a "radical" "anti-capitalist" populism through anti-vaccinationism, single-tax agitation and through the *Portland Labor Press*. Conversely, the organizing middle class consumers represented in this dissertation were critical of an economy seen to be dominated by *both* striking laborers and elite profiteers. They sought protection from these groups, but from within the existing economic structure. They condemned the radicalism of organized labor and ultimately sought change through existing political institutions and actors. While they organized at the grassroots level to convince the state to limit excess profits, middle class consumers were wary of the changes brought by the expansion of the consumer economy and the perceived erosion of the existing class structure. They believed themselves to be protecting traditional, conservative values, such as thrift, honest hard work, and middle class notions of marriage and family life. Critical of capitalism, but ultimately in favor of the existing political system, the postwar middle class was neither entirely radical nor conservative.³⁵

³⁴ Using Portland, Oregon as a case study, Johnston mainly focuses on the petite bourgeoisie's radicalism, anticapitalism and relationship to the working class, but also includes white collar workers in this argument. Johnston also focuses on the pre-World War I period, but notes that middle class anti-capitalism did not die out in the 1920s, and draws examples of its persistence from the immediate postwar period.

³⁵ Robert D. Johnston, *The Radical Middle Class: Populist Democracy and the Question of Capitalism in Progressive Era Portland, Oregon* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003).

Methodology and Chapter Outline

This dissertation interweaves a local and national approach in chronicling the rise and fall of middle class consumer activism in the postwar period. Because consumer organizing often occurred at the grassroots level- in city parks, meeting halls, school auditoriums and backyards- I have chosen to organize much of this project around local case studies of middle class consumer organizing in cities, such as Los Angeles, Chicago, Jacksonville and St. Petersburg, Florida. By studying the history of social movements at the local level, we gain not only a better understanding of the local contexts that made them meaningful, but also a more detailed sense of their potential.

Local middle class consumer activism both drew on and fueled a national discursive space of middle class consumer activism. In magazines and newspapers, throughout the halls of Congress, and even in music, plays and films, writers, commentators and politicians popularized middle class consumers as victims of the postwar economy. These sources actively and tacitly encouraged middle class Americans to form overalls clubs, join tenant associations, plant home gardens and condemn labor unions and profiteers. Concurrently, overalls club members, municipal market patrons, home gardeners, rent strikers, and sympathetic politicians in localities ranging from Birmingham, Alabama to Detroit, Michigan spoke of the plight of the middle class and denounced profiteers and laborers. In doing so, they contributed to the national discursive space of middle class consumer activism. Local and national spaces of middle class consumer activism were mutually reinforcing. By analyzing the politics and culture of middle class consumer activism at the grassroots and national levels, this dissertation

draws on the methodological focus of scholars such as Meg Jacobs, who combine approaches taken by social, cultural and political historians.³⁶

Participants in each movement understood themselves as part of a broader movement to make the economy meet the needs of middle class consumers. Each movement made reference to a general rise in middle class organization, and casted its efforts as part of this trend. Middle class Americans also engaged in multiple consumer campaigns simultaneously. John R. Patterson, for example, was the president of the Chicago Tenants' Protective Association, but he also wore overalls and referenced the plight of middle class consumers to afford the general high cost of living. In each campaign, participants centered their activism on individual commodities. I have chosen to discuss each of these movements separately, because unique stories told why individuals ranging from Baptist ministers to college professors found overalls a useful symbol of protest for rising clothing prices, why middle class Chicagoans chose both typical and specific culprits for rent increases, or why the strategy of state-sponsored home gardening resonated especially with the Los Angeles middle class. Yet, whether attending a tenants' meeting, digging up a backyard or wearing overalls, they understood themselves as part of the same story- and were part of the same story. Each movement represented a bold endeavor by middle class activists to define a consumerist politics as an impartial and righteous defense of the public against selfish groups.

This story begins with an exploration into the underpinnings of postwar middle class consumer activism during the Progressive Era and particularly World War I.

³⁶ See Meg Jacobs, *Pocketbook Politics: Economic Citizenship in Twentieth-Century America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 6.

Chapter 1 examines the roots of middle class consumer activism through an analysis of progressivism, working class food protests in the 1910s, and the experiences of middle class citizens working in the wartime U.S. Food Administration. In conjunction with socialists and the radical syndicalist union the Industrial Workers of the World, working class Americans protested high food prices in urban areas throughout the country, vandalizing wholesale food stores, overturning pushcarts and fighting with police. When the Wilson administration formulated wartime federal food policy, it encouraged middle class Americans to channel their distaste for high food prices into participation in U.S. Food Administration programs. Fearing an expansion of violent and radical working class anti-high food price protests into the ranks of the middle class, members of the U.S. Government encouraged Americans to undertake a contained, government-centered form of consumer organizing to reduce prices. Their experiences in the U.S. Food Administration provided a partial model for middle class consumer activism in the postwar period.

Using Los Angeles as a case study, chapter 2 examines middle class organization in response to rising food prices in the post-World War I period. It explores the “home garden” movement and the development of and participation in municipal markets. A spatially large city with year-round growing seasons, Los Angeles provided especially strong opportunities for its middle class residents to garden as a response to the high cost of food. Many neighborhoods offered large backyards or vacant lots which proved useful for home gardeners. Middle class residents believed that with the assistance of the city government, home gardening and patronage of municipal markets would allow them to circumvent profiteering middlemen that stood between “honest” farmers and consumers.

Whereas middle class consumers envisioned these profiteering middlemen as racially both white and non-white, they constructed the middle class victim as purely white. In Los Angeles, which featured the presence of recent immigrants from Japan, Mexico and Southern and Eastern Europe, popular culprits took on a variety of ethnicities, even if they were envisioned primarily as gluttonous white men dressed in suits or tuxedos. The disjuncture in portrayals between the consistent whiteness of middle class victims and the occasional multiracialism of profiteers, and the fact that these white middle class consumer activists seldom if ever worked with non-white middle class Americans, underscores the importance of race in their self-identification. As one middle class American, who noted “we of the middle class are ourselves the chief victims” of the high cost of living, proclaimed, “While the native white stock is not exactly identical with the middle class, the terms are so nearly synonymous...” Even though Americans of all ethnicities suffered from the high cost of living, white middle class Americans saw only themselves as victims.³⁷

Chapter 3 explores growing middle class discontent over rising clothing prices in the postwar period and how the Federal Government’s response contributed to middle class grassroots organizing. A myriad of federal politicians seized and enlarged budding middle class disgruntlement over rising clothing prices to gain political favor among prospective voters. When citizens demanded action, the Wilson administration created the Department of Justice High Cost of Living Division (DOJ-HCL). The DOJ-HCL sought to lower the prices of both food and clothing, but appeared to pay special attention

³⁷ Ross L. Finney, *Causes and Cures for the Social Unrest: An Appeal to the Middle Class* (New York: McMillan, 1922), 81-84.

to skyrocketing clothing prices. Wilson and DOJ leaders developed a two-pronged approach for the DOJ-HCL to lower the cost of wearing apparel. First, they aimed to convince Congress to give the DOJ the legal ability to prosecute profiteers. Second, in the mold of the U.S. Food Administration, the DOJ-HCL “Women’s Division” worked through women’s organizations to teach consumers how to exercise thrift and spend selectively. Both of these daunting tasks failed in part because of collective action problems within the diffuse reach of the Federal Government.

Chapter 4 examines the overalls movement (hereinafter called overall movement),³⁸ a grassroots response to high clothing prices and the inability of previous government actions to provide relief. Middle class citizens refused to wear anything but overalls, marched in the streets and formed overalls clubs until prices returned to normal levels. While they hoped that this boycott would directly influence prices, participants also aimed to convince local, state and federal politicians to take more decisive action than they had in the DOJ-HCL. The movement began in Jacksonville, Florida, spread throughout Florida and then became a national movement. My analysis jumps from city to city as the movement grew. What began as a general protest against rising clothing prices very quickly (within two weeks) became a middle class movement. While collar Americans borrowed this symbol of hard work from the working class as they condemned striking textile workers and profiteers. Once the movement reached the national scene, overalls permeated national popular culture. Songs and poems were written about the overall brigade; movies appealed to its themes; newspapers, magazines

³⁸ Participants and contemporaries generally called the movement “the overall movement,” but also used other characterizations, such as “overalls movement,” “blue denim brigade,” “overall brigade,” etc.

and academic studies provided daily, weekly or monthly coverage of the movement; and even school children formed overalls clubs. Realizing their chance to gain popular appeal, politicians ranging from St. Petersburg Mayor Noel Mitchell to Georgia Rep. William Upshaw became leaders of the movement. Brought on by high clothing prices, the overall movement represented an expression of the early twentieth century middle class's continued attachment to the producerist worldview of the nineteenth century middle class, and how it became a part of their consumer identity. Ironically, some clothing dealers raised the price of overalls because of increased demand for the garb from white collar workers. As a result, the movement splintered between wearers of overalls and donors of "old clothes." Organized laborers generally had never been enthused about the overall movement. They condemned participants for wearing the costume of hard work without actually doing any manual labor, and for driving up the price of overalls.

In fact, a popular notion of working class culpability for the high cost of living represents one of many reasons why the labor movement entered a period of temporary decline in the 1920s. Business leaders, such as William Wood, the president of the American Woolen Company, or the Chicago business men in the Citizens Committee to Enforce the Landis Award, capitalized on growing middle class anti-labor sentiment. Many business leaders sought to shift public attention away from their profits by encouraging middle class consumers to concentrate on the greed and laziness of labor unions. Doing so provided the potential dual benefit of avoiding public blame and developing a justification to stifle the labor movement. Wood, for example, used the high cost of living as an opportunity to slash wages and cripple local labor organizing,

exclaiming, “The public...will not pay the prices which the present wages involve.”

Wood and other business leaders followed through on their plans and used the idea that high labor costs led to high prices as a justification for mass firings, wage cuts, enforcing open shop, and hiring scabs. Facing an unsympathetic middle class, disgruntled over high prices and weary of any sign of labor radicalism in the wake of the Bolshevik Revolution, as well as the baggage of the failed strikes of 1919-20, organized labor entered what historians have termed “the lean years.”³⁹

Using Chicago as a case study, Chapter 5 chronicles the formation of exclusively middle class tenants unions in the postwar period. Chicago provides an ideal location for a case study, because of its large tenant population (seventy-three percent). I explore the Chicago Tenants’ Protective Association’s strategy of declaring “rent strikes” as a means of pressuring the local and state governments to enact rent-reform. Tenants fought for their rights as renters to live in single family homes in middle class neighborhoods at affordable rents. The existing spatial organization of the city by class encouraged this class-based response. In collectively refusing to move out of their apartments, middle class tenants sought to weaken the powers of landlords. They also hoped to convince state officials to end strikes and graft in the building industry among labor leaders, contractors and financiers. Middle class tenants activists, like home gardeners, municipal market proponents and overall club members, created a middle class consumerist space and depicted themselves as defenders of “the public,” “the people” and the nation. This story culminates with a discussion of attempts to form “middle class unions,” which were

³⁹ *Washington Post* 1/11/1921. For an overview of many historians’ periodization of the 1920s as the lean years for organized labor, see Melvyn Dubofsky and Foster R. Dulles, *Labor in America: A History* (Wheeling: Harlan Davidson, 2004).

outgrowths of these existing and concurrent spaces of middle class consumer activism. By threatening consumer boycotts, members of middle class unions sought to “protect” white collar workers from perceived exploitation by organized labor and capital. According to one member, the middle class union aimed “To organize the great unorganized middle class so as to protect it from many small but well organized divisions that will take advantage.”⁴⁰

These words all but summarized the political, cultural and social identities of many middle class Americans in their greatest moment of class consciousness then to date. In the following pages, I argue that in the postwar period, middle class Americans developed and organized around a shared identity that simultaneously reflected their acceptance of their roles as consumers and their ambivalence toward consumer society. Middle class Americans sought to impose a set of producerist values on a consumer economy that seemingly favored the working and elite classes, during a significant period of transition in middle class identity from a nineteenth century producerism to a growing consumerist subjectivity. These Americans drew on the Progressive Era organizing strategy of state-centered voluntarism, and called for an even more direct state intervention into the market. They also separated themselves from the working class, and shifted progressive goals to reflect their own self-interested values. These values, they asserted, were those of “consumers”- those of the “people.”

⁴⁰ United States Census, *Historical Statistics of the United States: Colonial Times to 1970*, Part I, Series E (Washington D.C.: GPO, 1975) 40-51 and 135-166; *Chicago Tribune* 4/6/1921.

Chapter 1: Politicizing Consumption in the Community: Middle Class Consumer Organizing during the Progressive Era and World War I

On September 20, 1918, Helen R. Kenealy, the wife of an accountant, and volunteer for the Los Angeles branch of the U.S. Food Administration, reported a “flagrant evasion of the rules of the Food Administration.” According to Kenealy, a woman by the name of Mrs. F.E. Gavin entered her office and requested a permit for 50-60 pounds of sugar “for the purpose of making grape juice for use as communion” in the services of the “Little Church of Christ.” Kenealy refused to issue the permit, citing insufficient reason, given the necessity of wartime rations on sugar. When, four days later, Dr. W. B. Thompson, head of the church, requested a permit for 25 pounds of sugar for “canning purposes,” Kenealy’s “suspicions were aroused.” She asked Thompson how he intended to use the sugar and he responded that he had a family of four to feed. Suspecting that Thompson had no family at all, Kenealy notified the head Food Administrator for Los Angeles, Louis Cole. Inundated with other cases and administrative work, Cole sent the case to the L.A. American Protective League (APL) for investigation. After further inquiry, Los Angeles APL agents determined that Thompson had, indeed, lied about having a family and intended to use the sugar for his church. Found to be a hoarder, Thompson was reprimanded under the Lever Food Control Act.⁴¹

⁴¹ Los Angeles U.S. Food Administration LMC/M to The American Protective League, Los Angeles 10/26/1918, California Food Administration Records, National Archives- San Bruno, CA; Helen R. Kenealy to Louis M. Cole 10/20/1918, California Food Administration Records, National Archives- San Bruno, CA; American Protective League Report in re: Dr. W.S. Thompson, 1319 Fifth Avenue 9/28/1918, California Food Administration Records, National Archives- San Bruno, CA; United States Census, 1920, Los Angeles Assembly District 62, Los Angeles, California; Roll: T625_105; Page: 4B; Enumeration District: 143.

The practices of the APL provided an important model for post-World War I middle class consumer activism. The American Protective League was a federally-sponsored group of private citizens, who in virtually every region of the country, spied on fellow citizens suspected of draft dodging, sedition, promoting labor unrest, profiteering, or food hoarding. Flashing “Secret Service” badges, APL members had no clear legal authority to act as agents of the law. They were merely private citizens- members of the salaried or professional class who, with the sanction of the U.S. government, conducted searches in the homes of suspected food hoarders, interviewed witnesses and even detained suspects. APL agents acted not only on their own, but also on the request of local food administrators, who were also volunteers for the Federal Government. These agents and administrators, like many other Americans, established wartime consumer organizing on the concept of voluntary cooperation.⁴²

As a voluntary organization with official power, the newly-formed United States Food Administration (USFA) helped to create and legitimize middle class consumer organizing during the war. With food prices rapidly advancing (by forty-six percent between 1913 and 1917) and a looming need to provide foodstuffs for American and allied troops abroad, the Wilson administration created the USFA during the summer and fall of 1917 as a means to use volunteers to facilitate the supply, distribution, and conservation of food during the war, and to prevent hoarding and profiteering. Many USFA leaders came from the ranks of progressives. They helped to shape government policy, gearing the USFA toward the progressive organizing tradition of voluntarism. As

⁴² American Protective League Report in re: Dr. W.S. Thompson, 1319 Fifth Avenue 9/28/1918, California Food Administration Records, National Archives- San Bruno, CA.

official agents of the Federal Government, USFA leaders tied middle class voluntarism more deeply to the state. The U.S. Government used the USFA to enlist the cooperation of thousands of middle class Americans. The USFA requested the observance of many guidelines, ranging from “Wheatless Wednesdays” to “Meatless Tuesdays.” and mandated the conservation of sugar and flour. Official USFA volunteers like Helen Kenealy or those working under their auspices, such as members of the American Protective League, coordinated with each other and other middle class consumers, to police USFA measures in the own communities. They came together in new and existing organizations, understanding themselves as diligent, honest and thrifty consumers, and defining themselves against hoarders, labor agitators and profiteers. They did so under the direction and authority of the Federal Government.⁴³

Through USFA activities, Americans holding white collar jobs and their families developed the makings of a middle class *political* identity as consumers. Throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, white collar families consumed in similar ways. They lived in single family homes in many of the same neighborhoods, bought the same styles of furniture, shopped at the same stores, ate similar foods, wore comparable clothing styles and read many of the same magazines, such as *Ladies Home Journal*. Through their participation in the USFA, white collar Americans politicized their already shared consumption practices. What they bought and how much they paid increasingly

⁴³ The Federal Government worked primarily through existing class-segregated organizations to control food prices and supplies. In their literature and correspondence, the U.S. Food Administration garnered support from organizations ranging from white, middle class women’s clubs to African American churches, working with them separately and appealing to them in different ways. While these organizations followed USFA guidelines, they also took the initiative to implement and disseminate them, and come up with their own strategies. “No. 336 Relative Retail Prices of Specified Articles of Food” in Department of Commerce, Bureau of Foreign and Domestic Commerce, *Statistical Abstract of the United States 1918* (Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1919), 584-585.

became political issues. As a result of their experiences in the USFA, they developed a greater political consciousness as “middle class consumers” in the postwar period, when continually increasing prices threatened their consumer-driven class identity.

Participation in the USFA provided an opportunity for middle class Americans to assert themselves in an economy perceived to be dominated by profiteers and labor agitators. In the minds of many Americans, radical labor organizations and profiteers were to blame for high prices. As one commentator declared, the war industries have “made the rich richer...has provided much higher wages for the laborers and that the only sufferers from the advanced cost of living are ‘the middle salaried class.’” In their appeals for middle class participation in the USFA national politicians, the press, and USFA leaders drew on such sentiment, which served to reify organized labor and elite hoarders and profiteers as culprits for the high cost of living (HCL).⁴⁴

The U.S. Government also reinforced the idea that profiteers, hoarders and organized labor engendered high prices by prosecuting these groups. Through the enactment Lever Food Control Act in the summer of 1917, the U.S. Government not only created the USFA, it also provided the legal underpinnings for federal prosecution of anyone manipulating food prices. Individuals or groups who held onto excessive food supplies for speculative purposes or for individual use, delayed the transportation of foodstuffs, or inflated prices by charging too much, were in violation of the Lever Act. The federal crackdown on violators during the war built expectations among the middle class that Department of Justice should and could be equally vigilant in the postwar period.

⁴⁴ Fort Wayne News 10/18/1916.

By creating programs for wartime government-led consumer organizing, the Wilson administration encouraged a contained, government-centered form middle class consumer organizing after the war. Through federal prosecution of hoarders and profiteers, conservation and home garden campaigns (to be discussed in chapter 2), as well as through the activities of the APL, the Federal Government suggested that relief from high prices would come through government-centered solutions. Politicians and USFA documents presented USFA programs in opposition to the ineffectual results from the extra-legal, radical working class food riots occurring throughout the United States. While not entirely shaping the postwar organizing strategies of middle class consumers, their experiences in the USFA provided an important model.⁴⁵

Consumer Organizing on the Eve of World War I

Leading up to American entry into World War I, many organized consumers among both the middle and working classes shifted gears from lobbying the government on behalf of workers and their families for protective labor legislation, to looking after their own pocketbooks. In the prewar era, both middle and working class groups used the growing strategy of consumer organizing to entice the state to become more involved in the political economy. As prices escalated, middle class Americans increasingly turned their focus to themselves. Meanwhile, many working class Americans responded to rising prices by participating in food riots and eschewing progressive reform as a goal of consumer protest altogether. Working class protesters advocated socialism and

⁴⁵ Meg Jacobs notes that the Wilson administration's condemnation of "manufactures, middlemen and merchants....encouraged grassroots activism," among labor. Meg Jacobs, *Pocketbook Politics: Economic Citizenship in Twentieth-Century America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 65-66.

syndicalism. This context of radical working class food riots and increasing displeasure among middle class Americans over their own inability to afford high prices, would shape the goals, strategies and appeals of the U.S. Food Administration.

During the Progressive Era, Americans came to see the state as a legitimate entity for managing the political economy. Between 1870 and 1900, the American population underwent substantial demographic shifts. Expansion of industries such as bituminous coal, petroleum, steel and manufacturing, on the scale of anywhere from five times to 140 times their previous size, helped to stimulate a simultaneous growth in the urban population from 9.9 million to 30.1 million. Accompanying these changes was a myriad of growing problems, including poverty, urban sanitary problems, and labor unrest. Progressive Era organizations, many led by the country's growing middle class, worked on behalf of the working class to lobby federal, state and local governments to combat injustices levied by industrial America. Not coincidentally, progressives pressed for these reforms as the state took a more active role in the changing political economy. As Michael McGerr notes, "By the end of the 1890s, the middle class had not only rejected its longstanding individualism; it had adopted a new 'creed,' the will to use association and the state to end...problems of industrial capitalism."⁴⁶

⁴⁶ Michael McGerr, *A Fierce Discontent: The Rise and Fall of the Progressive Movement in America, 1870-1920* (New York: Free Press, 2003), 68; Richard Hofstadter, *The Progressive Movement, 1900-1915*. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1963).

Middle class Americans used consumption to pressure the state to help usher in a more just economy for the working class.⁴⁷ Members of the white, middle class National Consumers' League, according to one historian, "saw themselves as a pressure group, encouraging female middle-class shoppers to boycott goods produced under exploitative conditions." As one of many smaller organizations that paid attention to consumption, the Providence Housewives League rallied against conditions that produced unsanitary foods and the high cost of living. These and other organizations, if not overtly working to improve labor standards, generally sought to join hands with the working class to improve society.⁴⁸

Nevertheless, alliances between middle and working class consumers were far from smooth. In many cases, reformers attempting to act in the interests of the working class neglected to work through the structures of organization developed by the workers themselves. At other times, reformers appealed to middle class consumers on the patronizing basis of preventing "germs" from entering their households through their domestic help or through the garments produced by working class labor. In the midst of price increases for all commodities by twenty-one percent from 1900-1912, working and middle class consumers became further divided by the fact that a number of middle class

⁴⁷ According to Dana Frank, "at their most basic, the common goal of all these campaigns has been to marshal consumer power within the United States on behalf of working people." Similarly, while also emphasizing the maternalistic urge to "civilize capitalism," Landon Storrs asserts that the National Consumers' League "understood their program as new aspect of a broader social justice movement to redistribute economic and political power to workers..." See, for example, Dana Frank, "Where are the Workers in Consumer-Worker Alliances? Class Dynamics and the History of Consumer-Labor Campaigns" *Politics & Society* 31:3 (2003): 363-379; Sybil Lipschultz, "Hours and Wages: The Gendering of Labor Standards in America" *Journal of Women's History* 8:1 (Spring 1996): 114-136; Landon Storrs, *Civilizing Capitalism: The National Consumers' League, Women's Activism, and Labor Standards in the New Deal Era* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 14.

⁴⁸ John Gilkeson, *Middle Class Providence, 1820-1940* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), 300-347.

Americans grew increasingly concerned over their own pocketbooks. As journalist Arthur B. Reeve noted of rising living costs compared to wage rates, “The increase in income has been first of all in the incomes of organized bodies of capital and labor... But the smallest increase of all has been among the workers of the middle class, unorganized.” “Prosperity matters little to the great middle-class consumer,” Reeve concluded, “when he gets the idea that he is paying the cost of it and not receiving his proportionate share.”⁴⁹

⁴⁹ While historians have recognized the importance of the high cost of living as a political and social issue to Progressive Era Americans, many have failed to treat it as a source of class division. Meg Jacobs describes how white collar workers began to pay more attention to the high cost of living and “felt particularly victimized by price increases,” but places a greater emphasis on how rising prices gave workers and the middle class common ground during this period. Similarly, Eric Rauchway views discussion of the high cost of living throughout the Progressive Era as a representation of the American public’s (all classes) acceptance of the new consumer economy. According to Rauchway, the HCL “belonged to everybody and was all right... unlike reformist definitions of progress, this popular definition (of progress) rested on public confidence in, rather than public concern about, economic operations.” Yet, leading up to and during World War I, the high cost of living signaled a growing discomfort with regular economic relations for many Americans and, while an important issue for all classes, was a source of class antagonism. It helped to inspire arguments in favor of massive government intervention into the economy in the form of price controls, and engendered resentment by many Americans over the perceived role that striking workers played in causing high prices. Lastly, the HCL was a primary causal factor for a number of urban working class protests that alarmed politicians and the press into thinking that the country might be on the brink of widespread “unrest.” The HCL signaled a discomfort with the new consumer economy. Speeches, academic studies, newspaper and magazine articles and other mediums included condemnations of “luxury” and “extravagance.” Attaching the HCL and profiteering to patriotism served to only add vigor to the issue. Rauchway astutely argues that the HCL was widely accessible as a concept, and could be used for a wide variety of purposes, even for advertising. However, Rauchway also notes that the HCL was discussed in consumerist terms, thereby making it less useful to producer-oriented socialists. It was certainly frequently discussed in this way, but the experiences of working class food price protests challenge this argument and it is also worth noting that socialists also employed the term frequently in the *New York Call*. See, for example, “Congress Will Wage Fight on Food Prices,” *New York Call* 12/1/1916, “Full Government Control of Food Urged in Bill by Meyer London,” *New York Call* 12/22/1916, “Vigorous Program of Action for Socialists,” *New York Call* 1/30/1917, and “H.C. of L. Exhibit Shows Up Mayor,” *New York Call* 2/8/1917. Eric Rauchway, “The High Cost of Living in the Progressives’ Economy” *Journal of American History* 88:3 (December 2001): 898-924; Meg Jacobs, *Pocketbook Politics: Economic Citizenship in Twentieth Century America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 1-81; Dana Frank, “Where are the Workers in Consumer-Worker Alliances? Class Dynamics and the History of Consumer-Labor Campaigns” *Politics & Society* 31:3 (2003): 369; Sybil Lipschultz, “Hours and Wages: The Gendering of Labor Standards in America” *Journal of Women’s History* 8:1 (Spring 1996): 117; Landon Storrs, *Civilizing Capitalism: The National Consumers’ League, Women’s Activism, and Labor Standards in the New Deal Era* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 14; John Gilkeson, *Middle Class Providence, 1820-1940* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), 300-347; Arthur B. Reeve, “The Standard of Decent Living” *The Independent* 8/29/1907; The statistic on prices

Working and middle class citizens grew more uneasy over rising prices with the outbreak of war in Europe. From January, 1913 to October, 1916, wholesale prices of all commodities rose by 34 percent, while retail food prices escalated by 23 percent. Most commentators viewed the disruption of the world economy by the outbreak of World War I as a primary factor. Price increases led economists such as Leon Congdon of the University of Kansas to declare the subject “of great importance to the people of this country.” But one did not necessarily need to read a tract from the American Statistical Association or the Kansas Academy of Science to understand the significance of rising prices. A glance on to the streets of a few American cities would have spoken to the implications and urgency of the situation. In Providence, RI, during August and September of 1914, working class residents of the Italian district “Federal Hill” responded to a “sudden rise in food prices” by attacking a local wholesaler. The incident expanded into a large-scale neighborhood protest led by socialists and the radical Industrial Workers of the World. Known as the “Pasta Riots,” the radical uprising included the participation of approximately 2,500 working class residents. The riots in Providence represented an ominous sign, as in the coming months, food protests erupted throughout the world, in localities spanning from Mexico City to Rome. In response to

of all commodities reflects wholesale prices. Retail prices of food increased by fifty-three percent from 1900 to August of 1912. “No. 270- Relative Wholesale Prices of Commodities,” in Department of Commerce, Bureau of Foreign and Domestic Commerce, *Statistical Abstract of the United States 1913* (Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1914), 501; “No. 290 Relative Retail Prices of Food, Sample and Weighted Averages” in Department of Commerce, Bureau of Foreign and Domestic Commerce, *Statistical Abstract of the United States 1912* (Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1913), 584. Based on price increases, Woodrow Wilson made the high cost of living (HCL) a central issue of his 1912 presidential campaign. For commentary from his contemporaries on Wilson’s use of the HCL as a major platform of his 1912 presidential campaign see chapter 3.

the riots, the press expressed alarm over the prospect that escalating food prices would lead the country into more radical forms of unrest.⁵⁰

In 1917, as many anticipated the United States' entry into the war, the trend continued. Retail food prices rose by 20 percent in just seven months between October, 1916, and April, 1917, and more working class protests ensued. Reports from Philadelphia chronicled "a crowd of women" who "rushed a fish store and upset a tank of live carp." Thousands participated, and an elderly woman was trampled. The Chicago *Tribune* sarcastically declared, "If things are a bit slow in Chicago, why not import Sweet Marie and Mother Jones to start food riots of our own." Just months later, the paper's wish materialized, when hundreds of residents attacked "food grafters" and profiteers on the west side, pouring kerosene on displays and throwing bricks at police officers. The most notorious riots occurred in New York. As historian William Frieberger notes, many of the nearly 10,000 participants, who stormed the streets and overturned pushcarts, advocated socialism and blamed capitalism for their woes during a time in which at least some believed that American business was making excess profits off the war. These protests throughout the United States and the rest of the world shaped the discussion around the passage of the landmark food control legislation that would follow.⁵¹

⁵⁰ Leon A. Congdon, "The High Cost of Food" *Transactions of the Kansas Academy of Science* 28 (Jan. 14, 1916 - Jan. 13, 1917): 313-318. Joe Sullivan, *Marxists, Militants, & Macaroni: The IWW in Providence's Little Italy* (Rhode Island Labor History Society, 2001), 9; Boston *Globe* 7/15/1915, New York *Times* 2/3/1915; "No. 334- Index Numbers of Wholesale Prices..." in Department of Commerce, Bureau of Foreign and Domestic Commerce, *Statistical Abstract of the United States 1918* (Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1919), 578-9; "No. 341- Relative Retail Prices of Specified Articles of Food: By Months, January, 1913, To December, 1920," U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, *Historical Statistics of the United States: Colonial Times to 1970 Part I* (Washington D.C.: GPO, 1975), 578; Editorial in *Providence Journal* 9/9/14; *Providence Journal* 8/30/1914, 8/31/1914 and 9/12/1914.

⁵¹ Dana Frank also emphasizes the radical orientation of many of the protesters, but demonstrates that the Socialist Party "seized" the opportunity for agitation only after the formation of "an independent working-



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The February, 1917 New York Food Riots

Alarmed by the growing wave of unrest, Congress empowered the Federal Trade Commission to investigate “alleged manipulation of food prices” and advocated a more permanent approach that would stabilize food prices and discourage the continued growth

class housewives’ movement” began the protests. Neither Frieburger nor Frank has explored the role that the working class food riots played in shaping the discussion of the landmark Lever Food Control bill in Congress and the press. Frieburger notes that the issue of food prices “was simply absorbed into the far more catastrophic crisis of American entry into the war” and states that “Hoover attempted to prevent food prices from getting completely out of control by the use of centralized purchasing,” but fails to make a connection between working class consumer unrest (and the fear of its further growth) and legislation that sought to end profiteering and control the cost of living through a non-radical, government-led movement of conservation and (somewhat) voluntary price controls. Frank discusses the initiative of protesting New Yorkers in seeking relief from the city and state government. William Frieburger, “War, Prosperity and Hunger: The New York Food Riots of 1917” *Labor History* 25:2 (1984): 238; Dana Frank, “Housewives, Socialists, and the Politics of Food: The 1917 New York of Living Protests” *Feminist Studies* 11:2 (Summer, 1985): 255-85; “No. 341- Relative Retail Prices of Specified Articles of Food: By Months, January, 1913, To December, 1920,” U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, *Historical Statistics of the United States: Colonial Time to 1970 Part I*, (Washington D.C.: GPO, 1975), 578; Chicago *Tribune* 2/23/1917, 5/30/1917; New York *Times* 2/22/1917; “The Story of the United States Grain Corporation, April 5, 1920,” Folder: Politics....plan of operations, information booklets,” Box 7, United States Food Administration Records, Herbert Hoover Presidential Library, West Branch, IA

⁵² Photograph published in the *Independent* 3/5/1917, pg. 403.

of radical unrest: the Lever Food Control bill. Recalling the political urgency of the moment, one USFA booklet stated, “If there had been no prospect of lower food prices, no curb on speculation, ‘upheaval’ may well have ensued.”⁵³

Prosecuting Profiteers: The Development and Enforcement of the Lever Act

Throughout the spring and summer of 1917, members of local state and federal governments were forced to respond to calls from citizens to provide relief from the high cost of living. While Americans pressed for a variety of measures to address the HCL, the capitalist “profiteer” or “hoarder” emerged as a primary culprit for rising prices. The Wilson administration responded by proposing the Lever Food Control bill. The bill sought to coordinate food supplies for the Allies, but also to stabilize domestic prices, in part by prosecuting wealthy hoarders and profiteers. During debates on the Lever bill and throughout the actual prosecutions of accused profiteers, politicians and the press continually reified the well-off hoarder or profiteer as a central cause of the price increases facing middle class Americans. In doing so, they created a limited legislative and ideological model for middle class Americans seeking relief from the high cost of living.

Americans looked to multiple levels of government for solutions to rising prices. The *Topeka Capital* called for “the confiscation by the federal government of stored food and its distribution in the markets at reasonable prices, giving the middle-men, who now

⁵³ New York *Times* 2/22/1917; “The Story of the United States Grain Corporation, April 5, 1920,” Folder: Politics....plan of operations, information booklets,” Box 7, United States Food Administration Records, Herbert Hoover Presidential Library, West Branch, IA.

completely dominate the situation, a fair profit and no more.” The Consumers League of Los Angeles requested that the L.A. City Council “pass a law to the effect that the City government shall control all food products and sell same to the public at moderate prices,” and the East Jefferson Improvement Association and the “Los Angeles Housewives” asked that the City Attorney “be instructed” to make foodstuffs a public utility “for relief against the high cost of living.”⁵⁴ In Hartford, CT, Jewish residents attending the Hebrew Institute “requested that Congress pass an embargo on foodstuffs” and that the governor of Connecticut appoint a board to supervise food prices. Similarly, the Royal Arch Masons of Kansas lamented the impact of rising food prices on the “salaried” class. Noting price increases of commodities ranging from wheat to rabbits, the Masons declared, “We are afraid that those who buy will realize the ‘inadequate’ condition of salaries as compared to the h.c. of l.”⁵⁵

The government at the highest level was forced to act to control food prices. On April 11, 1917, Rep. Ashbury Lever, chairman of the House Committee on Agriculture, met with President Wilson to consider introducing legislation that would become known as the “Lever bill” to discourage further unrest and help to stabilize the cost of food.⁵⁶ Introduced in the House on June 11, 1917, the Lever bill contained key provisions seeking to prevent profiteering and speculation of foodstuffs through a licensing system

⁵⁴ The East Jefferson Improvement Association had a middle class leadership. Their president, for example, was a pharmacist. United States Census, 1920, Los Angeles, California; Roll: T625_114; Page: 256.

⁵⁵ Records of the Los Angeles City Council 5/8/1917 and 3/11/1917, Los Angeles City Archives, 555 Ramirez Street, Los Angeles, CA; “Proceedings of the M.E. Grand Chapter of Royal Arch Masons of Connecticut, One Hundred and Nineteenth Annual Report,” pg. 23-25, Connecticut State Library, Hartford CT; *Hartford Courant* 3/13/1917; *Topeka Capital* quoted in *Current Opinion*, June, 1917.

⁵⁶ *New York Times* 4/12/1917.

and by criminalizing hoarding or destruction of food. The licensing system required that dealers of foodstuffs whose annual business exceeded \$100,000 obtain licenses to conduct business. If a dealer proceeded to charge excessive prices or neglected to “keep all food commodities moving in as direct a line, as with as little delay as far as possible,” it risked losing its license. In some cases, accused profiteers could even face jail time. According to one USFA document, these rules “aimed to eliminate various trade practices which tend to raise the price to the consumer.” In effect, the Lever bill also fueled expectations among Americans during and after the war that the government could and should lower prices by prosecuting profiteers.⁵⁷

Wilson, Hoover and many other members of the Federal Government, concerned about speeding up war mobilization and alarmed by the recent wave of radical anti-high food price protests, hoped to “rush” the Lever Act through Congress. With reporters present, George W. Anderson, a U.S. Attorney and special assistant to the Attorney General “in connection with the administration food control,” declared to the House Agricultural Committee, “Something must be done. That social and political upheaval is threatened cannot be denied or disregarded. I see signs of it. Anyone with his ears to the ground knows it.”⁵⁸ Hoover echoed this sentiment. His colleague and confidant William Mullendore wrote in his diary “He said that if it did not [pass], he was going to get out of the country entirely and leave for China or some other country where his family would be reasonably safe.” During House debates of the Lever Act, Rep. Sydney Anderson of Minnesota worried about “social disturbances,” while Rep. Lever warned of the “wrath”

⁵⁷ Document, Box 3, Remuse of Letters...to all Federal Food Administrators 1917-1918 Proclamations, 9.

⁵⁸Los Angeles *Times* 5/19/1917.

of the people if the legislation were to die in Congress. Minnesota Rep. Harold Knutson declared, “This congress must take immediate steps to effectively stop all sorts of speculation in all the necessities of life or the American people will arise in their righteous indignation and repeat the performance of the Russian people.” An applause followed his remarks. Heightening matters were reports of unrest abroad, such as the discontent occurring in Norway, of which an American newspaper wrote, “one of the gains [in socialist activity] has been the high cost of living, and many of the middle class people whose wages have not increased proportionately have gone over to the socialist platform.” Without the Lever Act, many believed that high prices might radicalize the country and cause irreparable and widespread disorder.⁵⁹

Nevertheless, the Lever bill faced strong opposition. Opponents of the bill admonished the country not to go down the path of “autocracy,” and preferred to call Herbert Hoover, the prospective head Food Administrator, “the food dictator,” a label Hoover despised. Chief among the bill’s opponents was Senator James Reed of Missouri, who called the bill “vicious and unconstitutional,” and claimed Hoover’s power would exceed that of “a king, a potentate, a Czar, a Caesar, or a Kaiser.” William Mullendore, who had watched the attacks from the gallery, recalled, “That was one of the longest and most vitriolic and bitter attacks; purely political and purely artificial.” “I totaled up the number of hours in July that I listened to Reed on the floor,” Mullendore continued, “It was ninety-two hours on the floor of the Senate...that Reed carried on, day after day. He

⁵⁹ Diary entry 6/15/1917, Folder “Diary 1917,” Box 19, William Mullendore Papers, Herbert Hoover Presidential Library, West Branch, IA; *Congressional Record*-House of Representatives 6/18/1917; Lowell Sun 1/19/1917.

just occupied the floor making an attack on Hoover.” Unsurprisingly, Woodrow Wilson characterized the process to Hoover as “tedious and vexatious.”⁶⁰

In response, the proponents of the bill justified the measure not just by referencing the potential for domestic unrest, but also by reifying hoarders and profiteers as villains. During a House debate, Rep. Lever declared, “Milk, the food of the babies of America, in April, 1914, sold at 9 cents per can. In April, 1917, it sold at 15 cents per can, or a 67 per cent increase...there is no reason on earth except that manipulators are controlling it.” Lever proceeded to reference the “hysteria” of hoarding necessities and “wild speculation.” Rep. Anderson frequently spoke of the “manipulation of the speculator” and Rep. Knutson exceeded the intensity of either Lever or Anderson’s rhetoric. In a passionate speech on the House floor, Knutson exclaimed that the Lever bill did not go far enough to prevent the profiteering of “food speculators and pirates.”⁶¹

Many politicians also connected anti-profteering to patriotism. Rep. Anderson called profiteers “unpatriotic and vicious.” But his words did not match the extreme statements made by other members of the House and Senate, including Rep. William Borland of Missouri. “The man who poisons the food of the men fighting for the country

⁶⁰ Oral History Interview with William Mullendore, pg. 5-6, Folder “Oral History Interview with William C. Mullendore,” Box 22, William C. Mullendore Papers, Herbert Hoover Presidential Library, West Branch, IA; *New York Times* 6/15/1917; *Congressional Record*- Senate 6/14/1917; Woodrow Wilson to Herbert Hoover 7/19/1917, Arthur Link et. al. eds., *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson Vol. 43* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983).

⁶¹ Proponents of the bill also underscored the notion that freedom would not exist if the enemy were to win the war. One of Herbert Hoover’s colleagues, Lewis Strauss, even suggested that they use of quotations from George Washington and Abraham Lincoln as to “advocating centralization of power and temporary abrogation of personal privilege for war measures” for the purpose of “combating opponents of the legislation.” See, untitled note from Lewis Strauss, “Lincoln’s Views on Centralization of Power and Temporary Surrender of Personal Liberties as a War Measure,” and “Views of Washington on Food Administration,” all in Folder: Food Administration Correspondence & Memoranda 1917, Box 23, Lewis Strauss Papers, Herbert Hoover Presidential Library, West Branch, IA; *Congressional Record*- House 6/18/1917.

is a traitor and murderer, but he is no worse than the man who makes fictitious profits out of the food sold his countrymen,” Borland shouted. “The man who to-day charges an exorbitant price on the necessities of life puts himself into the class of Benedict Arnold.” Borland concluded that “There is only one way to stop these vultures in human form from preying on our people, and that is to place the control of food in the Government, the same as the Lever bill will do.” The press followed suit. The *Pilot* of Steamboat Springs, Colorado asserted that “illicit, unpatriotic and inhuman dealing in food stuffs of the United States,” leading to elevated prices, was “established” fact. Underscoring the threat of high prices to American democracy, the Chicago *Daily Tribune* stated, “The revolution in Russia began with the food riots...we certainly must guard against promoting any such condition in this country...” Whether or not these appeals resonated, the Lever bill was signed into law on August 11, 1917.⁶²

Following the passage of the Lever bill, the Department of Justice prosecuted a number of individual “hoarders” and “profiteering” retailers, and was reasonably successful. The combination of expanded government wartime powers, super-patriotic publicity, and growing unrest over rising food prices, provided a unique opportunity to successfully punish those accused as “hoarders” or “profiteers.” While a variety of citizens bore the brunt of federal hoarding and profiteering investigations, the prosecution of millionaire Hulett Merritt, seemingly representing the epitome of luxury and greed, provides a compelling example.

⁶² *Congressional Record*- House of Representatives 6/18/1917; Steamboat *Pilot* (Steamboat Springs, Colorado) 7/4/1917; Chicago *Daily Tribune* 6/23/1917.

Born in Duluth, Minnesota, Merritt became a multimillionaire by the age of eighteen. He owned large interests in the Missabe Range iron mines and financed the building of the Missabe and Northern Railway. At twenty-one, he became the world's youngest railway president. Later selling his mining and railroad assets to the United States Steel Corporation, Merritt became the company's largest stockholder. In 1904, Merritt moved to Pasadena, California to be with his parents and acquired interests in gas and electric services for the Los Angeles area. In addition, Merritt was involved in the businesses of steam laundry, steamship lines, beet sugar factories, gold, silver and ruby mines, "ladies' ready-to-wear chains," Great Lakes deep water fishing, fruit orchards, real estate, banking, insurance, and merchandizing.⁶³

Merritt was a man of lavish tastes. His mansion took six years to build, and at one point, he owned two large residences, the 54-room "Villa Merritt-Ollivier" and "The Oaks," a 20-room house on forty acres, "which [was] known as the finest landscaped estate in California." Residents strolling on the streets of Pasadena may also have been able to see him driving a special, imported \$30,000 Mercedes racing car. Merritt enjoyed racing the car competitively, once defeating famed racer Barney Oldfield in a fifty-mile race on a stretch of land from Ocean Park to Venice, that he had paved to help transport

⁶³ *Eminent Californians* (Palo Alto: C.W. Taylor, 1953), 14-20, Los Angeles Public Library; Russell Holmes Fletcher ed., *Who's Who in California: A Biographical Reference Work of Notable Living Men and Women of California Vol. 1* (Los Angeles: Who's Who Publications Co., 1943), 625, Los Angeles Public Library; Franklin Harper, *Who's Who on the Pacific Coast: A Biographical Compilation of Notable Living Contemporaries West of the Rocky Mountains* (Los Angeles: Harper Publishing Co., 1913), 395, Los Angeles Public Library; *Notables of the West: Being the Portraits and Biographies of Progressive Men of the West Who Have Helped in the Development and History Making of This Wonderful Country Vol. 2* (New York: International News Corp., 1915), 451-51, Los Angeles Public Library; Justice Detwiler ed., *Who's Who in California: A Biographical Directory 1928-29: Being a History of California as Illustrated in the Lives of the Builders and Defenders of the State and of the Men and Women Who Are Doing the Work and Molding the Thought of the Present Time* (San Francisco: Who's Who Publishing Co., 1929), 162, Los Angeles Public Library.

electric light poles and gas pipes. Truly a member of the elite class, not just financially, but also socially, Merritt served on the boards of elite organizations, belonged to yacht and gun clubs, and married Rosaline Calistine Ollivier, the grand-daughter of a field marshal for Napoleon Bonaparte and the niece of the first prime minister of France.⁶⁴



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Hulett Clinton Merritt

⁶⁴ *Eminent Californians* (Palo Alto: C.W. Taylor, 1953), 14-20, Los Angeles Public Library; Russell Holmes Fletcher ed., *Who's Who in California: A Biographical Reference Work of Notable Living Men and Women of California Vol. 1* (Los Angeles: Who's Who Publications Co., 1943), 625, Los Angeles Public Library; Franklin Harper, *Who's Who on the Pacific Coast: A Biographical Compilation of Notable Living Contemporaries West of the Rocky Mountains* (Los Angeles: Harper Publishing Co., 1913), 395, Los Angeles Public Library; *Notables of the West: Being the Portraits and Biographies of Progressive Men of the West Who Have Helped in the Development and History Making of This Wonderful Country Vol. 2* (New York: International News Corp., 1915), 451-51, Los Angeles Public Library; Justice Detwiler ed., *Who's Who in California: A Biographical Directory 1928-29: Being a History of California as Illustrated in the Lives of the Builders and Defenders of the State and of the Men and Women Who Are Doing the Work and Molding the Thought of the Present Time* (San Francisco: Who's Who Publishing Co., 1929), 162, Los Angeles Public Library.

⁶⁵ *Notables of the West: Being the Portraits and Biographies of Progressive Men of the West Who Have Helped in the Development and History Making of This Wonderful Country Vol. 2* (New York: International News Corp., 1915), 451-51, Los Angeles Public Library.

On or around July 25, 1918, federal agents raided 407 Olcott Street in Pasadena, a property owned by Merritt. The investigation of Merritt began when Edward S. Graham, an agent in the American Protective League, alleged that Merritt held excessive amounts of sugar. Graham pressed Commissioner Stephen G. Long for additional investigation and Long agreed. Agents found five one-hundred pound sacks of sugar, leading head Los Angeles County Food Administrator Louis Cole to declare, “if the facts bear out our suspicions the disclosures will be most startling...I can see no reason why any individual should have 500 pounds of sugar on hand at this time.”⁶⁶

The idea of a millionaire hoarding sugar for private use, while working and middle class Americans were sacrificing for the war effort, must have been infuriating to the general public, and newspaper reports do not suggest otherwise. Fitting the image of a profiteering millionaire, Merritt was unable to comment when the first reports of the raid surfaced, because he had been busy cruising on his yacht in the Santa Barbara Channel. Angrily, Louis Cole juxtaposed the dedication of the general public with the Merritt’s greed, telling the *Los Angeles Times* “It is gratifying that the average citizen is patriotically abiding by the rules and regulations of this office.”⁶⁷

On September 4, 1918, a Federal grand jury indicted Merritt for violating the Lever Act and Merritt promised to put up a “vigorous” defense. Merritt’s attorneys did not disappoint, as the initial trial led to a hung jury. Yet, this only delayed prosecutors.

⁶⁶ *Los Angeles Times* 6/24/1918.

⁶⁷ *Los Angeles Times* 6/24/1918; “In the District Court of the United States Southern Division of California Southern Division, United States vs. Hulett C. Merritt, Criminal No. 1558, Assignment of Errors,” National Archives Division, Laguna Niguel, CA; “In the District Court of the United States Southern Division of California Southern Division, United States vs. Hulett C. Merritt, Criminal No. 1558, Demurrer to Indictment,” National Archives Division, Laguna Niguel, CA.

During the second trial, the prosecution enjoyed the aid of additional friendly publicity, so much so that Merritt sued the Los Angeles *Examiner* for libelously insinuating that Merritt had instructed his son's wife to purchase a large amount of sugar because "food was going to be scarce." During jury selection, at least one potential juror even admitted to having formed an opinion based on publicity, causing defense attorneys to issue a challenge. To make matters worse, according to court documents, "the jury was allowed to separate and mingle among people generally, during the trial...without first being admonished by the court, in accordance with the requirements of the law." Faced with these obstacles, Merritt's claim that his servants and members of his family had purchased the sugar without his knowledge, did not hold up, especially since the prosecution alleged that some of the sugar had been held suspiciously in a vault. The jury returned a guilty verdict and the press appeared to be overjoyed. Merritt was sentenced to five months in prison and a fine of \$5000.⁶⁸ Symbolically, his guilt was confirmed. Appearing to be a grand example of selfishness and obstinacy, Merritt represented a perfect target for federal hoarding/profitteering charges. Through the conviction of Merritt and others in the elite class, the Department of Justice was able to project an image of success for federal policy aiming to reduce food prices. These convictions drew on and reinforced the idea the hoarders and profiteers were a major reason why the public suffered from high cost of food.⁶⁹

⁶⁸ After a long appellate process, the U.S. Supreme Court overturned the conviction two years later. *Hulett C. Merritt v. United States*, No. 519. Supreme Court of the United States, 255 U.S. 579; 41 S. Ct. 375; 65 L. Ed. 795; 1921, March 7, 1921, Lexis Nexis Academic.

⁶⁹ The Los Angeles *Examiner*, which was in the process of being sued by Merritt for libel, finished their report of the verdict with a quotation by Assistant U.S. Attorney Lyndol Young that read, "It might well be said that justice has again prevailed." Los Angeles *Examiner* 4/2/1919; "In the District Court of the United States Southern Division of California Southern Division, United States vs. Hulett C. Merritt, Criminal No.

Blaming and Prosecuting Labor

Pointing to high wages and growing labor unrest, many politicians and members of the press identified laborers as a second culprit for high prices. In addition to labor turnover, in 1917, the United States witnessed a 17 percent increase in number of strikes from the previous year. The Piqua, Ohio *Daily Call* declared, “There is a pernicious feeling among many people that the war should enable them to get their bit rather than do their bit. The employee that sees his employer making enormous profits feels that he ought to have his share of them. If his employer is not making large profits,” the *Call* continued, “the employee feels that he should get into some business where there are large profits with the hope that he can get some of them.” More pointedly, Sen. Henry Myers of Montana suggested the public peace and prosperity had been compromised by IWW “agitators,” who had “threatened that unless farmers paid extortionately high prices for farm work the crops would be burned and destroyed.” Politicians debating the Lever bill also underscored the need to curb the wartime opportunism of labor. During a debate in the House of Representatives, Ohio Rep. S.D. Fess expressed concern over the scarcity of farm labor, claiming that agricultural workers were demanding exorbitant wages and moving to cities to obtain them. As a result, Fess declared, the country was experiencing heightened underproduction and high prices. The Los Angeles *Times* summarized the war as the “Heyday of the Workingman,” citing wage increases ranging from 45 to 100

1558, Assignment of Errors,” National Archives Division, Laguna Niguel, CA; “In the District Court of the United States Southern Division of California Southern Division, United States vs. Hulett C. Merritt, Criminal No. 1558, Demurrer to Indictment,” National Archives Division, Laguna Niguel, CA; Los Angeles *Times* 9/5/1918, 12/25/1918, 12/29/1918, 1/1/1919, 3/25/1919, 3/27/1919, 4/2/1919, 4/9/1919.

percent that had caused the cost of living to increase accordingly. Asserting that the laborer is “going to get a bigger slice than ever,” the *Times* suggested that the public would have to pay for the greed and opportunism of labor. Throughout the war, such appeals to the “public” that was neither capital nor labor, became more frequent in the press and political rhetoric. In the immediate postwar period, middle class Americans would increasingly repeat these sentiments, with added vigor. They would assert their interests as the “public” or “people’s” interests.⁷⁰

Labor leaders worried that that the Lever bill would allow the U.S. Government to turn public sentiment against labor into legal action. In June 27, 1917 letter to Woodrow Wilson, American Federation of Labor president Samuel Gompers declared that while he supported the Lever Act, it “would repeal the protective features of the Clayton Law by declaring that the ordinary organized activities of the workers engaged in an effort to maintain standards of work and life could be construed and stigmatized as conspiracies” to halt the production and distribution of food. Gompers was not alone. A letter from Herbert Hoover to Rep. Lever stated that “The labor representatives are very much exercised over the possible reading of the food-control bill to stretch to control wages...” In fact, union leaders were concerned enough that a collection of labor-friendly representatives proposed an amendment to the Lever bill to prevent its use against unions.

⁷⁰ Alexander Trachtenberg and Benjamin Glassberg, eds., *The American Labor Year Book 1921-1922* (New York: Rand School of Social Science, 1922), 430; *Congressional Record*- House 6/18/1917; *Congressional Record*- Senate 8/23/1917; *Piqua Daily Call* 7/16/1917; *Los Angeles Times* 9/20/1917.

The amendment failed by a vote of 152 to 45 and organized labor would suffer the consequences.⁷¹

The Federal Government would indeed to use the Lever Act against organized labor in the postwar period, when middle class antipathy against labor unions was more vehement. It was in the postwar period that, as the *Wall Street Journal* exclaimed, “the public which has found itself caught between the upper and lower millstone of Capital and Labor, is prepared to make a great struggle for life.” A citizen who wrote the *New York Times* in the summer of 1919, represented just one of many citizens engaging in “middle class protest.” According to the writer, the greed of workers undertaking railroad strikes would make the country “suffer grievously.” “Think how many millions of clergymen, doctors, lawyers, teachers, college professors, traveling salesmen clerks, bookkeepers [etc.]” lived of less income, the writer continued. “Must we take still more from our meagerness to add to his increase?”⁷²

Federal prosecution of California railroad workers, who had allegedly allowed food to spoil during a strike, serves as perhaps the most illustrative example of the creative use of the Lever Act against organized labor. In the late spring of 1920, following the lead of striking Chicago switchmen, members of the Brotherhood of Railway Trainmen in Fresno, Barstow and other California cities and towns, left work in

⁷¹ A variety of organizations ranging from local governments to chambers of commerce lent their support to the passage of the Lever Act, each with individual motives, as well as the stated motive of patriotism. See, for example, Los Angeles Chamber of Commerce Board of Directors Minutes June 20, 1917, ID 24, Carton 9, Los Angeles Chamber of Commerce Records, University of Southern California Special Collections; Enclosure: Samuel Gompers to Woodrow Wilson 6/27/1917, Arthur Link et. al. eds., *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson Vol. 43* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983); *Congressional Record*- House 6/18/1917; *Congressional Record*- House 6/23/1917.

⁷² *Wall Street Journal* 1/8/1920; Letter from “A Real American” (Lynchburg, Va.) to the editor of the *New York Times*, *New York Times* 8/5/1919.

protest of stagnant wages. At an April 9, 1920, meeting in Fresno, workers declared that one “couldn’t make a living on 5.11 a day.” According to a witness, the workers “had been waiting now indefinitely for relief from the high cost of living and they had been dilly-dallying with this wage question, and they were not going to wait any longer.”⁷³ Similar meetings took place across California and elsewhere throughout the United States, as at least a few of the California workers had been inspired by “the railroad trouble all over the country.”⁷⁴

Shortly after the meeting, many of the railway workers decided not to go back to work. The Southern Pacific Company, which had agreed to hire seventy-five percent of its workforce from the Brotherhood of Railway Trainmen, immediately brought in scabs. Workers who remained on the job were also branded as scabs. Instantly, the situation took on the atmosphere of a strike. Speaking to workers’ resentment of scab labor, J.D. Bledsoe, a switchman for the Santa Fe Railroad, noted “you couldn’t call a union man anything worse than a scab,” while E. Christensen, one of the defendants, told a neighbor that those remaining at work “would carry the scar to their graves.” Yet, those who had *left* work had not technically gone on strike. Cunningly, at the April 9 (and 15th) meetings the workers planned to each “quit” as individuals, so as to prevent the possibility of a judicial injunction to end the strike. “We are not striking,” one worker declared, “but we

⁷³ Woodrow Wilson, in a letter to railroad unions, also chose to not help railroad workers obtain higher wages, justifying the decision by calling the “high cost of living” temporary, and expressing optimism in the federal government strategy to address it. Wilson stated that a railroad strike would be “highly injurious to the public.” Trial Transcript, “In the District Court of the United States, Southern District of California, Southern Division, United States v. Henry W. Crumrine et.al.,” pp. 135-7, National Archives- Laguna Niguel, CA.

⁷⁴ Trial Transcript, “In the District Court of the United States, Southern District of California, Southern Division, United States v. Henry W. Crumrine et.al.,” 19, 11, 69, National Archives- Laguna Niguel, CA.

are walking out to better ourselves as man for men, for humanity's sake." However, prosecutors had a different plan in mind.⁷⁵

On April 19, 1920, a grand jury indicted 29 railway workers for violating the Lever Act, alleging that they had conspired and combined "to limit the facilities for transporting, supplying and storing many necessities by means of agitation, calling and declaring a strike." One provision of the Lever Act outlawed destruction of foodstuffs, under the logic that it could drive up prices or exacerbate a wartime food shortage. Prosecutors argued that conspiring to go on strike, and thereby allowing fruits and vegetables to spoil, constituted "willful" destruction of food, punishable by law.

Their case rested on the idea of proving that the workers had "conspired" or planned to strike, rather than intended to leave work as individuals. A group action threatened the food onboard trains traveling across California, whereas an individual could not have conceivably known of this danger, if acting alone. Throughout the trial, prosecutors called witnesses, testifying to coordination in the work stoppage, because the strikers had agreed *together* to quit as individuals. For example, Howard W. Heskett, a switchman for the Santa Fe Railroad, testified that at a meeting before the work stoppage, fellow members of the Brotherhood of Railway Trainmen "got up and said that they were not striking, and that they had just simply quit their jobs." Prosecution witnesses also testified to seeing the workers attempt to form a Yardmen's Association "for the purpose to get an increase in wages," another indication that they had not simply "quit." In some instances, government witnesses testified to hearing conversations suggesting even greater plans for "conspiracy." James A. Evans, an acquaintance of defendant E.

⁷⁵ Trial Transcript, "In the District Court of the United States, Southern District of California, Southern Division, United States v. Henry W. Crumrine et.al.," 20, 24, 107, National Archives- Laguna Niguel, CA

Christensen, claimed to have overheard him speak in favor of using a radical labor organization during the strike. Evans testified, “he spoke of one big union, and he said if the men would all come out they would have their one big union.”⁷⁶ Lastly, the prosecution called witnesses who testified that the workers were aware of the fact that the trains were carrying perishables.⁷⁷

The defense strategy depended on demonstrating that the defendants had simply quit and had not intended to use their work stoppage as a bargaining chip with the company. During cross examination, the defense attorneys had government witnesses admit to hearing defendants discuss finding other work, a signal that they had not planned to return to their jobs. A defendant, Oscar Lefever, stated that he had hoped to find work elsewhere and that “when he went home on the night of April 7th, he “did not know of any impending strike or walk-out or quitting of work by the men in the Santa Fe yards or elsewhere” in the country. During the trial, Lefever asserted, “I quit as an individual.” Yet, shortly after Lefever decided to quit, he had signed a list of demands for the managers, drawn up by the union, stating what it would take for the workers to return.⁷⁸

⁷⁶ Perhaps the most damning evidence against the railway workmen was that a few of them signed a statement stating that they would go back to work with wage increases. Trial Transcript, “In the District Court of the United States, Southern District of California, Southern Division, United States v. Henry W. Crumrine et.al.,” 114, National Archives- Laguna Niguel, CA.

⁷⁷ One witness testified that a car carrying butter, eggs and vegetables “lost about 14 hours in Barstow” and “the next station where that car could be iced was Needles, 171 miles from there. That 170 miles is across desert country and the temperature at this time of year runs between 80 and 90 degrees.” Trial Transcript, “In the District Court of the United States, Southern District of California, Southern Division, United States v. Henry W. Crumrine et.al.,” 2, 47, 86, 32, 80, 81, National Archives- Laguna Niguel, CA.

⁷⁸ The defense also argued that the defendants had been unaware that they were in violation of the Lever Act, a claim that the prosecution contested. Trial Transcript, “In the District Court of the United States, Southern District of California, Southern Division, United States v. Henry W. Crumrine et.al.,” 165, National Archives- Laguna Niguel, CA.

Given the context of rising food prices, it came as no surprise that the jury found the defendants guilty. The jury could not have been expected to react kindly to testimony that the railroad yards “became immediately congested with freight after the men went out and it is still lasting yet” with “every kind of commodity that you can conceive of [on the tracks]...lumber, oil and salt and foodstuffs and perishables-fruit...” Or, another witness’s statement that the “stopping of the switchmen had a very disastrous effect for some days on the public.” Already lacking public sympathy, the workers faced unfriendly publicity and opposition from organizations, such as the Los Angeles Chamber of Commerce. Claiming to represent the public interest- “all classes and conditions of residence of the city”- the Chamber of Commerce passed a resolution that stated, “again an infinitesimal portion of the population is imposing drastic conditions upon the nation... causing critical shortages of food in large cities and attempting to render impotent the national transportation systems upon which the very existence of the people depends.” Echoing these sentiments, the Los Angeles *Times* called the defendants “outlaws” in an article reporting on the verdict. The bulletin of the Brotherhood of Railroad Trainmen summed up the union’s frustration with being blamed for the high cost of living by stating “Government can regulate Railway Wages but not the profiteer.” The bulletin concluded,

It is to be sincerely hoped that, in the not too distant future, the attention of the public will be directed to the causes for the increased costs of living, and not be diverted from the main issue by persistent and continuous efforts to mislead the public mind as to increased costs by continually claiming it to be railroad rates and railroad wages.

The Brotherhood of Railroad Trainmen and other unions would be sorely disappointed, as middle class antipathy for organized labor would persist further into the immediate postwar period.⁷⁹

Conservation and Consumer Organizing: The U.S. Food Administration

Through government-sponsored voluntary participation in food conservation, the U.S. Food Administration created another state-centered model for addressing high prices. The prosecution provisions of the Lever Act suggested to Americans that legislation and prosecution were key components of the solution to the HCL. Drawing on their participation in the U.S. Food Administration middle class citizens came to believe that government-coordinated voluntarism would also play a central role in stabilizing prices.

USFA conservation programs reached from the highest level of government down to the community. With no precedent, the Wilson administration created the USFA on August 11, 1917 under the legal authority of the Lever Act. The USFA sought to supply food to the allies and American civilians during the war at a reasonable price, in part by instituting a massive participatory food conservation program. USFA programs enlisted the support of federal agencies, state and local governments, existing private clubs and organizations, such as women's clubs and fraternal orders, and newly formed groups,

⁷⁹ The *Railroad Trainman*, Official Publication of the Brotherhood of Railroad Trainmen, April 1920, uncataloged labor periodicals, Littauer Library, Harvard University; Trial Transcript, "In the District Court of the United States, Southern District of California, Southern Division, United States v. Henry W. Crumrine et.al.," 165, National Archives- Laguna Niguel, CA; Los Angeles Chamber of Commerce Board of Directors Minutes April 15, 1920, ID 26, Carton 13, Los Angeles Chamber of Commerce Records, University of Southern California Special Collections; Los Angeles *Times* 7/16/1920.

including “Women’s Committees” of state and local Councils of Defense. Countless Americans worked through largely class-stratified groups, to help the USFA manage the nation’s food supply and keep prices reasonable for consumers. Through the USFA, the U.S. Government made middle class consumer activism during the war contained and government-centered.

Even before the Lever Act provided the legal underpinnings for the U.S. Food Administration, Woodrow Wilson set its activities in motion, picking Herbert Hoover as its impending director. On May, 19, 1917, months before the passage of the bill, Wilson announced that Hoover would be appointed to the post of U.S. Food Administrator. Hoover undertook the task of coordinating the food supply for the Allies and American civilians, and ensuring that production would remain high enough and prices sufficiently low to make this possible. The question was: how would Hoover accomplish this difficult endeavour?

Hoover sought to enlist the voluntary cooperation of individuals and preexisting organizations to promote food conservation and eliminate “wasteful practices.” Hoover’s emphasis on voluntarism, according to at least a few scholars, represented his way of merging the nineteenth century values of his youth with the realities of the twentieth century. Born in 1874 in West Branch, Iowa, Hoover had a small town, Quaker upbringing. According to one biographer, he had “a blunt plainness; a belief that people will work well together and that in rational discussion minds can be persuaded to meet.” A self-made man, who rose from West Branch to become a successful mining engineer and manager, Hoover was a believer in both the ideology of “heroic individualism” and

management. When the United States encountered the twentieth century problems of industrialization and urbanization, Hoover developed a particular blend of progressivism, in which the government acted as a manager in the affairs of groups and private individuals who voluntarily cooperated with each other and the government to address these problems. It was this ideology that he brought to his work in the Food Administration. As one USFA letter exclaimed, “the Food Administration is chiefly a voluntary organization.”⁸⁰

Hoover’s emphasis on voluntarism in the USFA not only reflected his worldview, it also played into the wartime culture of sacrifice to defeat an enemy, whether it be the Germans, or high prices. Through conscription, many Americans were required to sacrifice their careers and home lives to fight an enemy abroad. The Federal Government asked companies to reorient their businesses toward the war effort (though many benefited mightily). While the Wilson administration officially sanctioned some unions, it required that they not strike during wartime. Perhaps most of all, the Espionage Act mandated that Americans control their speech so as to not undermine support for the war.

⁸⁰ See David Burner, *Herbert Hoover: A Public Life* (New York: Alfred A Knoff, 1979), x; Patrick G. O’Brien and Philip T. Rosen, “Hoover and the Historians: The Reconstruction of a President” in Mark M. Dodge ed. *Herbert Hoover and the Historians* (West Branch, IA: Herbert Hoover Presidential Library Association, 1989), 64; and Joan Hoff Wilson, *Herbert Hoover: Forgotten Progressive* (Boston: Little Brown and Company, 1975), 39. Joan Hoff Wilson characterizes Hoover’s progressivism as “associational, decentralized, corporatism” and considers it an outgrowth of both his Quaker, small-town upbringing, and his experience as a businessman in the mining industry. William Clinton Mullendore, *History of the United States Food Administration 1917-1919* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 1941), 51, 53; “Remuse of Letters...to All Federal Food Administrators 1917-1918 Proclamations, pg 2, Folder: Remuse of Letters...to All Federal Food Administrators 1917-1918 Proclamations, Box 3, United States Food Administration Papers, Herbert Hoover Presidential Library, West Branch, IA.

Private organizations, such as the American Defense Society and The Vigilantes, sprung up to encourage and enforce these sacrifices.⁸¹

Through the USFA, Hoover sought not just to enlist volunteers, but also to create a grassroots movement of active consumers that would operate under government management to conserve foodstuffs and keep prices at reasonable levels. Even before the passage of the Lever Act, Hoover wrote to Woodrow Wilson, “a sense of volunteer service...is absolutely critical in order to amass the devotion of the people.” In kind, one USFA proclamation declared, “Autocracy finds its strength in its ability to impose organization by force from the top. The essence of democracy consists of the application of the initiative in its own people.” The proclamation continued, “if individualism cannot be so organized as to defend itself, then democracy is a faith which cannot state. We are seeking to impose no organization from the top; we are asking the American people to organize from the bottom up.” William Mullendore, reflecting on Hoover’s ideology as Food Administrator, wrote that he rested his strategy on his faith “in the power of a democracy to solve its problems through voluntary effort.” Similarly, a USFA press release asserted that “this is being done without compulsion of the law; but by spontaneous effort and self-denial of the people.” The press release elaborated, “There have sprung up over night throughout the United States, in every city, county, village and state, definite and positive organizations, practical in their ends and unflagging in their efforts, which have the will to solve [the] food question.” Yet, these efforts did not “spring up” without direction- “the first requirement of the situation was to arouse this

⁸¹ David Kennedy, *Over Here: The First World War and American Society* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), 41.

great force, which was to a large degree dormant and only potential, and then to direct it toward the elimination of waste in all the economic processes, particularly those having to do with food.”⁸²

The Federal Government awakened this “great force” by calling for the formation of new organizations, and encouraging existing groups to focus their efforts on proper consumption habits, as outlined in government instructions. This included primarily middle class fraternal lodges and women’s clubs, as well as general merchant, wholesale, retail and labor organizations. L.D. Sale, president of the Los Angeles Chamber of Commerce reflected, “Our organization during these twelve months, has gone through a period of transition that has brought it from a body devoted almost exclusively to our community development, to an auxiliary organization of the national government.” The Food Administration asked all retail and wholesale grocers to sign pledges to abide by the rules of the Food Administration and place them in store windows. The USFA also facilitated the formation of “fair price” committees, which included representatives from merchants, labor and “the public,” for the purpose of investigating and publishing “fair” retail prices in newspapers. Not only could profiteering retailers lose business because of negative publicity, they could also lose their licenses, forcing them to go out of business.

⁸² Herbert Hoover to Woodrow Wilson 7/12/1917, Arthur Link et. al. eds., *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson Vol. 43* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983); “Remuse of Letters...To All Federal Food Administrators 1917-1918 Proclamations, pg 2, Folder: Remuse of Letters...To All Federal Food Administrators 1917-1918 Proclamations, Box 3, United States Food Administration Records, Herbert Hoover Presidential Library, West Branch, IA; William Clinton Mullendore, *History of the United States Food Administration, 1917-1919* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 1941), 80; Press Release No. 133, Food Administration Public Information Department, July 28, 1917, pg. 2, Folder: Press Releases 100-150, Box 10, United States Food Administration Records, Herbert Hoover Presidential Library, West Branch, IA.

“A system of checking prices charged by retailers,” was undertaken by “Housewives Committees.”⁸³

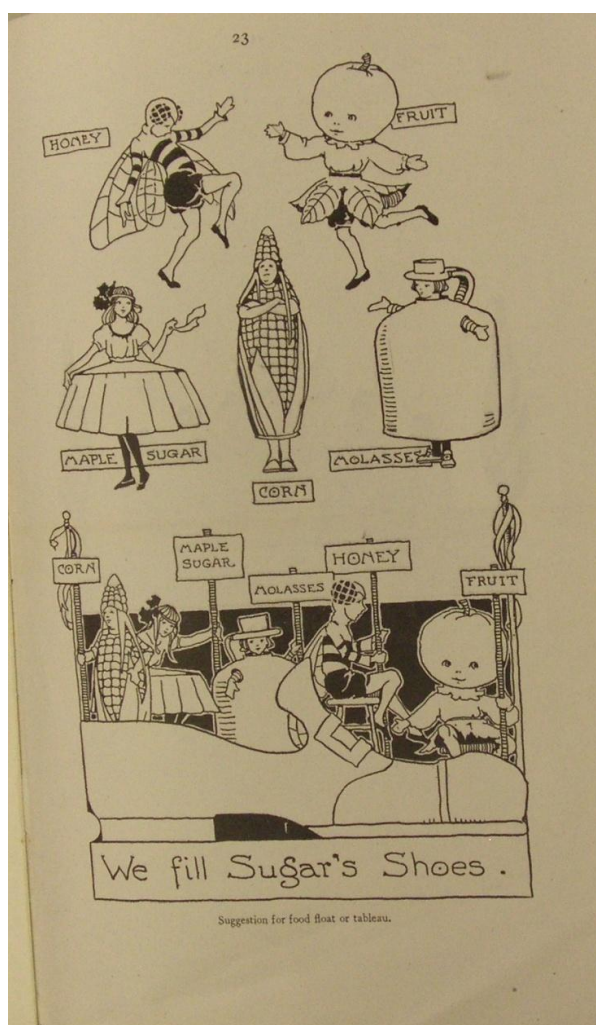
More importantly, the USFA used local groups to publicize USFA regulations and pressure fellow citizens to follow them. The USFA communicated a variety of suggestions and regulations to women’s clubs, churches,⁸⁴ fraternal lodges, schools, public libraries and a host of other organizations, in order to encourage food conservation. For example, one rule stated that grocers had to sell bread with fifty percent wheat substitutes and not hold onto necessities for speculative purposes, and that consumers were to abide by the same rules in their purchasing habits. Through pamphlets, display cards, letters, and other mediums, the USFA asked consumers to observe “Meatless Tuesdays,” and “Wheatless Wednesdays,” while avoiding the use of sugar as much as possible. Additionally, the USFA promoted the “abundant” consumption of fruits and vegetables, which had limited transport values. Consumers were encouraged to observe a “Wheatless Monday” and have at least one meal per day without wheat, two days without pork and make every day a “fat-saving day.” The USFA tailored many suggestions to each targeted group. For example, a pamphlet entitled, “United States Food Administration Suggestions for Enlisting the Active Support of

⁸³ The Chamber not only gave its “moral support,” but also assisted USFA propaganda efforts, and worked with the USFA in modifying the distribution and retail of foodstuffs to fit USFA suggestions and guidelines. Los Angeles Chamber of Commerce Members’ Annual 1918, pg. 15, Carton 40, Records of the Los Angeles Chamber of Commerce, University of Southern California Special Collections; Los Angeles Chamber of Commerce Board of Directors Minutes October 14, 1917, Carton 24, ID 9, Los Angeles Chamber of Commerce Records, University of Southern California Special Collections; Remuse of Letters...To All Federal Food Administrators 1917-1918 Proclamations, Box 3, United States Food Administration Papers, Herbert Hoover Presidential Library, West Branch, IA.

⁸⁴ Churches formed food committees to coordinate USFA suggestions and regulations among church membership.

Religious Organizations” asked churches and synagogues “to teach conservation as a matter of self-sacrifice.” Many ministers followed this advice and continued to do so in postwar anti-HCL movements, when they encouraged wearing overalls and old clothes by pointing to the thriftiness of John the Baptist.⁸⁵

⁸⁵ Helen Zoe Veit also underscores how Americans’ experiences with the USFA led them to think about conservation in moral terms. Veit states, “individuals within and external to the administration clearly saw the food conservation campaign as an opportunity to champion the moral value of austerity.” Veit contends that USFA officials treated “self-effacement, self-disciplining and austerity as uniquely democratic virtues in themselves,” and that Hoover believed that democratic people would naturally gravitate toward these principles, rendering coercion unnecessary. Veit also mentions that thousands of ministers wrote to the USFA in response to USFA bulletins for clergy lending their support and promising to preach on conservation. Helen Zoe Veit, ‘We Were a Soft People’: Asceticism, Self-Discipline and American Food Conservation in the First World War” *Food, Culture and Society: An International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research* 10:2 (Summer 2007): 169, 181; United States Food Administration Home Card, Folder: Home Cards, Box 8, United States Food Administration Records, Herbert Hoover Presidential Library, West Branch, IA; “United States Food Administration Suggestions for Enlisting the Active Support of Religious Organizations,” March, 1918, California Food Administration Records, National Archives Division, San Bruno, CA.



The picture above is an example of the USFA's efforts to promote sugar substitutes for consumers. The USFA circulated this image to public libraries, as a suggestion for a "food float" in a parade.

While the USFA could only encourage consumers to use wheat substitutes and eat perishables, hoarding was punishable by law. No longer could an individual store extra food in a cellar or buy as much as he or she pleased. In addition, the Food Administration penalized restaurants and cafeterias that served bread without wheat substitutes or used large amounts of sugar, and reprimanded grocery stores that sold large quantities of foods

⁸⁶ Food news Notes for Public Librarians, July 1918, Folder: Food News Notes For Public Librarians vol. 1-12, Box 8, United States Food Administration Records, Herbert Hoover Presidential Library, West Branch, IA.

that the USFA had designated for conservation. Thus, in many respects, consumers did not have the choice of eating as they pleased. Alice Flowers became aware of her limited eating options when The Beverly Hills Hotel refused to serve her two loafs of white-flour wheat bread that she had brought into the hotel's dining room. After being informed of USFA rules, prohibiting "the bringing into a public dining room of any breadstuffs from the outside," Flowers became "resentful and indecent," and "caused considerable unpleasantness among the other guests." In another example of USFA intervention, the Administration sent investigators to a home, merely because of a neighbor's suspicion that "edibles" could be found in a garage secured by "three locks" and "guarded by a ferocious bull dog." Such control, under the guise of management, could not be replicated after the war, when the resources of the Food Administration no longer existed and when some questioned the legality of a peacetime U.S. Government involving itself in commerce to such a great extent. Nevertheless, during the postwar period, many consumers wondered why the government could not take a more active role in addressing the H.C.L.⁸⁷

While fraternal societies and other groups of men played a large role in promoting the work of the Food Administration, women, who, by many accounts, controlled household consumption, stood at the forefront of Food Administration campaigns. Recently, historians have used women's experiences in the Food Administration as examples of how, according to Melanie Rich, "their [wartime] contributions and

⁸⁷ Louis M. Cole to American Protective League 4/17/1918, California Food Administration Records, National Archives Division, San Bruno, CA; Los Angeles American Protective League Report 6/28/1918 "Report by Field Captain #2...", California Food Administration Records, National Archives Division, San Bruno, CA.

achievements were on par with those of men.” Similarly, Elizabeth Cassidy West has noted that “through the Women’s Committee of the South Carolina State Council of Defense, South Carolina women made significant but often unrecognized contributions to the state’s war efforts.” Marsha Gordon astutely notes that women’s contributions to the war were considerable, but that the propaganda driving their efforts was, in effect, conservative. Food Administration directives ultimately sought to keep women in the home, operating as “kitchen soldiers,” even if giving them vital roles in the war effort and containing the high cost of living. Gordon suggests that World War I was a moment of contingency for women- that the Food Administration led many American women into a more conservative model of participation in the war than what might have otherwise transpired. Whether or not a radically different approach was possible, the USFA also created a contained model for how Americans should address high prices, in general. From its inception, underlying all USFA efforts was the idea of preventing radical unrest. The Administration attempted to do this by making consumer activism government-centered.⁸⁸

Significantly, the groups that participated in the USFA were not just often relatively homogenous in accordance with gender, but also with class. The USFA had a specific newsletter for public librarians and circulated pamphlets directed specially at women’s clubs, organized labor, churches, banking groups, farmers and fraternal

⁸⁸ Melanie Rich, “‘She Would Raise Hens to Aid War’: The Contributions of Oklahoma Women during World War I” *Chronicles of Oklahoma* 81 (Fall 2003): 334; Elizabeth Cassiday West, “‘Yours For Home and Country’: The War Work of the South Carolina Women’s Committee” *Proceedings of the South Carolina Historical Association* (2001): 59; Marsha Gordon, “Onward Kitchen Soldiers: Mobilizing the Domestic During World War I” *Canadian Review of American Studies* 29:2 (1999): 61-87.

lodges.⁸⁹ In many cases, these organizations and other groups drew their membership from a specific class, community or line of work. For instance, reports on the USFA's summer classes state that "the majority of these students are teachers."⁹⁰ The Women's Committee of the Illinois State Council of National Defense, who "got behind Hoover" and signed a public pledge for food conservation, included three wives of attorneys, a wife of an accountant, a teacher and a doctor.⁹¹ Most of the chairpersons of the Women's Committee of the Kentucky Council on National Defense, which claimed that "the emphasis was [placed] on *FOOD*,"⁹² were members of families whose breadwinners held middle class professions (see figure 1). A list of the town chairpersons for the Los

⁸⁹ For example, a USFA circular titled, "United States Food Administration Suggestions for Enlisting the Active Support of Fraternal Organizations" called on fraternal lodges to have fewer courses in meals and use "conservation menus" for banquets, encourage "the consumption of local products" and give "a few minutes on the program at regular meetings to the subject of Food, thus keeping the membership advised of the constantly developing aspects of the food situation." "United States Food Administration Suggestions for Enlisting the Active Support of Fraternal Organizations" March 1918, California Food Administration Records, National Archives Division, San Bruno, CA.

⁹⁰ College administrators and students also came together to volunteer with the Food Administration. See, for example, "Columbia Aids Hoover" *New York Times* 1/17/1918, "Simmons Seniors Plan to Graduate Next February" *Boston Daily Globe* 7/1/1918 and "Northwest Notes" Davis County (Utah) *Clipper* 8/2/1918.

⁹¹ *Chicago Tribune* 6/20/1917. Professions taken from the 1920 United States Census. The chart reflects only locatable names in the 1920 U.S. Census. Some names were missing and other names presented too many options. Also, illegible professions and professions listed as "none" or "retired" were omitted, except when a husband's profession was listed. In these cases (which constituted the majority), the husband's profession was used. Compiling numerical data on class presents the problem of how to define, in many ways, a culturally constructed concept, empirically. Unfortunately, it would be nearly impossible to determine the class identification of individuals in (enough) specific households, thus using professions (the best demographic data available) is the best option. This dissertation does not argue that class can be defined by profession. Data on professions is used in this instance (and a few others) only because it is locatable (and it is worth noting that white collar families did often exhibit similar cultural behavior (e.g., patterns of consumption)). For a discussion on the drawbacks of defining class by profession, see Burton Bledstein and Robert Johnston eds., *The Middling Sorts: Explorations in the History of the American Middle Class* (New York Routledge, 2001). Report of the Activities of the Kentucky Council of Defense to January 1, 1920, pg. 81, Connecticut State Library, Hartford CT; "Food Administration: Ten Lessons for Conservation, Lessons I to V," Folder: Bulletins #1-17, Box 7, United States Food Administration Records, Herbert Hoover Presidential Library, West Branch, IA; "Schedule of Bulletins," Folder: Bulletins #1-17, Box 7, Herbert Hoover Presidential Library, West Branch, IA.

⁹² From the summer of 1917.

Angeles County State Council of Defense Women's Committee reflects a similar statistical breakdown (see figure 2).⁹³

Figure 1: Percentage Class Breakdown of County Leaders of the Kentucky State Council of Defense Women's Committee

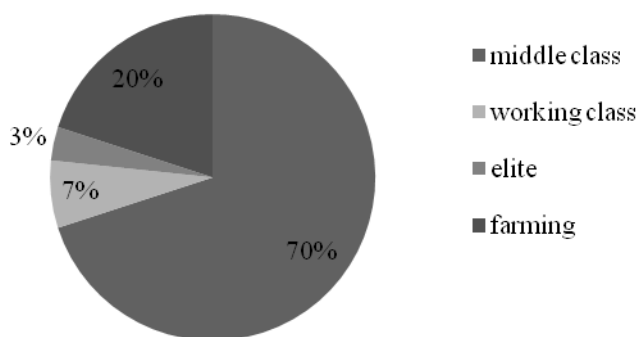
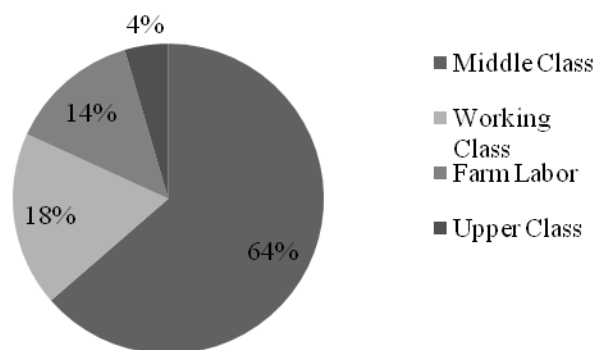


Figure 2: Percentage Class Breakdown of Chairpersons for Town Units in Los Angeles County



⁹³ The chart reflects only locatable names in the 1920 U.S. Census. Some names were missing and other names presented too many options. For example, the list of Los Angeles county chairpersons did not always provide middle initials and there were multiple options for "James White." Also, illegible and professions listed as "none" or "retired" were omitted, except when a husband's profession was listed. In these cases (which constituted the majority), the husband's profession was used. Report of the State Council of Defense of California to Governor William D. Stephens (6/1/1917-1/1/1919), Los Angeles Public Central Library, 12-13.

The U.S. Government instructed Women's Committees of State Councils of Defense to circulate USFA conservation instructions, many of which included subtle, class-coded language. A booklet/lecture entitled "Ten Lessons for Food Conservation," declared that "House-wife, father, children, are equally concerned and equally under obligation to enter the partnership." While language expressing the ideal of having a household with a sole, male breadwinner certainly could have also been directed at a working class readership, it normalized a disproportionately middle class experience. The document proceeded to use the protests of Italian Housewives in New York against the rising price of Italian cheese as an example of ignorance, noting that they "do not know how to cook with any other type of cheese in the same way...in ignorance of the fact that many American cheeses serve every purpose equally as well." The USFA's solution: "to instruct them, without being patronizing, on how to use American cheese for the same purposes." The document's usage of the phrase "without being patronizing," was inherently patronizing to the experiences of these predominantly immigrant working class protesters. Yet, to a middle class readership, concerned about rising prices, but without the experience of taking part of a violent protest, this language might have resonated. The USFA's model-to instruct and conserve- stood in opposition to the tactics of many in the urban working class throughout their 1917 anti-H.C.L. protests.⁹⁴

More general instructions called for citizens to follow USFA "substitute" recipes, sign cards pledging to abide by USFA regulations, or place USFA posters in viewable locations. In many cases, the creators of these posters had specific viewers in mind. A

⁹⁴ "Food Administration: Ten Lessons for Conservation, Lessons I to V," pp. 5 and 8, Folder: Bulletins #1-17, Box 7, United States Food Administration Records, Herbert Hoover Presidential Library, West Branch, IA.

card/poster for food retailers emphasized the law, since hoarding and profiteering were legally punishable. “Congress has passed a food law, which forbids any person to speculate, hoard or exact excessive prices for any necessary food,” it declared. “Every dealer, large or small, licensed or unlicensed, is subject to this law, and is also liable to the stoppage of his supplies if he violates it.” The USFA hoped for voluntary cooperation from retailers, but, because it was enforceable by law, compliance was not a choice. On the other hand, when consumers were asked to have wheatless or meatless meals, they could, at least partly, ignore the request. Fittingly, a USFA pledge card intended for “housewives,” appealed to their “moral obligation.”⁹⁵

The California Women’s Committee of the State Council of Defense took on an especially large role in directing conservation efforts for its state. An auxiliary of the California State Council of Defense, the Women’s Committee “was organized to coordinate and centralize the organized forces of women of the state” and “to enlist the cooperation of unorganized women,” and “also to provide a channel through which the different Government Agencies and Departments could speedily and effectively reach the women with directions and suggestions to help the Government win the war.” Consisting of a central committee and county-level organizations, the Women’s Committee, cooperated with local women’s clubs, secured over 600,000 pledges to follow USFA guidelines, and launched an “educational speaking campaign.” In addition, the Women’s Committee circulated USFA conservation guidelines and recipes, and “receiv[ed] and

⁹⁵ “To Retail Food Merchants,” Folder: Cards, Small Display Pieces, Box 7, United States Food Administration Records, Herbert Hoover Presidential Library, West Branch, IA; Pledge Card (Burlington, Iowa), Folder: Cards, Small Display Pieces, Box 7, United States Food Administration Records, Herbert Hoover Presidential Library, West Branch, IA.

transmit[ed] complaints of consumers.” As one Women’s Committee document states, “The burden of Conservation for the State was placed upon the Women’s Committee.”⁹⁶

In addition to practicing and promoting USFA conservation guidelines, many members of the Women’s Committee of the California State Council of Defense took on the role of the producer by joining the canning industry to aid the war and lower prices. Nationwide reports chronicled similar efforts to fight the HCL by canning perishables. Commonplace were headlines, such as “Preserves of Girls of Fulton helping to Reduce the High Cost of Living,” or “Experts Show Housewives How to Buy Better and Pay Less.” The California Women’s Committee charged Katherine Philips Edson with coordinating “women in industry.” Edson had extensive experience lobbying on behalf of women industrial workers. A leader in the women’s suffrage movement and member of the California Progressive Party Central Committee, Edson served on the California Industrial Welfare Commission, which helped to pass minimum wage and maximum hours laws. In many cases, Edson’s job centered on supervising working conditions for women already working in the canning industry, but she also oversaw efforts from middle class women to join the ranks of labor to help maintain the nation’s supply of food.⁹⁷

⁹⁶ Report of the State Council of Defense of California to Governor William D. Stephens (6/1/1917-1/1/19), Los Angeles Public Central Library, 32, 34, 54 and 53.

⁹⁷ Edson, though, noted that this was less necessary in the West (she did not give a reason), but she did mention that a need for replacement labor from women would come “when our men are being withdrawn for the draft.” Canning was of the utmost importance, since according to some estimates, as much as fifty percent of California’s perishables had gone to waste throughout certain months of the war. Thus, some middle class women began canning not simply for wages, but also to help prevent waste. Others volunteered for USFA administrative positions that became necessary because of the increased need for cannery work. As a California State Council of Defense Women’s Committee report stated, “In July, the Women Directors were asked to become responsible for the issuing of permits for sugar for canning...About twelve hundred women assisted in this service...[it] was the largest specific piece of work

One instance of middle class participation in cannery work actually caused a great deal of irritation for Edson and the USFA. At the beginning of the canning season in 1917, “a lot of excitable Sicilians” in a San Jose cannery went on strike to protest low wages and poor working conditions. The strike quickly spread to canneries in Oakland and San Francisco. Under the assumption that the food was about to spoil, “some club women went into the C.F.C.A. cannery to save the fruit, as they thought, when, in fact, about all they succeeded in doing in the minds of the public was to break the strike.” While the public may well have approved, it was bothersome to government officials, who were focused on maintaining labor peace during the war. Herbert Hoover’s primary representatives in California “were able to get the whole matter adjusted most satisfactorily,” convincing the workers to go back to work for a five cents per hour increase, but with no recognition of the union. Although Edson recognized many of the grievances as legitimate, the local press was less sympathetic, reporting “violence” and even agitation by the IWW.⁹⁸

done by women of this organization during the entire year.” Helen R. Kenealy, the aforementioned wife of an accountant, who reported attempted misuse and hoarding of sugar by “The Little Church of Christ,” was just one such volunteer for the city of Los Angeles. Harold Powell to Newton D. Baker 8/18/1919, Folder 3, Box 1, Powell Family Papers, UCLA Special Collections, Charles Young Library; Report of the State Council of Defense of California to Governor William D. Stephens (6/1/1917-1/1/19), p. 56, Los Angeles Public Central Library. Atlanta *Constitution* 10/22/1917; New York *Times* 6/9/1918. Los Angeles Division of U.S. Food Administration/LMC/M to The American Protective League, Los Angeles 10/26/1918, California Food Administration Records, National Archives- San Bruno, CA; Helen R. Kenealy to Louis M. Cole 10/20/1918, California Food Administration Records, National Archives- San Bruno, CA; American Protective League Report in re: Dr. W.S. Thompson, 1319 Fifth Avenue 9/28/1918, California Food Administration Records, National Archives- San Bruno, CA; United States Census, 1920, Los Angeles Assembly District 62, Los Angeles, California; Roll: T625_105; Page: 4B; Enumeration District: 143.

⁹⁸ See, for example, Oakland *Tribune* 7/26/1917; Katherine Edson to Miss Bertha von der Nienburg 8/9/1917, Folder 7, Box 2, Katherine Philips Edson Papers, UCLA Special Collections, Charles Young Library.

Yet even Edson, who had spent much of her career fighting for better working conditions and remained an advocate for labor, expressed resentment over the idea that American farmers and consumers had sacrificed for the war, while immigrant and foreign workers had taken advantage of the labor shortage. To a colleague, Edson wrote, “I feel that if the National Government does not soon take hold of this question of the allied [and domestic] aliens being forced to respond to the war demand just as our native sons that we are going to face a terrific crisis all over the country.”⁹⁹ Edson additionally wrote that other members of the State Council of Defense in attendance at a two day session had heard a report from the County Chairman on the issue that “was most disquieting and discouraging.” Edson, like many other middle class Americans, valued sacrifice and industriousness.

Whether women, drawing on their wartime experiences in Women’s Committees and other groups working with the USFA, or men who had promoted USFA practices through fraternal organizations or individually, middle class Americans had altered their relationship to consumption during the war. Summarizing Edson’s place in the Women’s Committee, her wartime leadership in the Industrial Welfare Commission and the role of women like her across the country, a biographical sketch declared,

We have felt rather original with our pure food regulators and our Mr. Hoover! No, there is nothing new about the commission idea, but there is something new in using it wholesale as a governing instrument for a big, modern state. And there is something newer yet in the placing of a woman at the head of one of the commissions...”

⁹⁹ Edson was responding to the notion that “a great bitterness exists among the farming element that their sons should be withdrawn from production and that they are being obliged to employ aliens for whose battles their sons have been drafted, while these aliens are taking advantage of every possible industrial problem to force wages and make trouble.” Katherine Edson to Miss Marie Obenauer 9/12/1917, Folder 12, Box 2, Katherine Philips Edson Papers, UCLA Special Collections, Charles Young Library.

Many women left World War I with the experience of having connected their consumption practices to the national economy, contributing a growing Progressive Era trend. Just as pre-World War I middle class women had used their power as consumers to advocate the passage of child labor or minimum work week laws, these wartime volunteers used consumption to press for both specific and ambitious goals. They hoped to regulate the food supply and influence prices, nationally, and had the federal government behind them. Many, like members of the Women's Committees of State Councils of Defense, had also promoted USFA consumption guidelines to their local communities or had become involved in production by participating in or overseeing the canning of fruits and vegetables. It comes as no surprise that in the immediate postwar period, a colleague of Herbert Hoover, after meeting with a few women's organizations, would report to him that "the women are ready for some program which will help them to secure an understanding of present economic conditions and enable them to take a part in bettering these." World War I had brought a strategy of consumer organizing in support of broad, ambitious goals that ultimately rested on the power of the state to stabilize prices and bring about a just economy.¹⁰⁰

Government and Citizens in Cooperation: The USFA and the American Protective League

¹⁰⁰ Untitled biographical sketch of Katherine Philips Edson, Katherine Philips Edson Papers, UCLA Special Collections, Charles Young Library; Martha Van Rensselaer to Herbert Hoover 5/10/1920, Folder: Van Rensselaer, Martha, 1919 1920, Box 16, Herbert Hoover Pre-Commerce Papers, Herbert Hoover Presidential Library, West Branch, IA.

The reach of the USFA extended even beyond its conservation programs to unusual practice of coordinating community vigilante justice against hoarders and profiteers. Over the course of the war, the USFA and participating organizations worked with a secret vigilante justice group, consisting of disproportionately middle class citizens, called the American Protective League (APL). Food Administrators provided APL “agents” information on suspected hoarders and profiteers and allowed them to carry out investigations as quasi-federal investigators. Feeding off World War I super-patriotism, APL agents and the citizens who accused their neighbors of hoarding and profiteering, tied the practice of consumer activism, to a host of unrelated community matters, ranging from divorce proceedings to the standoffishness of a neighbor. An analysis of the Los Angeles American Protective League will provide a community-level illustration of these practices.

Almost at the onset of USFA activities, local and state Food Administrators received a myriad of letters reporting hoarding or profiteering in their local communities. In fact, the USFA had asked citizens to report violations as part of their voluntary participation in the USFA. Many of these letters came from citizens holding middle class professions, and reported varying types of profiteering or hoarding. An office worker named Myron McNeal, wrote the USFA merely on suspicion of a neighbor. “I am calling to your attention, my suspicions in regard to a certain couple who reside at 4513 Wesley Ave., in that I, as well as some of my neighbors believe that this couple is guilty of food hoarding,” McNeal wrote. “Their actions are rather peculiar in that they will not associate with any of their neighbors,” McNeal continued, “they have large orders of groceries of

all kinds delivered...no one is permitted to come nearer [to] the house than the sidewalk.” Perhaps most extreme was a letter Louis Cole received from a woman reporting her husband’s hoarding of sugar. According to the woman, her husband insisted on putting an extra spoonful of sugar in his coffee each morning, despite her admonitions that he was being unpatriotic and violating Food Administration guidelines. Other letters were virtually devoid of any reference to patriotism and simply reflected a general distaste for rising prices and profiteering. “It is a damnable outrage the way the Cafeterias of this city are allowed to gouge the people in prices...to see a damn bunch like the Boos Bros and the B & M take advantage of the situation and charge several hundred per cent profit just because they can is very discouraging to anyone who has to patronize such places,” one writer declared.¹⁰¹ Consumers inundated the Food Administration with such letters and the agency could not possibly investigate all of them. As a result, they turned to a recently formed, loosely federally-sponsored vigilante justice group called “The American Protective League.”¹⁰²

Formed by Albert M. Briggs in the early months of 1917, the American Protective League defined itself as “A volunteer organization to aid the Bureau of Investigation of the Department of Justice.” Its official history defines “A.P.L.” as “a silent, unknown army of more than a quarter million of the most loyal and intelligent citizens of America,

¹⁰¹ Frank Wilson to Louis Cole 8/7/1918, California Food Administration Records, National Archives Division, San Bruno, CA.

¹⁰² Myron McNeal was mistaken as to the activities of his neighbors. An American Protective League investigation found that Mrs. William Lindsrom, one of the accused neighbors, suffered from tuberculosis. “She is sensitive about her affliction and keeps it from her neighbors,” Operative #1432, reported. “She was very kind and good in showing the investigator thru the house.” The agent found no evidence of wrongdoing. Letter to Louis M. Cole 2/20/1928, California Food Administration Records, National Archives Division, San Bruno, CA; Myron McNeal to Louis M. Cole 8/20/1918, California Food Administration Records, National Archives Division, San Bruno, CA.

who indeed did spring to arms over night.” The Bureau of Investigations (the early FBI) empowered the APL as a secret organization of private citizens to investigate cases of alleged food hoarding, as well as pro-German subversion and draft dodging. Displaying “secret service” badges, purchased for seventy-five cents, APL agents investigated complaints of profiteering and food hoarding through extra-legal means, but with the encouragement of the members of the Food Administration and the Department of Justice. They followed suspects, interrogated them, searched through garbage cans, broke into houses and even made arrests, dubiously using citizen’s arrest and disturbing the peace statutes as justification.¹⁰³

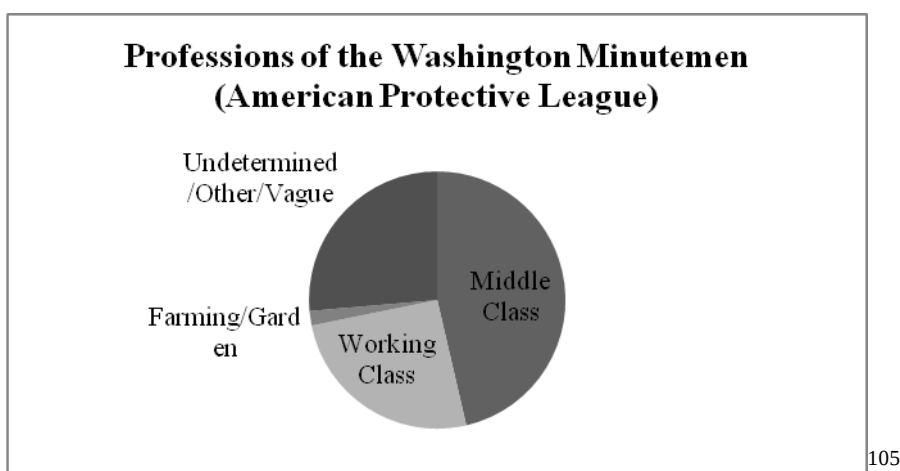
The APL was formed in cooperation with the Department of Justice and had the support of a number of governmental officials. In an APL report, Victor Elting wrote that he had met with Herbert Hoover about the APL and he told him that “our organization could do him great service.” Local USFA officials confirmed this support, though the APL’s relationship to the U.S. Government was secretive enough that at least one senator had been unaware of it. When an APL agent ran down a pedestrian with his car, the man’s wife informed Senator Joseph Ransdell, who wrote the War Department to “inquire as to whether the relation between the American Protective League and the Government was such as to make the Government at least morally responsible.” Sensitive to the problem posed by a close governmental connection to the APL, the Attorney General had requested that APL agents change the writing on the badges from “Under the direction of the United States Department of Justice” to “Cooperating with the U.S. Dept. of Justice.” Very shortly, the Attorney General asserted that the APL could not mention

¹⁰³ Joan M. Jensen, *The Price of Vigilance* (Chicago: Rand McNally, 1968), 22 and 46; Emerson Hough, *The Web* (Chicago: The Reilly & Lee Co., 1919), 13.

any connection the organization had with the government. Yet this did not stop Food Administrators from using their services. After the war, one Food Administration official wrote of the APL in Louisiana, “It is only through the voluntary support of such agencies that we can be assured of compliance with all our regulations and requests.”¹⁰⁴

Drawn from the ranks of “business and professional men,” a substantial percentage of APL agents held middle class professions. While APL administrators ensured that virtually all professions were represented among agents in order to address espionage and hoarding in all sectors of society, middle class professions, such as teachers, dentists, managers and clerks were most prevalent. Because APL documents rarely listed the actual names of agents, it is difficult to obtain extensive data on their backgrounds. However, a list of agents for precinct 1 of the Washington Minutemen division of the APL and their occupations is available. The following represents a statistical breakdown of their professions:

¹⁰⁴ Report of Victor Elting 1/9/1918, Folder: Reporting Diary, Box 8, Charles Frey Papers, UCLA Special Collections, Charles Young Library; “A Summary of the...” pg 9, Folder: Misc Printed Material, Box 8, Charles Frey Papers, UCLA Special Collections, Charles Young Library; FLR to Sen. Joseph Ransdell 1/9/1920, Washington Minutemen microfilm, Box 10, Charles Frey Papers, UCLA Special Collections, Charles Young Library; Report of Victor Elting 2/8/1918, Folder: Reporting Diary, Box 8, Charles Frey Papers, UCLA Special Collections, Charles Young Library; Stenographic Report of the Meeting of the American Protective League 1/25/1918, Folder: MISC Material re: APL, Box 9, Charles Frey Papers, UCLA Special Collections, Charles Young Library.



Throughout 1917 and 1918, the California Food Administrators, including Los Angeles Food Administrator Louis Cole, forwarded letters reporting profiteering and hoarding of foodstuffs to the APL for investigation. Of the California APL's activities, the organization's official historian noted, "some of the cases were odd, some mysterious, and a good many of them big."¹⁰⁶

One case originating from Grace C. Simons, the wife of an attorney and member of the Women's Division of the California State Council of Defense, demonstrates a detailed level of cooperation between the USFA, its cooperating organizations, and the APL. Simons was an active supporter of the Republican Party and a member of the California Federation of Women's Clubs. A supporter of progressive reform, Simons became president of the pro-women's suffrage Political Equality League in Southern California in 1911. The League reportedly printed in excess of 1 million leaflets and held

¹⁰⁵ The Minutemen were a postwar outgrowth of the APL in Washington. "Public Reserve Precinct 1," Box 10, Charles Frey Papers, UCLA Special Collections, Charles Young Library.

¹⁰⁶ Emerson Hough, *The Web* (Chicago: The Reilly & Lee Co., 1919), 332.

as many as dozens of meetings per week. After the war, she would become an ardent supporter of using U.S. funds to help European reconstruction. “America could take the lead in such a program, and in doing so would only be answering to moral responsibility,” Simons would claim. She was also a member of the Friday Mourning Club,¹⁰⁷ which became involved in an “anti-extravagance campaign” during the postwar period in conjunction with a massive Department of Justice-led “Women’s Division” campaign to bring down the postwar cost of living (discussed at length in chapter 3). Speakers at the club blamed the postwar H.C.L. at least in part on “high wages,” one claiming that “the most serious of all is the fact that the wave of high prices is actually beginning to undermine the home.”¹⁰⁸

Throughout May and early June of 1918, Simons took periodic walks down La Brea Ave. and noticed a man on top of a garage tossing pieces of bread, rolls and cakes to the birds. The man, Chris Paul, reportedly said “it was for God’s birds” as he discarded the baked goods. As an active member of the Women’s Division of the State Council of Defense, Simons was dismayed to witness such a “deliberate motive in the waste.” After patiently watching, Simons drafted a letter to the Food Administration, describing the violation and signing her name on State Council of Defense letterhead. On June 6th, Louis

¹⁰⁷ The Friday Morning Club Yearbook states, “The subject of Food Conservation was emphasized at club programs. War menus were used at club luncheons and pledges were distributed to all the members.” Friday Morning Club Yearbook 1917/1918-1919/1920 pg. 62, Los Angeles Natural History Museum Archives, Los Angeles, CA.

¹⁰⁸ Los Angeles *Times* 9/21/1918, 5/23/1921, 12/22/1922, 10/29/1923, 6/3/1924, 6/18/1920; “The Friday Morning Club, November 14, 1919, 940 South Figueroa Street, Los Angeles. Topic- ‘Causes and Cures for the High Cost of Living.’ Ralph P. Merritt,” Folder 3, Box 32, John Haynes Papers, UCLA Special Collection, Charles Young Library; Jane Apostol, “Why Women Should Not Have the Vote: Anti-Suffrage Views in the Southland in 1911” *Southern California Quarterly* 70 (Spring 1988): 32; Jane Apostol, *South Pasadena: A Centennial History 1888-1988* (Pasadena: South Pasadena Public Library, 1987), 66.

Cole and his assistant received the letter. Flooded with countless reports of food hoarding, waste and profiteering, his office forwarded the information to the American Protective League branch in Los Angeles, with whom they had been working for many months. In a letter to the APL, the Los Angeles County USFA described Simon's accusation, stating that "it looks like deliberate waste," and asked "to have you investigate this gentleman and give this office a report of your findings."¹⁰⁹

In this and most other food cases, the APL acted on a clear request from the USFA, and often found that reportedly odd behavior among the accused was actually normal. Throughout the next two weeks, Operative #895 snooped around Paul's neighborhood. Investigating the case "thoroughly," the operative based his conclusions on an interview of one of Paul's neighbors and tenants. According to the neighbor, Paul was born in Germany and moved to the United States when he was nine years-old. "His attitudes and remarks were always patriotic," he subscribed to Liberty Bonds and the Red Cross Fund, and "his daughter is now practically devoting all her time to the Red Cross work at the Los Angeles Station." The neighbor proceeded to tell Operative #895 that "it was his custom" to survey nearby garbage cans and pick out "scraps of bread, etc." to feed the birds. The operative concluded that he had not wasted any food and that "the

¹⁰⁹ Grace C. Simons to Louis Cole 6/5/1918, California Food Administration Records, National Archives Division, San Bruno, CA; City Administrator to Mrs. Seward A. Simons 6/6/1918, California Food Administration Records, National Archives Division, San Bruno, CA; City Administrator to American Protective League, California Food Administration Records, National Archives Division, San Bruno, CA; American Protective League Report In re: Chris Paul, 1766 La Brea Ave., Hollywood, Cal., California Food Administration Records, National Archives Division, San Bruno, CA; W.A. Hammel to Louis Cole 6/29/1918, California Food Administration Records, National Archives Division, San Bruno, CA.

original complaint was not warranted.” The APL subsequently informed Louis Cole that “nothing of importance developed in this case.”¹¹⁰

In addition to helping to politicize the consumption practices of themselves and others, APL agents, Food Administration volunteers, and the suspicious residents who wrote them, did so in a heightened atmosphere of super patriotism. A number of historians have presented World War I as a central moment in the growth of the Federal Government’s capacity to suppress dissent, turning a blind eye to excessive patriotism and sometimes overtly or tacitly encouraging it.¹¹¹ One of many examples involves a few men in Thetford Township, Michigan, who tarred and feathered a local resident for only purchasing \$1,500 of Liberty Bonds, when they felt that \$3,000 would have been more suitable. In this politically-charged climate, false accusations directed at a man feeding birds or neighbors keeping 200 pounds of sugar in their basements, were not unique.¹¹²

Responding to claims that often rested on mere suspicion, APL agents used evasive investigative techniques. When the APL received information suggesting that Deputy County Assessor John H. Lane had used his position to obtain excessive amounts of canned goods, the Los Angeles USFA and APL devised a strategy that consisted of using his divorce against him and searching his apartment without his consent. Agents

¹¹⁰ American Protective League Report In re: Chris Paul, 1766 La Brea Ave., Hollywood, Cal., California Food Administration Records, National Archives Division, San Bruno, CA; W.A. Hammel to Louis Cole 6/29/1918, California Food Administration Records, National Archives Division, San Bruno, CA.

¹¹¹ See, for example, Richard McCormick, *Seeing Reds: Federal Surveillance of Radicals in the Pittsburgh Mill District, 1917-1921* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press: 1997), Joan M. Jensen, *The Price of Vigilance* (Chicago: Rand McNally, 1968), David Kennedy, *Over Here: The First World War and American Society* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), 45-92.

¹¹² Paul L. Murphy, *World War I and the Origin of Civil Liberties in the United States* (New York: Norton, 1979), 127-132.

were informed that “he has recently had some divorce proceedings with his wife,” that “they are not friendly” and that “she will probably give you some information.” APL operatives then proceeded to use a key borrowed from Lane’s landlord to enter the apartment and to search the premises. In Lane’s cellar, operatives #2604 and #2557 found nearly 29 cases of canned foods. Without ever being interviewed, Lane was in violation of USFA regulations.

Such extreme examples suggest that the super-patriotic atmosphere of World War I America, coupled with a belief among citizens that they could play a role in reducing prices, led many citizens to further politicize their consumption practices and to connect them to their senses of community. For numerous Americans, consumption of food was no longer an individual or even familial activity. Indeed, some believed it was their duty to their country and community to inform the authorities of a neighbor that might be hoarding food, a retailer who might be serving meat on Tuesdays, or a corner market with prices a little too high. They were inspired to join the APL, the Women’s Committee, or another organization’s government-sponsored program to control prices and the food supply. While Americans had associated their consumption practices with organized communities since the colonial period, Progressive Era organizations, such as the National Consumers’ League, had heightened this process. This was, in part, because of legitimization from the state, which passed new labor legislation, pure food and drug laws, etc. The Food Administration, through the language of patriotism and the desire of Americans to stabilize prices, made consumption a paramount concern for individuals,

neighborhoods, women's clubs, fraternal organizations, parent-teacher associations and public libraries¹¹³ that, in many cases, had hitherto focused on other issues.¹¹⁴

Even though food prices increased by approximately seventeen percent throughout 1917-1918, by most published accounts, government-sponsored consumer organizing through the USFA and other organizations was a success. Of the USFA's effectiveness in promoting conservation among the American public, a *New York Times* editorial declared, "We showed that we were willing to make sacrifices, that we could save." Nationally renowned reporter Louis Seibold also wrote of the "successes" of the Food Administration. Some even penned poems about USFA accomplishments. One,

¹¹³ In turn, with state-backing, these organizations, and the American Protective League in particular, gave individuals a means to connect the unrelated grievances that they had with members of their local communities- resentment of a local African American retailer, a divorcing spouse, or a standoffish neighbor- to the heightened issue of responsible food consumption.

¹¹⁴ A wide array of literature focuses on the relationship between consumption practices and both large and small communities. Progressive Era groups, such as the National Consumers' League, organized at national, state and city levels. Lizabeth Cohen, Dana Frank, Ardis Cameron and Roy Rosenzweig are among the many labor historians who explore how unions made consumption an important part of addressing workers' concerns, both in their communities at the workplace and in their neighborhoods. Other historians, such as William Frieberger and Joseph A. Spencer discuss how working class communities organized around rising prices and rents. These groups organized at the neighborhood level and led anti-high price campaigns. In the case of anti-high food price protests, the many socialist participants, if not appealing to wartime language, had to oppose propaganda that accused them of working with Germany to undermine the war effort. Historians of the American Revolution and other wars have long explored the relationship between expressions of patriotism and pre-war or wartime boycotts/adjustment of consumption practices. See Landon Storrs, *Civilizing Capitalism: The National Consumers' League, Women's Activism, and Labor Standards in the New Deal Era* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2000), Lizabeth Cohen, *Making a New Deal: Industrial Workers in Chicago, 1919-1939* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990), Ardis Cameron, *Radicals of the Worst Sort: Laboring Women in Lawrence, Massachusetts, 1960-1912* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993), Roy Rosenzweig, *Eight Hours for What We Will: Workers and Leisure in an Industrial City, 1870-1920* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983), William Frieberger, "War, Prosperity and Hunger: The New York Food Riots of 1917" *Labor History* 25:2 (1984), Joseph A. Spencer, "New York City Tenant Organizations and the Post-World War I Housing Crisis" in Ronald Lawson and Mark Naison, eds., *The Tenant Movement in New York, 1904-1984* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1986), 51-93, T.H. Breen, *The Marketplace of Revolution: How Consumer Politics Shaped American Independence* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004). Myron McNeal to Louis M. Cole 8/20/1918, California Food Administration Records, National Archives Division, San Bruno, CA; American Protective League Report In re: Mr. and Mrs. Wm. T. Lindstrom, Myron McNeal to Louis M. Cole 8/20/1918, California Food Administration Records, National Archives Division, San Bruno, CA.

entitled “the imperishables,” stated, “On profits false they waged war; And business ways that were not clean; Were quickly banished from the scene.” Participants in the USFA flooded its leaders with letters of praise, commending the USFA’s achievements. One letter to Harold Powell, head of the perishables divisions, expressed thanks for “the wonderful gift of leadership that my superior officers possessed, particularly our chief, Mr. Hoover.” Another reflected on the “success achieved in the work of the Perishables Division.” Many Americans departed from the war with high hopes that the combination of state action and voluntarism would be effective in addressing consumers’ concerns.¹¹⁵

Conclusion:

Despite the fact that prices had steadily increased during the war, many Americans viewed the U.S. Food Administration as a great success. USFA policies intensified a growing trend, in which middle class Americans connected their consumption practices to the potential of solving societal problems and to the state’s ability to help. Under Federal Government control, organized USFA volunteers further politicized their own consumption habits and policed the practices of their fellow citizens. Similar to many organized middle class consumers of the pre-World War I decades of the Progressive Era, who decried monopolies and unfair (or lack of) labor

¹¹⁵ *Historical Statistics of the United States Colonial Times to 1970 Part 1* (Washington D.C.: U.S. Department of Commerce, 1975), 211; San Antonio *Light* 12/5/1918; New York *Times* 10/29/1918; “The Imperishables,” Folder 3, Box 1, Powell Family Papers, UCLA Special Collections, Charles Young Library; Priebe to Harold Powell 11/13/1919, Folder 3, Box 1, Powell Family Papers, UCLA Special Collections, Charles Young Library; R.H. Switzler to Harold Powell 11/22/1919, Folder 3, Box 1, Powell Family Papers, UCLA Special Collections, Charles Young Library; See also, EWJH to Harold Powell 11/10/1919, Folder 3, Box 1, Powell Family Papers, UCLA Special Collections, Charles Young Library; W.R. Dadson to Harold Powell 11/21/1919, Folder 3, Box 1, Powell Family Papers, UCLA Special Collections, Charles Young Library.

legislation (particularly for women and children), the USFA paid attention to the concept of fairness in an industrial economy.

However, rhetoric surrounding the passage of the Lever Act, the words of the U.S. Attorneys who enforced it, and the language of a variety of USFA documents expressed a somewhat different concept of fairness in the wartime political economy. They heightened rhetoric against “manipulators” and “profiteers,” now calling them unpatriotic, as well as greedy. Politicians, the press and USFA documents also vehemently condemned strikes and the extra-legal, anti-high-food-price protests of the working class. By the end of the war, Americans, including many who had worked with the Food Administration, grew more upset with working class radicalism and supposed greed- attributes that contrasted with the values of industriousness and thrift. A National Council of Defense Report suggested that the middle class had suffered the most from “profiteering among capitalists and profiteering among labor,” citing underproduction and high wages as primary culprits.” A campaign adviser to former Governor of California and current Senator Hiram Johnson, who had worked with Catherine Edson on food issues before and during the war, mirrored the sentiment of the Council of Defense report, stating “a very crying issue of the times is the lack of stability in the price of labor and commodities, both of which are of course at the bottom of the evil known as the ‘high cost of living.’” He elaborated that while laborers enjoyed higher wages, “the great majority of the people and especially those who work for regular salaries...have an exceedingly hard time to make ends meet”¹¹⁶

¹¹⁶ Los Angeles *Times* 9/4/1919; MFL to Hiram Johnson 4/17/1919, Folder 14, Box 2, Katherine Philips Edson Papers, UCLA Special Collections, Charles Young Library.

Both wartime political rhetoric and the USFA's style of organization would play roles in shaping grassroots and government-led middle class consumer movements in the postwar period. The perceived success of the USFA, for example, led one government official in the postwar period to proclaim that women "can to a large extent control prices." While postwar middle class consumers would also borrow symbols and strategies of organization from the working class, many would depend on the helping hand of the government in their attempts to stabilize the high cost of living.¹¹⁷

¹¹⁷ Edith Strauss to "Madam" 11/8/1919, Department of Justice High Cost of Living Division Records, National Archives II, College Park, MD.

Chapter 2: Becoming Producers and Avoiding the Middleman: Home Garden and Municipal Market Campaigns

In the summer of 1919, an individual only identifying himself as F.G.B. called on the government to take action against “rank profiteering” of food throughout Los Angeles. Writing to the editors of the *Los Angeles Times*, he lamented, “Last year we ‘middle class’ could buy a pound of fine cherries for fifteen or twenty cents, two pounds of grapes or almost any other fruit for fifteen cents.” “Why are we now asked thirty-five cents for the same cherries and fifteen or twenty cents for a single pound of the same grapes?” F.G.B. considered himself “one of that ‘middle class’” who had trouble making ends meet. He would support any politician, regardless of party affiliation, who would embrace the slogan “Down With Profiteering” and “seriously consider the subject at once ere matters become more complicated and revolt inciting.” Among the central “profiteers” of postwar Los Angeles to individuals like F.G.B. were middlemen that stood between honest producers of food and consumers. Middle class consumers protested middlemen’s stranglehold over the production, distribution and retail of food, and supported new and existing methods to use the government to eliminate them.¹¹⁸

Middle class Los Angeles residents embraced two primary solutions to reduce their reliance on the middleman. First, during the war middle class consumers participated in the “home garden” movement. Consumers, private organizations, the city government, and the United States Food Administration collectively organized the movement in order to both aid the war effort and reduce rising food prices. By raising

¹¹⁸ *Los Angeles Times* 7/25/1919.

their own food, home gardeners circumvented all food profiteers, including middlemen. As the war came to a close, middle class residents attempted to continue the movement. In their efforts to maintain the movement, they persisted to appeal to a combination of patriotic, wartime themes and people's desire to fight the high cost of living.¹¹⁹ Second, throughout the war and postwar periods, citizens petitioned the local government to maintain municipal markets, at which small producers sold directly to consumers. In spite of their efforts to keep the markets open, city officials discontinued them in August of 1920. As a result, middle class consumers turned their attention to a campaign to place a proposition for state-run city markets on the California ballot.

In each of these endeavours, middle class consumers continued to draw on Progressive Era tradition of organization through voluntarism, and called for the expansion of city, state, and, in some cases, federal intervention into the economy. Middle class citizens sought to create a more just economy by coming together and committing themselves to home gardening and municipal market campaigns. But they also advocated new laws, ordinances and programs that would expand local and state market departments, and fund home gardening. Working with local, federal and state politicians, middle class organizers envisioned activist governments.

In the home garden movement, middle class activists spoke in a Progressive Era language that emphasized uplifting and protecting children and the poor, but placed an equal, if not greater, emphasis on their own economic self-interest. Participants in the

¹¹⁹ Americans had increasingly tied consumption practices to their notions of citizenship in the pre-World War I decades. Historian Charles McGovern argues that in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, "Americans came to understand spending as a form of citizenship, an important ritual of national identity in daily life." Charles F. McGovern, *Sold American: Consumption and Citizens, 1890-1945* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 3.

home garden movement claimed to teach children and the poor self-reliance, hard work and patriotism. Veterans of the Progressive movement, including Mrs. J.T. (Mary) Anderson, a social worker and wife of a civil service employee, led home gardening campaigns. Anderson and other leaders spoke in Progressive terms that promoted organizing for the benefit of children and the poor. They also, however, engaged with a growing postwar public discourse that lamented the impact of the high cost of living on the middle class.

Middle class consumers attempted to impose producerist values that had shaped the identity of the nineteenth century middle class onto the consumer economy in their activism to fight high food prices. While the home garden movement was a *consumer* protest against profiteering, home gardeners became *producers* and claimed to showcase the values of hard work and thrift. They claimed to be promoting producerist values in an economy that had yielded greedy non-producing middlemen, who threatened the “public” interest. Middle class participants in the home garden and municipal market movements additionally celebrated the paragon of honest farmer, who was portrayed as another victim of the greed of middlemen. The ideal farmer, according to many middle class consumers, desired to sell directly to consumers and only for a fair profit. This particular image of the honest producer was an ideal that contrasted with the actual practices of many farmers. Farmers did not adequately occupy municipal market stalls, opposed a California initiative for state-run municipal markets, and preferred cooperative marketing strategies that received, at best, mixed opinions from consumers. Nevertheless, middle class consumers continually referenced their version of the honest and diligent farmer as a symbol of economic fairness.

Whether criticizing the greed of food trusts, wholesalers or profiteering merchants, middle class consumers expressed a righteous conviction of the universalism of their values. They believed that all sectors of society should operate in accordance with the values of honesty, industriousness and thrift- as they (middle class consumers) defined them. Even as they organized to defend their own interests as middle class consumers, they painted other groups that acted on their own behalf as self-interested.

Drawing on their experiences during the war, middle class residents continued to connect their consumption practices to their senses of community. They envisioned solutions to rising prices that called for gardens in backyards and unused community lots, and for local municipal markets that intended to bring hard-working, honest producers and consumers closer together. By creating alternative places for food production and purchasing, middle class consumers sought to police the honesty of the major groups engaging in the local economy. Because the municipal market and home garden movements largely occurred at the community level, this chapter focuses on these movements in one city, Los Angeles, with periodic mention of national voices and trends. A spatially-large city with a warm climate that was conducive to backyard gardening, and a recent destination for middle class Midwesterners, Los Angeles provides an ideal setting for a case study on middle class anti-high food price activism. The city became an important local space in a national story of middle class consumer activism.¹²⁰

¹²⁰ The percentage of the male labor force in Los Angeles holding white collar professions was approximately fifteen percent higher than that of the United States as a whole. Clark Davis, *Company Men White-Collar Life and Corporate Cultures in Los Angeles, 1892-1941* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000), 77.

Food Prices, Rising Middle Class Discontent, and the Vilification of the Middleman

By the end of World War I, food prices throughout the United States had reached unparalleled levels. Many middle class Americans believed that neither themselves nor a large number of honest and hard-working farmers were to blame. They felt victimized by price increases and attributed them in large part to the greed of middlemen. According to these voices, the solution resided in the ability to use the state to bring the honest producer and the consumer closer together and eliminate the destructive influence of those in between.

Throughout the 1910s, food prices had increased at what many Americans correctly understood to be an alarming rate. From 1913 to 1919, prices for all articles of food rose by eight-six percent, with a twenty-seven percent increase occurring between 1917 and 1919. People everywhere took notice. One Chicago resident lamented in a letter to the *Tribune* that “Butter, already high for this time of year, has been suddenly increased...just when it should be steadily on the decline. A comparatively small head of lettuce at 15 cents seems exorbitant, while yeast has risen 300 percent.”¹²¹ In suburban Boston, one woman complained of the struggle to feed her family properly. “How long are these prices to continue?, she wondered. “Thousands of housewives are on the verge of a nervous breakdown trying to feed their families... Wives especially of clerks and

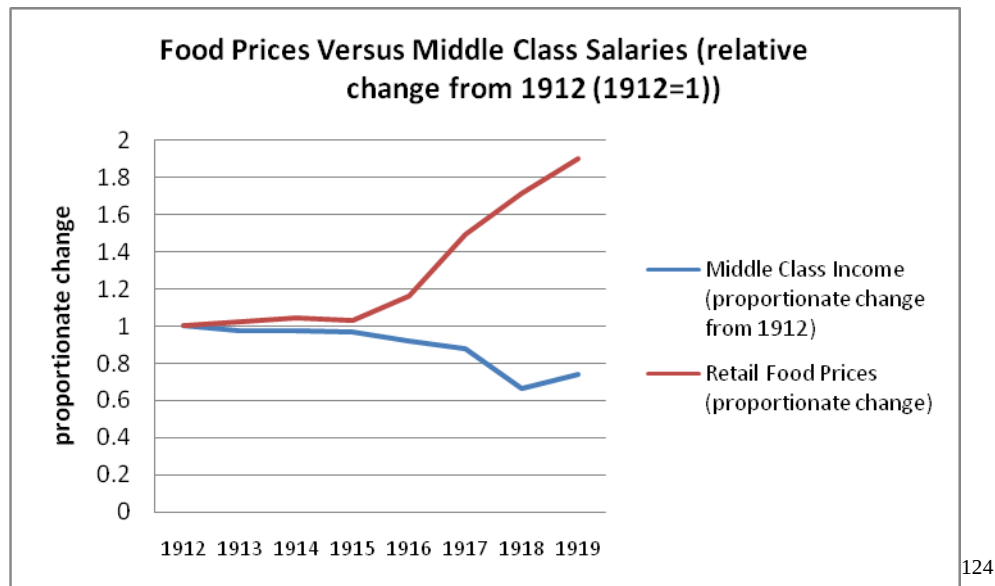
¹²¹ Responding to such concerns, Chicago Mayor Big Bill Thompson took a hard-line approach. “I advocate the enactment of laws providing for imprisonment of every person, firm or corporation, that becomes a party, directly or indirectly, to any combination, arrangement, agreement or understanding to fix the price of any article of food,” Thompson declared. Mayor Thompson 1919 campaign literature: under High Cost of Living, Folder 3, Box 75, Charles E. Merriam Papers, University of Chicago Special Collections, Regenstein Library; Boston *Globe* 8/10/1919.

men whose salaries have not increased while prices of foods daily soar higher.” Stating that “Living has become a struggle these days,” a Washington D.C. resident wrote the *Post* that she buys stewing meat once a week and “never get[s] it for less than 30 cents per pound.” Unsurprisingly, the *Post* called the high cost of food a “universal problem.”¹²²

Media sources began to report on the particular struggle of middle class Americans to pay high food prices. Many articles in newspapers, bulletins and magazines noted that as income had remained stagnant for salaried workers during the war, prices had increased. One New York *Times* article argued that whereas farmers and the working class enjoyed the power of demanding higher compensation to meet rising costs, the middle class had not enjoyed this privilege. “Farmers and workmen have seen to it that they do not suffer,” the article asserted. Although farmers and the working class also encountered high prices, “middle-class homes everywhere are suffering as deeply; and for them no remedy is at hand or proposed. The grievance of the mother who sees her children skimped and often hungry is more serious than that of the farmer and the workman.” “There is an inequity here,” the article concluded, “and a deep one; it will test the full virtue of republican institutions to correct it.”¹²³

¹²² “Relative Retail Prices of Food,” in Department of Commerce, Bureau of Foreign and Domestic Commerce, *Statistical Abstract of the United States 1921* (Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1922), 631; Chicago *Tribune* 5/30/1919.

¹²³ New York *Times* 9/16/1919.



The Los Angeles media reported on the same anxieties. “Never has the country been confronted with such economic chaos,” a Los Angeles *Times* editorial declared. And, “It is the middle classes that are hardest hit by the chaotic conditions and soaring prices; the men and women with moderate incomes.” An editorial in the *Daily Courier* of neighboring Oxnard, CA. entitled “middle class woes” noted that “the American middle class [man] is full of indignation as he considered its wrongs and misfortunes.” His salary “has known no increase” and he is one “whose living expenses have mounted higher and higher each year.” More pointedly, another Los Angeles *Times* editorial declared that “the middle classes are suffering a gradual but certain impoverishment.”¹²⁵

Middle class citizens themselves also spoke of being victimized by food price increases. One Boston woman wrote, “I think there are several agencies at root of high prices of food,” and “It is the middle-class, like myself, who are suffering. The rich don’t,

¹²⁴ For data and sources, see appendix 2.

¹²⁵ Los Angeles *Times* 7/19/1919 and 5/30/1920; Oxnard *Daily Courier* 5/16/1919.

nor do the men in Washington actually feel the privation that I and my family are experiencing.” B.F. Gray, a Los Angeles insurance agent, referenced “many complaints” about the prices charged by cafeterias in the city. “Thought this morning as I looked at my breakfast and figured the cost of the articles... I had 5 prunes in my dish for which I paid seven cents a little shameful sized dish of oatmeal- 6¢... it’s ridiculous as well as criminal.” In Medford, Oregon, Fred Dalton Haight, a music teacher, wrote of his frustration over elevated food prices in his diary. According to Haight, “sugar and flour are way up and spuds [potatoes] nine dollars a hundred. Hell! Where is the end of this H.C.L. anyway. No relief is in sight.”¹²⁶ Fittingly, the Los Angeles *Times* proclaimed, “In this country that wail of the middle classes is already heard,” through few solutions to their troubles had been enacted.¹²⁷

Many Americans focused on eliminating or limiting the influence of the middleman to bring down the cost of food. Newspapers frequently reported on how food hoarders inflated prices by limiting supplies. These popular villains included farmers’ cooperative marketing associations, storage plants, wholesalers, greedy retailers and undefined “speculators.” The press also identified meat packers, the railroad system and a few other parties as middlemen between producers and consumers. Outraged by the exploits of middlemen, Washington D.C. residents attempted to form a “People’s Co-

¹²⁶ Signaling how numerous middle class consumers had to change their shopping habits because of rising food costs, and how food prices and price increases for other necessities were interrelated, the *Woman Citizen*, in response to a letter from a middle class woman about exorbitant rents, published an article called “The Middle-Class Goad and His Keepers,” that lamented how middle class women also “must carry their market baskets and shop from door to door in order to beat the food profiteer.”

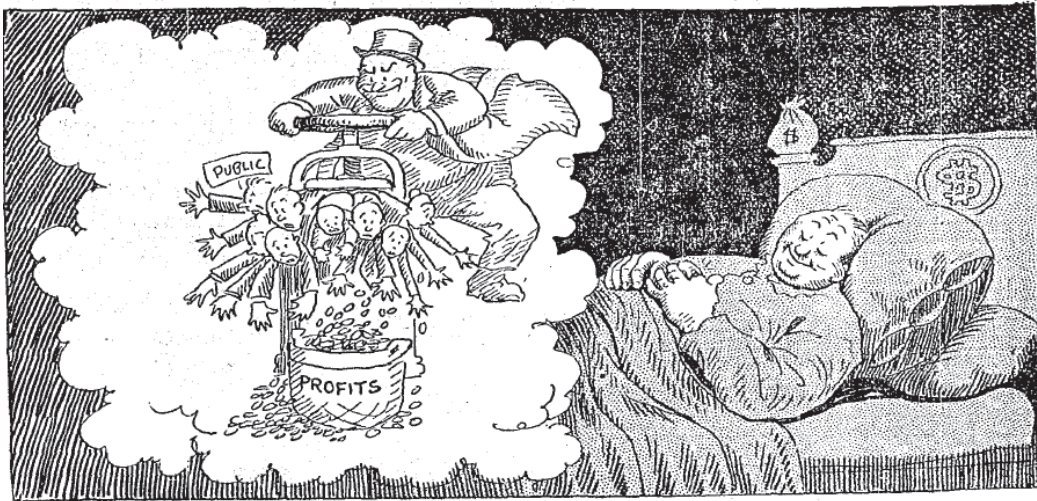
¹²⁷ *Woman Citizen* 3/20/1920; *Women’s Journal* 8/16/1919; Los Angeles *Times* 7/19/1919; Louis Cole to B.F. Louis Cole 6/5/1918, California Food Administration Records, National Archives Division, San Bruno, CA.

operative Union” as one potential solution. The organization sought to “control the production and distribution of the supplies needed to satisfy their wants, saving them the enormous and unjustified profits exorted by the middle-man.” In Georgia, the state government took over the role of the middleman by offering to sell consumers one to five dozen eggs and one to five pounds of butter at the lowest farm produce price in the country. The purpose of the plan was “to establish as quickly as possible a regular weekly interchange of orders and deliveries between the farmers and the people in the cities, thereby eliminating the middle man.” A meat retailer in Decatur, IL even advertised, “We want to help you cut the high cost of living. We are killing our own meat, thus cutting out the middle man.” The advertisement’s pronouncement of eliminating the middle man mirrored the desires expressed by numerous citizens throughout the United States.¹²⁸

¹²⁸ *Washington Post* 1/31/1920; *The Atlanta Constitution* 8/20/1919; *Decatur Review* 11/26/1920.

A DOSE OF HIS OWN MEDICINE

[Copyright: 1919: By John T. McCutcheon.]



The Food Hoarder's Dream.



The Food Hoarder's Nightmare..

The editorial cartoon above reflects the emerging emphasis on the middleman (hoarders, speculators, etc.) as a cause of excessive food prices.¹²⁹

By blaming middlemen for high prices, middle class Americans intensified a trend developing in late 19th/early 20th century of condemning the speculator and celebrating the honesty of consumers and unorganized diligently-producing farmers. As

¹²⁹ Chicago Daily Tribune 8/15/1919.

one historian notes, vilifying the middleman allowed Progressives Era commentators to no longer focus simply on urban areas as representations of the unfairness of the modern economy, and rural areas bastions of virtue. Instead, honest rural producers and urban consumers both suffered from exploitation by the cold storage industry, railroads, the grain elevator business, wholesalers, or greedy retailers. During World War I, the press, Congress and the Wilson administration continued to portray hard-working farmers and consumers as lost in an economy in which middlemen took advantage. Throughout congressional debates and press discussion over federal food control measures, politicians and the press underscored how many farmers received little compensation for their crops, while consumers paid exorbitant prices.¹³⁰ Popular political commentary persisted to posit diligent farmers and consumers against greedy middlemen.¹³¹

Middle class Los Angeles consumers and their sympathizers suggested that multiple levels of the government should play a crucial role in eliminating middlemen and decreasing food prices. They looked to a variety of public officials to address the high cost of food. A July, 1919 Los Angeles *Times* editorial called on the federal government for action to help middle class victims of high food prices. "Second only in importance to the ratification of the peace treaty" the editorial asserted, "is Federal legislation to...reduce the untenably high cost of living." Other editorials looked to governors or other state officials to facilitate lower prices. Norton F.W. Hazeldine, a chemist living

¹³⁰ The Lever Act aimed to encourage production for the war by giving farmers a fair return for their crops, while outlawing profiteering by parties ranging from merchants of farm equipment to wholesalers of foodstuffs. See, for example, *Congressional Record*- Senate 7/3/1917, pp. 4630-31, or *Atlanta Constitution* 7/11/1917.

¹³¹ Eric Rauchway, "The High Cost of Living in the Progressives' Economy" *Journal of American History* 88:3 (December 2001): 898-924.

near Hollywood, believed that the L.A. City Council could provide relief from food price increases by circumventing the middleman. In a letter to the City Council, Hazeldine wrote to “call attention to” “the fact that the high cost of living has reached such proportions that it has become a burden too heavy for thousands of citizens to bear.” Hazeldine proposed a three part plan to make food more affordable. First, he asked the City Council to suspend all ordinances that regulated the slaughtering of livestock and facilitate the erection of a building to which nearby farmers could transport cattle. In this structure, farmers could slaughter their cattle and sell the meat “at cost to the people.” Second, Hazeldine suggested that the city build a public kitchen with a frying tank “where fish can be brought direct from the boats and converted into wholesome food.” Following examples from “England, France and other countries,” fish “should be cleaned and cooked for about 1¢ per 1lb and should be sold direct to the public at cost.”¹³²

While Hazeldine’s plan did not come to fruition, middle class Los Angeles residents did focus on two strategies that they hoped would eliminate the middleman and lower food prices. Looking to local, state, and in some cases, federal politicians for support, Los Angeles residents proposed the continuance and expansion of the wartime home gardens and municipal markets that had seemingly flourished throughout the war.

The Home Garden Movement

In their participation in the home garden movement, middle class citizens merged producerist values that had shaped older (19th century) identities of the middle class with

¹³² Los Angeles *Times* 7/19/1919 and 5/14/1919; Records of the City Council of Los Angeles 8/5/1919, Los Angeles City Clerk’s Office, Records Management Division, Los Angeles, CA.

a consumer identity. As consumers protesting what they perceived to be an unfair economy dominated by the greed of non-producing middlemen and profiteers, middle class Americans organized to collectively dig up their backyards and become producers. In the war and postwar contexts, they gardened for the nation, for their own pocketbooks, and, continuing middle class Progressive Era reformist impulse, for the protection and uplift of children and the poor. Middle class home gardeners incorporated producerism into their consumer identities and intimately tied them to their conceptions of economic fairness and citizenship.

On the eve of American entry into World War I in April of 1917, middle class Los Angeles residents had already begun to take advantage of the city's favorable climate by planting wintertime home gardens to fight the high cost of food. Los Angeles offered two features that were typically unavailable to urban dwellers. First, the warm, ocean-side climate allowed for growing seasons year-round. Secondly, a spatially large city, many residents had relatively large backyards, or lived near vacant lands. Fittingly, a February, 1917 Los Angeles *Times* article declared, "Every backyard in Los Angeles is a Potential Producer." According to the *Times*, residents increasingly seized upon these advantages, as "the home garden has assumed somewhat important proportions for the present season in view of the advanced food prices in all lines." By planting gardens, residents used Los Angeles's unique urban environment to protect their pocketbooks from profiteers.¹³³

¹³³ Los Angeles *Times* 2/19/1917.

With growing certainty of American entry into the war, and continual prices increases, participation in what was commonly termed the “home garden movement” soared. Citizens throughout the United States dug up their backyards, planted gardens, and attended home garden meetings to further publicize the movement and for mutual support. One gardener spoke happily that “This vegetable raising is sure cutting down the high cost of living for us.” A number of participants also wrote their local newspapers to share their beliefs that, as one doctor explained, to “reduce the cost of food, the people should” participate in wartime conservation, but also “have gardens at home.”

The movement had both a local and national orientation. Home garden organizations surfaced in localities ranging from Chicago to Thomasville, GA. While the impetus to plant gardens often came from individuals, local communities, or city governments, a national organization called the National Emergency War Garden Commission¹³⁴ also facilitated home gardening. In March of 1917, Charles Lathrop Peck of the American Forestry Association organized the National Emergency War Garden Commission to respond to anticipated food shortages and to coordinate citizens’ latent and active eagerness to plant gardens. In Peck’s words, the commission had the goal “of inspiring the people of the United States to plant war gardens in order to increase the supply of food without the use of land already cultivated, of labor already engaged in agricultural work, of time devoted to other necessary occupations.” The Commission worked in conjunction with federal officials from the Department of Agriculture and the

¹³⁴ The National Emergency War Garden Commission changed its name to the National War Garden Commission.

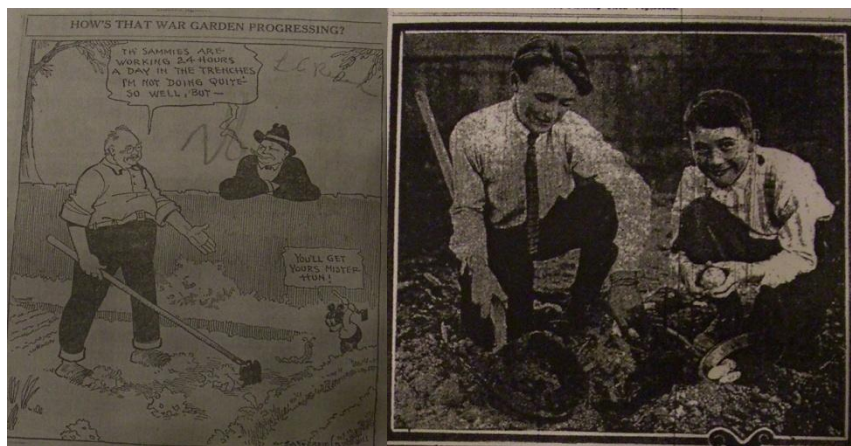
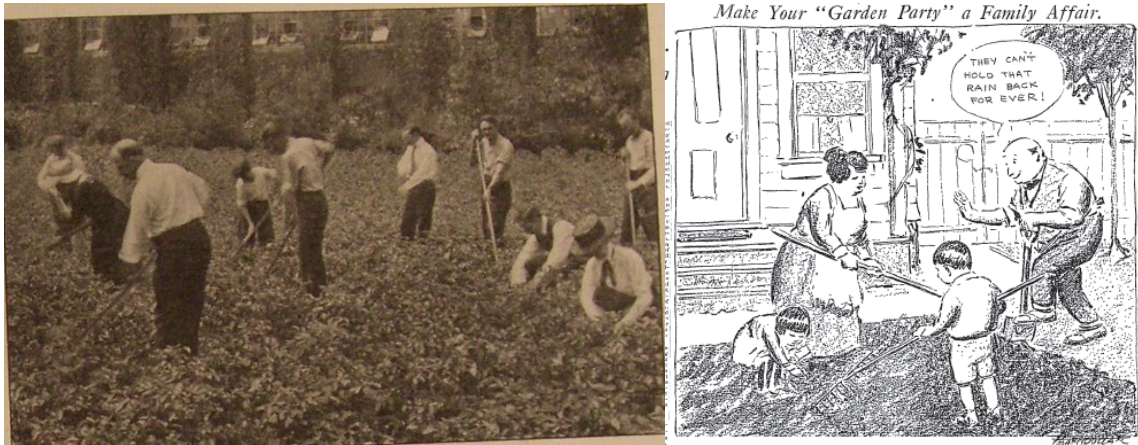
U.S. Food Administration,¹³⁵ and circulated numerous leaflets instructing citizens on what could be gained by planting a garden. In addition to patriotic motives, the commission emphasized how gardens would fight the high cost of living. In particular, the National Emergency War Garden Commission specified that “we must make a big drive to produce food in this country as near the point of consumption as possible, rout the middleman and cold storage man.” Whether responding to the Committee’s specific statements or on their own initiative, many Americans were eager to take on these enemies.¹³⁶

Press reports and promotional literature from the USFA, the National Emergency War Garden Commission and other sources suggested that white collar Americans should be at the forefront of home garden campaigns. One USFA press release, for example, praised the North Carolina State Food Administrator for encouraging employers to allow clerks to play a critical role in the movement by rescheduling work days to allow them to garden in daylight hours. The Los Angeles *Times* reported on a number of white collar men and women, who took special initiative in leading the movement. Theatre operator J.A. Quinn, for instance, received publicity for putting on productions of “Garden of Allah” to benefit the home garden committee. The *Times* also lauded office men who

¹³⁵ The USFA played an instrumental role in working with local governments and private organizations for the promotion of home gardens. These organizations also assisted in the overall aims of the USFA. For example, the 1919 Members’ Annual of the Los Angeles Chamber of Commerce noted, “The Food Administration was aided by the lectures on home gardens and the advice given by our Agricultural Department relating to war time essentials along food production lines.” Los Angeles Chamber of Commerce Members’ Annual 1919, University of Southern California Special Collections Library, Los Angeles, CA.

¹³⁶ *Fall Garden Bulletin*, Municipal Reference Collection, Harold Washington Public Library, Chicago, IL; Atlanta *Constitution* 3/3/1918; “Urban and Suburban Food Production: Its Past and Its Future,” California Food Administration Records, National Archives Division, San Bruno, CA. Letter from J Harvey Moore, M.D. to the Los Angeles *Times* 4/28/1917; Los Angeles *Examiner* 3/29/1917; Charles Lathrop Peck, *The War Garden Victorious* (Philadelphia: J.P. Lippincott, 1919), 1-23.

planned gardens on the rooftops of Los Angeles office buildings. Lastly, the Los Angeles media and the USFA published pictures and cartoons of white collar families, wearing suits and ties working diligently on home gardens.¹³⁷



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¹³⁷ "Release Feb. 22nd ----- United States Food Administration-----Lucas," California Food Administration Records, National Archives Division, San Bruno, CA.

¹³⁸ Los Angeles *Times* 5/11/1917, 2/13/1918; Los Angeles *Examiner* 3/7/1917; "28. Home Garden, 'How's That War Garden Progressing?'" California Food Administration Records, National Archives Division, San Bruno, CA; "The Patriotic Garden: Making a Nation of Garden Cities," California Food Administration Records, National Archives Division, San Bruno, CA; Pamphlet: "Raking the Gardener," California Food Administration Records, National Archives Division, San Bruno, CA; For quotation below the photographs beginning "No enterprise is a success..." "Raking the Gardener and Canning the Canner," National Emergency Food Garden Commission, California Food Administration Records, National Archives Division, San Bruno, CA.

The picture on the top-left is a depiction of home gardeners from a National War Garden Commission Publication. On the top-right is a cartoon from the *Los Angeles Times*, while the image on the bottom-left is an unlabeled cartoon from the California USFA Records. According to the National War Garden Commission, cartoonists played an important role in supporting and publicizing the movement. “No enterprise is a success unless it invites the attention of the humorist,” a National Emergency Food Garden Commission pamphlet asserted. The picture of home gardeners on the bottom-right was published in the *Los Angeles Examiner*.

Middle class Americans generally did, in fact, lead home garden campaigns. The presidents of both large and small home garden committees and associations typically came from the ranks of the middle class. For example, an attorney was initially at the helm of the Los Angeles Home Garden Committee, while the presidents of the Chicago and Winona, MN committees were managers. A USFA “Organization Plan for City War Gardens” mentioned Rotary Clubs, Parent-Teacher Associations and Women’s Clubs as key groups from which to solicit involvement. Other USFA documents chronicled the successes of middle class participants in the movement. A San Francisco man who raised six hens, Belgian hares and vegetables represented just one white collar worker, “who worked all day in an office and devoted his after hours to such a splendid act of thrift and valuation.”¹³⁹

¹³⁹ United States Census, Perry Holden. Manager (Chicago), Year: 1920, Census Place: *Chicago Ward 25, Cook (Chicago), Illinois*, Roll: T625_342, Page: 10A, Enumeration District: 1458; Image: 549; United States Census, Luther G. Brown- Attorney (Los Angeles), Year: 1920, Census Place: *Los Angeles Assembly District 63, Los Angeles, California*, Roll: T625_106; Page: 18B, Enumeration District: 145, Image: 38; United States Census, S.L. Wright, manager (Winona, MN), Year: 1920, Census Place: *Winona Ward 2, Winona, Minnesota*, Roll: T625_865, Page: 15A, Enumeration District: 202. *Fall Garden Bulletin*, Municipal Reference Collection, Harold Washington Public Library, Chicago, IL; *Winona Republican-Herald* 3/14/1918; *Los Angeles Times* 4/28/1917; “Organization Plans for City War Gardens...,” California Food Administration Records, National Archives Division, San Bruno, CA; “I-3...’Melt the fat, add flour mixed with seasoning...A War-Garden Exhibit,” California Food Administration Records, National Archives Division, San Bruno, CA.

At almost the onset of the home garden movement, a variety of politicians and the press cast the movement in patriotic terms and suggested that fighting the H.C.L. for personal gain and aiding the war effort were intertwined. Senator Wesley L. Jones of Washington in a speech before Washington D.C. home gardeners, advocated that citizens on the home front assist the allies and themselves by planting gardens that would allow them to avoid paying high food prices. A newspaper account summarized his message: “By every person utilizing his back yard and vacant lots for garden purposes... we will be able to keep down the cost of living throughout the country and also supply food for the men across the seas.” In Los Angeles, newspapers printed headlines, such as “Garden Brigades, Attention, Report for Back Yard Duty, Time For Combined Assault on Redoubts of High Cost of Living Is At Hand,” “City’s Idle Land Means Nearly Five Million Dollars This Year: Great Army of Gardeners Ordered Swiftly Mobilized in Los Angeles” and “Get Busy in Your Back Yard So That Our Army May Eat and Win,” for articles that discussed how home gardeners could combat high food prices and do their patriotic duty simultaneously. After the U.S. Food Administration commenced its activities in the summer of 1917, it began publishing suggested press releases that applied militaristic language to the home garden movement. One circular that discussed the need to properly feed the household and lessen food shortages abroad, declared, “The hoe has become a weapon of war.”¹⁴⁰

Combining the themes of patriotism and the high cost of living encouraged many consumers to develop strong and occasionally excessive attachments to the home garden

¹⁴⁰ U.S. Food Administration, for RELEASE, War Gardens and Sugar Supply, IV-3 and III-3, California Food Administration Records, National Archives, San Bruno, CA; *Washington Post* 4/17/1917. *Los Angeles Times* 4/22/1917, 2/13/1918; *Los Angeles Examiner* 3/13/1917.

movement. Throughout the war, Woodrow Wilson's Committee on Public Information, led by former journalist George Creel, fueled super-patriotism among the American Public through posters, pamphlets, radio broadcasts, newspapers, and "four minute" speakers. This encouraged the public to question the American-ness of anyone who did not sufficiently support the war, whether by failing to buy war bonds, grow a garden, or by uttering "unpatriotic" statements.¹⁴¹ In this super-patriotic atmosphere, Mrs. J.E. Demandell of Santa Monica beat her neighbor, Mrs. A.J. McEwan, unconscious after McEwan called her pro-German. The incident began when Demandell questioned the border of McEwan's home garden, claiming that the garden infringed on her property. Outraged that Demandell would interfere with her gardening plans, McEwan accused her of pro-Germanism. McEwan's words were no match for the beating that ensued. McEwan was unconscious for over an hour and Demandell was charged with assault. Fitting to the wartime context, the Los Angeles *Times* reported on the event by publishing the headline "Women in battle over home garden."¹⁴²

In addition to using patriotic language, participants and supporters of the movement emphasized how home gardening promoted the value of diligent production. An appeal from the Atlanta Home Garden League for participation contended, "Successful gardening is a triumph of care perseverance, hard work, real effort, interest, patriotism, and general resourcefulness." The Los Angeles *Examiner* "issued a striking

¹⁴¹ Wartime super-patriotism transformed into the antiradicalism of the first red scare during the immediate postwar period. For discussion of World War I era patriotic excesses, see Paul L. Murphy, *World War I and the Origin of Civil Liberties in the United States* (New York: Norton, 1979) and David M. Kennedy, *Over Here: The First World War and American Society* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), 45-92.

¹⁴² Los Angeles *Times* 2/27/1918.

call to every man, woman and child to get to work to make our soil productive” through the home garden campaign. One USFA document asserted, “there is still time to raise if you do not want to be a slacker.” A circular of the National War Garden Commission also equated those who did not produce in home gardens with lazy draft dodging “slackers.” Even criticizing unused vacant land itself, the issue stated, “More than 5,000,000 people in the United States are this year cultivating back yards, vacant lots and other city and town tracts which hitherto have been ‘slacker’ land.” Fitting to the movement’s emphasis on the value of diligent production, when Los Angeles theater operator J.A. Quinn showed “The Garden of Allah” to raise funds for the movement, his ticket-takers wore overalls- a symbol of hard work. Similarly, in Venice, CA, the mayor and a city trustee supported the movement by posing in overalls, holding a hand-plow set to transform the soil of the front lawn of City Hall into a garden.¹⁴³

¹⁴³ “For Laggards But Not Slackers,” California Food Administration Records, National Archives Division, San Bruno, CA; Undated issue of *The Patriotic Garden*, “Making a Nation of Garden Cities,” p. 188, California Food Administration Records, National Archives Division, San Bruno, CA; Clipping of Los Angeles *Examiner* 12/27/1918, California Food Administration Records, National Archives Division, San Bruno, CA; Los Angeles *Examiner* 4/27/1917; Atlanta *Constitution* 4/18/1918.



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William Randolph Hearst's Los Angeles *Examiner* played a central role in encouraging urban consumers to become producers in Los Angeles. In February of 1917, the paper offered ten cash prizes totaling \$210 for "best results in growing vegetables on lots in [the] city and county." The prizes applied to both small backyard gardens and large vacant lots, and the *Examiner* created a special prize for gardens maintained by school children. Publishing numerous announcements and articles on the contest and the necessity of home gardens, the *Examiner* printed sensational headlines such as "Home Garden Idea Spreads Like Wildfire." The *Examiner* asked Mayor Woodman to name a garden contest judging committee and encouraged the city government to lend its further

¹⁴⁴ Los Angeles *Examiner* 4/26/1917.

support for home gardens. Reporting that the contest was “given the impetus of enthusiasm,” the mayor complied, appointing a group of judges ranging from the president of the Housewives League to the superintendent of schools. One member of the committee, Mrs. Josiah Evans Cowles, president of the National Federation of Women’s Clubs, expressed optimism for the plan. “Certainly, as one sees the vast spaces which are available to the people of Southern California, and of Los Angeles County,” Cowles stated, “for the purpose of growing things, one cannot help but wonder why there should be the problem of the high cost of living.” Mayor Woodman sensed that the contest and the nascent gardeners represented only the beginning of a larger movement. “I believe that we may start a movement which will grow to much greater proportions than we more foresee, as we become familiar with the problems to be met.” Woodman would be correct. Thousands of residents attended home garden meetings and even more planted gardens.¹⁴⁵

In response to pressure from citizens and the *Examiner*, the Los Angeles city government increased its support for the movement. First, Mayor Woodman and the City Council voted unanimously to make the home garden committee official, giving it an initial appropriation of \$500 with \$1000 more to come. Second, in June of 1917, the home garden committee “requested that the Purchasing Agent loan their Committee approximately 700 feet of second-hand fire hose” for use in the gardens, and the City Council complied. The City Council also arranged for water rates to be reduced for gardening purposes, and took up a measure to increase funds for the Los Angeles Public

¹⁴⁵ One individual home garden meeting even drew 2500 people. *Los Angeles Examiner* 2/26/1917, 2/28/1917, 3/6/1917, 3/13/1917; *Los Angeles Times* 5/6/1917.

Library partially on the basis that “the public is asking for books specifically upon...vegetable gardening,” and other food saving measures. In early July, 1917, Mayor Woodman was so encouraged by the promise of the home garden movement that he praised it in his annual message to the City Council. The Home Garden Committee, “is performing a very important work in this city, and is attracting the attention of the country at large,” Woodman asserted. “Many people are now engaged in the cultivation of small tracts” Woodman continued, and “this work should be encouraged, and carried forward during the next year with increased vigor.”¹⁴⁶

A blossoming discursive space of middle class consumer protest in newspapers, magazines, and other sources, encouraged middle class Americans to use home gardens as a physical space of consumer activism into the postwar period. Middle class support of home gardens to fight high food prices in the immediate postwar period was a manifestation of the increasing calls in newspapers, newsletters, polemics and other mediums for organization of the “intermediate millions” or the “middle class” to combat “heartless profiteering.” This discursive space grew during the late Progressive Era and World War I and peaked in the postwar period. Letters to the editor, politicians seeking to appeal to the masses, or other middle class citizens parading in overalls or engaging in rent strikes,¹⁴⁷ called for thrift among the middle class and praised home gardens as one

¹⁴⁶ Records of the City Council of Los Angeles 6/19/1917, Los Angeles City Clerk’s Office, Records Management Division, Los Angeles, CA; Records of the City Council of Los Angeles 6/20/1917, Los Angeles City Clerk’s Office, Records Management Division, Los Angeles, CA; Records of the City Council of Los Angeles 7/2/1917, Los Angeles City Clerk’s Office, Records Management Division, Los Angeles, CA; Records of the City Council of Los Angeles 5/18/1918, Los Angeles City Clerk’s Office, Records Management Division, Los Angeles, CA; Los Angeles *Examiner* 3/17/1917.

¹⁴⁷ See chapters 4 and 5.

of many solutions to middle class consumer woes. It was in this environment that citizens like Mary Anderson continued to build the movement.¹⁴⁸

Throughout the closing months of the war and in the postwar period, Mrs. J.T. (Mary) Anderson, a both typical and atypical member of the Los Angeles middle class, led the home garden movement in Los Angeles. Similar to many middle class Los Angeles residents, Mary Anderson was part of substantial migration of white middle class Midwesterners to Los Angeles in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Born in Missouri, Anderson moved to Los Angeles sometime between 1885 and 1910, when approximately forty-one percent of the Los Angeles American-born population consisted of Midwestern migrants. While it is unknown why Anderson and her family moved to Los Angeles, in many cases, migrants moved for noneconomic reasons- for the climate or a middle class suburban-style environment.¹⁴⁹

Less typical of an “average” middle class Los Angeles resident, Anderson became a primary leader of the Los Angeles Progressive Era middle class. A social worker and

¹⁴⁸ Charles Henry Meltzer spoke the aforementioned words during a meeting at the Greenwich Village Theatre in New York City for the organization of middle class consumers, published in the *New York Times*. Meltzer advocated the establishment of public markets among many other measures. The article was one of many to call for or report on middle class consumer organizing for the protection of their own pocketbooks from the postwar economy. *New York Times* 12/14/1919.

¹⁴⁹ Southern California boosters, such as Charles Fletcher Lummis, a photographer for the magazine *Land of Sunshine*, attempted to lure middle class migrants to Los Angeles by depicting the city as a haven for healthy middle class babies and a Garden of Eden. See, Jennifer A. Watts, “Photography in the Land of Sunshine: Charles Fletcher Lummis and the Regional Ideal” *Southern California Quarterly* 87:4 (2005): 339-376; For an analysis of migration patterns to Los Angeles in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, see Robert M. Fogelson, *The Fragmented Metropolis: Los Angeles, 1850-1930* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1967), 63-84 and 189. For census records on Anderson, see United States Census, Year: 1920; Census Place: *Los Angeles Assembly District 63, Los Angeles, California*; Roll: T625_107; Page: 11A; Enumeration District: 184; Image: 447; United States Census, Year: 1910; Census Place: *Los Angeles Assembly District 74, Los Angeles, California*; Roll: T624_84; Page: 18A; Enumeration District: 74; Image: 38. Los Angeles *Times* 11/1/1917, 10/28/1917. Data of Midwestern migration to Los Angeles reflects percentages from 1910, printed in Table 8 in Robert M. Fogelson, *The Fragmented Metropolis: Los Angeles, 1850-1930* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1967), 81.

wife of a civil service worker, Anderson served as president of the Council of Community Service of California, which “include[d] representatives from all active and progressive organizations of the city and county” and was involved in the Society of American Music Optimists of Los Angeles, and the Wa-Wan Club. During the war, Anderson served as the president of the Liberty Loan drive for Los Angeles, which helped to finance the war, and was a key member of the Los Angeles Council of Defense. In the latter capacity, Anderson worked directly with the U.S. Food Administration. Within the first two days of their efforts, Anderson helped to secure pledges from 40,000 local residents to observe USFA guidelines. According to another USFA volunteer, “To Mrs. J.T. Anderson...goes the entire credit for working up such a wonderful and efficient organization.”¹⁵⁰

During the war, Anderson also worked with the government to police the consumption practices of people in her community and throughout Los Angeles. Not only did she serve on the “consumers’ branch” of the Los Angeles Fair Price Committee during the war and postwar periods, she also reported cases of hoarding and profiteering that allegedly contributed to rising food prices. On one occasion, Anderson instructed the Los Angeles USFA’s office to “please investigate” a Mrs. L.H. Multer, who allegedly possessed 200 pounds of sugar.¹⁵¹ On other occasions, Anderson forwarded complaints

¹⁵⁰ Los Angeles *Times* 11/1/1917, 10/28/1917; United States Census, Year: 1920; Census Place: Los Angeles Assembly District 63, Los Angeles, California; Roll: T625_107; Page: 11A; Enumeration District: 184; Image: 447.

¹⁵¹ The Los Angeles USFA assigned the American Protective League to the case. Operative #1432 interviewed Multer, who admitted to previously having the sugar, but stated that she had returned it- “she had changed her mind as she thought it best not to have it.” Her husband told the operative that he had wanted it for “charitable purposes” and returned it as soon as he realized that he was in violation of USFA regulations.

ranging from one of a women burning bread and rolls in her backyard to another alleging that a wedding party had wasted rice by throwing it at the bride and groom as part of a ceremonial tradition. Anderson acted with the direct encouragement of the federal officials. A deputy Los Angeles food administrator, for example, even asked Anderson herself to investigate a case of potential hoarding that had been sent to his office. Through her wartime activities, Anderson had gained experience in working with the government to stabilize food prices by policing consumption practices in her community. Given her previous activism and leadership, it comes as no surprise that press reports from the postwar period would describe Anderson as leading the charge to “tackle [the postwar] H.C.L. problem.”¹⁵²

Like Anderson, women, in particular, took on leadership positions in home garden campaigns. Their leadership in many cases was an outgrowth of the gender dynamics of both wartime United States Food Administration (see chapter 1) and Progressive Era

¹⁵² To Anderson, both expressing patriotism and addressing the high cost of food were of paramount concern. Anderson also participated in the postwar campaign by the United States Department of Justice High Cost of Living Division to use middle class women to bring down high prices (see chapter 3). Her participation was significant enough for the Special Assistant to the Attorney General to thank her for “the more than credible work you and your organization have been doing in Southern California.” See, Special Assistant to the Attorney General to Mrs. J.T. Anderson 10/7/1920, Records of the High Cost of Living Division of the Department of Justice, National Archives II, College Park, MD. For other examples of Anderson’s wartime and postwar USFA and fair price work, see Louis Cole to Mrs. J.T. Anderson 10/17/1918, California Food Administration Records, National Archives Division, San Bruno, CA, “You are cordially invited...” from Mrs. J.T. Anderson, California Food Administration Records, National Archives Division, San Bruno, CA, Louis Cole to Mrs. J.T. Anderson 5/16/1918, California Food Administration Records, National Archives Division, San Bruno, CA, Louis Cole to Mrs. J.T. Anderson 8/12/1918, California Food Administration Records, National Archives Division, San Bruno, CA and Louis Cole to Mrs. J.T. Anderson 11/1/1918, California Food Administration Records, National Archives Division, San Bruno, CA. Los Angeles *Times* 5/29/1919; Mary Brooks to Mrs. J.T. Anderson 9/6/1918, California Food Administration Records, National Archives Division, San Bruno, CA; Hammond to H. Dranger 9/13/1918, California Food Administration Records, National Archives Division, San Bruno, CA; Certified Statement from L.H. Multer with Leo Longley as notary public, California Food Administration Records, National Archives Division, San Bruno, CA; Los Angeles *Times* 11/18/1917; Mrs. C.H. Comcard to Mrs. J.T. Anderson 7/3/1918, California Food Administration Records, National Archives Division, San Bruno, CA; Deputy City Administrator to Mrs. J.T. Anderson 9/7/1918, Food Administration Records, National Archives Division, San Bruno, CA.

organizing, in which women led and comprised the membership of reformist organizations, ranging from the National Consumers League to the Hollywood Women's Club. As the president of the Council of Community Service of California, Mary Anderson was no exception. Consumer campaigns designed to reduce or circumvent high food prices particularly lent themselves to female participation. During the early twentieth century, women were considered to be disproportionately responsible for acquiring and preparing food (and other goods) for their households. Rising food prices made their labor more difficult.

Mrs. J.T. Anderson and other participants in the postwar home garden movement focused on persuading the city government to assist the movement. During the war, the mayor and City Council felt pressure both from below and above to use the apparatus of the local government to encourage home gardening. The U.S. Food Administration was in regular contact with local governments regarding all measures that would conserve foodstuffs, and even President Wilson and congressmen had issued statements and made speeches that encouraged city governments to take on a central supportive role. After the war, the reach of the U.S. Food Administration diminished, as federal officials returned to old roles and participating organizations in USFA programs were left to their own devices to maintain conservation efforts to fight the high cost of food. As a result, citizens who desired to continue planting gardens as a solution to rising prices had to rely on their own efforts to convince city officials to lend a helping hand.¹⁵³

¹⁵³ The Women's Committee of the U.S. Department of Justice High Cost of Living Division (1919-20) (see chapter 3) did encourage home gardening as a solution to high food prices, but focused most of its efforts elsewhere. The few references to the home garden movement in Department of Justice High Cost of Living Division Women's Committee documents mainly just praise the existing movement, such as the "St. Paul [MN] women," who "started the Garden campaign and are being followed by other women in the

The fact that many city officials themselves remained critical participants in the movement helped organizers like Anderson garner city government support for the movement. Mrs. J.T. Anderson's husband was a city worker, and both press accounts and City Council records chronicle the participation numerous other municipal employees. In May, 1920, 500 city workers petitioned the City Council "to do some local daylight saving" by beginning the official city work day at 7:00am instead of 8:00 to enable municipal employees to garden after work at 4:00pm.



The above drawing depicts white collar workers using daylight savings time to work on home gardens.

Additionally speaking to the City government's positive view of home gardening, the Mayor reported to the City Council at the end of 1918, "This work has been conducted during the past year with a wonderful degree of efficiency, and deserves our highest commendation. The fact that there were 98,537 gardens conducted under the direction of Mrs. J.T. Anderson and her associates speaks volumes for their work." According to the mayor, "The Home Garden idea...should be continued."¹⁵⁴

state." Summary of Activities of the States, pg. 3 "Minnesota", Records of the United States Department of Justice High Cost of Living Division, National Archives II, College Park, MD.

¹⁵⁴ Los Angeles *Times* 5/11/1920; Records of the City Council of Los Angeles 10/11/1918, Los Angeles City Clerk's Office, Records Management Division, Los Angeles, CA; Charles Lathrop Peck, *The War Garden Victorious* (Philadelphia: J.P. Lippincott, 1919), 168.

Of course, maintaining financial support for the movement was easier said than done. It required the persistent efforts of Anderson and other participants. At first, support came without too much trouble. In February of 1919, Anderson wrote to the City Council “If the Home Gardens work is to be continued, we must have an appropriation of at least \$2000 at this time to continue the work.” Anderson continued, “There is a most incessant demand for assistance in a way of seeds and plants by the citizens located in all parts of the city who have the soil prepared,” that fifteen Community Centers for distribution of seeds and plants had been established, and that “the seed supply is exhausted.” “We must provide them at once or immediately notify the public that the work will be discontinued,” Anderson asserted. “In view of the fact that the accompanying report shows such enormous interest on the investment made by the city in the return of feeds for her people, I trust the allowance will be granted at once.” The Council voted unanimously in support of the funds and “commend[ed] the efficient work done by the Committee.” Shortly after, the Council also agreed to again reduce water rates to minimize the cost of maintaining home gardens.¹⁵⁵

Participants and supporters of the postwar movement continued to speak of their activities in producerist language. With Mrs. J.T Anderson presiding, one home garden speaker stated that citizens should work at their business desks, but also in “your home garden.” A Los Angeles *Times* editorial explained of the postwar movement, “countless thousands of householders in Los Angeles, tiring of their unenviable role of helpless

¹⁵⁵ Records of the City Council of Los Angeles 2/11/1919, Los Angeles City Clerk’s Office, Records Management Division, Los Angeles, CA; Records of the City Council of Los Angeles 2/14/1919, Los Angeles City Clerk’s Office, Records Management Division, Los Angeles, CA; Records of the City Council of Los Angeles 3/12/1919, Los Angeles City Clerk’s Office, Records Management Division, Los Angeles, CA.

consumers, have turned the tables on the food purveyors by turning producers. Refusing to believe the fiction that it is as cheap to buy vegetables as to grow them, they have cleared the trash out of their back yards, routed out the pansy bed and spaded up the last square foot available for gardens.” The *Times* considered a bed of pansies no longer acceptable to the producerist values of the Los Angeles consumer. The value and experience of production would be instrumental in “beating the H.C.L.”¹⁵⁶

Anderson and other Los Angeles home gardeners also used the movement to teach children the values of production, patriotism, economic fairness, and manhood. The movement’s attention to children as a critical symbol and beneficiary of the campaign reflected a Progressive Era middle class reformist impulse centered on organizing through the state to protect and uplift children. Women’s disproportionate leadership in these campaigns can be considered part of what historians have called Progressive Era “maternalist” activism.¹⁵⁷ As part of numerous reform movements, women saw

¹⁵⁶ As before, government sources, home gardeners and the media contrasted the movement with the unproductiveness of middlemen, but also increasingly identified the laziness of many laborers as a reason for high prices. A U.S. Department of Agriculture report concluded, “serious risk of reduced food production this year because of high wages demanded by farm laborers, high cost of farm equipment and supplies, and because of pronounced movements of people from the farms to the cities is indicated by reports and letters that are reaching the United States Department of Agriculture from many sections of the country.” Similarly, one 1920 editorial summed up the sentiments of many throughout the country declaring, “high wages demanded by farm labor” made the use of home gardens “almost a matter of self-preservation.” *Los Angeles Times* 2/8/1920, 3/7/1919; Florida (Jacksonville) *Times Union* 4/13/1920.

¹⁵⁷ A number of works discuss how progressive individuals and organizations sought social reform through the state to protect or uplift children and the poor. This approach has been labeled “maternalist”- a designation that also carries a number of theoretical meanings- namely that the mother-child relationship was applied by progressives to the relationship between reformers and children, or between reformers and the poor, or reformers and society. These concepts carried gendered meanings. For example, some progressive women related reform to the themes domesticity and motherhood. In many cases, a commitment to maternalist ideology meant that reformers viewed their subjects of reform (or those who would most benefit from reform) as having less agency than themselves. Of particular relevance to this discussion of how home garden proponents aimed to teach children patriotism and the value of hard work, is Molly Ladd-Taylor’s definition of maternalism. According to Ladd-Taylor, a key component of maternalist ideology is “that mothers performed a service to the state by raising citizen-workers.” (Ladd-Taylor 110). For works that discuss maternalism, see, for example, Elizabeth J. Clapp, *Mothers of All*

themselves as especially qualified to teach “values” particularly to the young and working class- even those associated with manhood, such as hard work. As one female home garden leader put it, “the purpose” is “to train our boys and girls in thrift, industry, service, responsibility and patriotism.”¹⁵⁸

Whether under male or female direction, Los Angeles home gardeners sought to instill these values into the nation’s youth. As one 1919 garden bulletin noted, “children engaged in [the home garden] work will be benefited physically, mentally, and morally.” On a tour of Los Angeles school gardens, Dr. Van Evria Kilpatrick, “father of the school gardens¹⁵⁹ movement,” discussed how children needed guidance and direction from both parents and teachers to encourage them to work hard on their gardens. According to Kilpatrick, “the child who does not receive this outdoor training is deprived of his natural birthright.” A July, 1919 advertisement in the Los Angeles *Times* for contributions to the Boy Scouts of America and their participation in the home garden movement also appealed to the themes of patriotism and hard work, as well as manhood. The advertisement explained the organization’s devotion to “good citizenship” and asked “Wouldn’t almost any scout work harder, at say, hoeing a home garden, if he knew that at the end of the long, long row, somebody besides himself and his folks were interested in

Children: Women Reformers and the Rise of Juvenile Courts in Progressive Era America (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1998); Anne Durst, “‘Of Women, by Women, and for Women’: The Day Nursery Movement in Progressive-Era United States” *Journal of Social History* 39:1 (Autumn, 2005): 141-159; Molly Ladd-Taylor, “Toward Defining Maternalism in U.S. History” *Journal of Women’s History* 5:2 (Fall 1993): 110-113; Lynn Y. Weiner, “Maternalism as a Paradigm: Defining the Issues” *Journal of Women’s History* 5:2 (Fall 1993): 96-98.

¹⁵⁸ Atlanta *Constitution* 1/12/1919.

¹⁵⁹ While the practice of planting school gardens in America began as early as 1691, it became a widespread practice in the 1890s (to teach children wholesome values and address the bad influences of urban poverty) and greatly expanded during World War I. Laura J. Lawson, *City Bountiful: A Century of Community Gardening in America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 51-52.

his patriotic work?” The appeal for funds continued by stating that a contribution would be “investing a dollar in boyhood to build manhood.” Similarly, a national school garden pamphlet published in 1919 suggested that school gardening had made “pupils eager for the real work of outdoor gardens.”¹⁶⁰

Responding to calls for patriotism and producerism, more than one million students, teachers and school employees planted school gardens in Los Angeles and throughout the rest of the United States during the war and postwar periods. As one Los Angeles *Times* editorial asserted, “the interest the young folks were acquiring in the cultivation of the soil is a valuable national asset, whether in war or peace.” During the war, the U.S. Department of the Interior and the Bureau of Education organized the U.S. School Garden Army, an initiative in which 1.5 million school children throughout the United States in 1918 alone planted gardens to learn the value of hard work and help the war effort.¹⁶¹ Even in peace, the U.S. Department of Education and the media referred to school gardeners as members of the “United States School Garden Army.” The Department of the Interior and the Bureau of Education program hoped to “enlist” 5,000,000 children in the School Garden Army in the postwar period and Gov. Stephens lent in his support. Hoping for the participation of 150,000 California school children,

¹⁶⁰ U.S. Department of the Interior, Bureau of Education, *The Garden Army in 1919* (Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1919), 1; J.H. Francis, “The United States School Garden Army” *Bulletin* 26 (1919), 3; Los Angeles *Times* 7/29/1917, 6/8/1919.

¹⁶¹ Under the direction of teachers, parents, and city, state and federal officials, children, according to an official document, learned the “patriotic and Americanizing impulse.” Regardless of specific the aims and intentions of individual adult organizers, they suggested that participants in both national and local school urban garden programs could become better Americans by taking part in the movement. U.S. Department of the Interior, Bureau of Education, *The Garden Army in 1919* (Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1919), 1-2; J.H. Francis, “The United States School Garden Army” *Bulletin* 26 (1919), 5; Los Angeles *Times* 2/21/1919.

Gov. Stephens stated, “I heartily approve the plan and I hope that all persons, particularly those having children old enough to take part in the movement, will give it their loyal support.” Many, indeed, planted gardens. Yet, much like the support for adult home garden committees in the postwar period, federal support for a School Garden Army dissolved shortly after the end of the war. As historian Rose Hayden-Smith notes, urban children continued to garden, “but Uncle Sam didn’t ask them to.”¹⁶²

For many, the School Garden Army offered an opportunity to address the destructive values and unfairness brought on by the growing consumer economy. According to Rose Hayden Smith, the School Garden Army represented a nationwide effort to instill traditional producerist values into urban children who were increasingly influenced by the evils of consumerism. Since discussion of the School Garden Army also frequently referenced their use in fighting the high cost of food, the program also represented a means to protest an unfair consumer economy that not only encouraged indolence, but also led to high prices for the urban middle class. As Dr. Van Evria Kilpatrick noted, school gardens were an important contribution to “the battle against the common enemy, General High Cost of Living.” By learning producerist values, children could both help their families protest an economy saturated by profiteers and middlemen and also learn the value of hard work that seemed lacking among these malevolent groups, as well as among spendthrift urban consumers.¹⁶³

¹⁶² Rose Hayden-Smith, *Soldiers of the Soil: A Historical Review of the United States School Garden Army*, (Davis: University of California, Davis- Center for Youth Development, 2006), 11; Los Angeles Times 5/6/1919, 1/23/1919.

¹⁶³ Los Angeles Times 7/29/1917.

Mirroring the rhetoric of many Progressive Era reformers, middle class home garden leaders also underscored how the enlisting the participation of the poor in the movement would assist and uplift them.¹⁶⁴ The committee emphasized the need to instill into the poor the value of production for their future and immediate economic well being. According to one city document, poor Los Angeles residents would be able to help themselves mentally and morally if taught “to become interested” in producing. The City Council and the Social Service Commission offered its support partially on this basis. A City Council resolution declared, “its work among the indigent poor population of the City will be greatly aided by the appropriation of money for the purpose of plowing vacant lots and parts of lots and the furnishing of seeds, water and fertilizer for vegetable growing.”¹⁶⁵

In addition to underscoring the material help home gardening provided for the poor, the City Social Service Commission emphasized how gardening created healthy families, socially and medically. Socially, the home garden campaign gave poor residents useful work and a common activity that built stronger familial relationships. A Social Service Commission report asserted, “A normal, healthful occupation is furnished many who would otherwise be without it and families are kept together in a common interest”

¹⁶⁴ Promoting gardening in part to protect and uplift the poor continued not only a broad Progressive Era middle class impulse to work for reform on behalf of the poor, but also the more particular goal of using urban gardening to address a variety of problems in poor communities. According to Laura J. Lawson, since the 1890s, middle class reformers established urban gardens as an environmental determinist approach to facilitate “the moral, physical, and economic development of the poor.” Local governments often directed or lent support to these efforts. Laura J. Lawson, *City Bountiful: A Century of Community Gardening in America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 21.

¹⁶⁵ Records of the City Council of Los Angeles 3/18/1919, Los Angeles City Clerk’s Office, Records Management Division, Los Angeles, CA; City of Los Angeles Commission of Social Service Annual Report July 1, 1918- July 1, 1919, pg 38, Los Angeles City Clerk’s Office, Records Management Division, Los Angeles, CA.

through their participation in gardening. Promoting the medical health of the poor was of equal importance to the Commission. Like many early twentieth century state-led efforts to uplift the working class, the Social Service Commission identified children as a beneficiary and symbol of their efforts. According to a Social Service Commission report, “Children can have a greater and more varied supply of fresh vegetables so needed for their growth.”¹⁶⁶

These appeals to “teach” less-fortunate families made no reference to the fact that many of them, in Los Angeles and elsewhere, already raised their own foodstuffs. One Chicago family living on \$55 per month planted a garden that produced “all the greens we care for” and raised chickens that produced “all the eggs” they could use, as their method to reduce the high cost of living. The home was a focal point for working class Los Angeles residents’ identities, both for its recreational purposes and its productive capacities. After World War I, working class residents, particularly in suburbs such as South Gate, continued to “[turn] their domestic property into sites of production,” as one historian phrases it. These efforts by no means required the guidance and support from the middle class, though garden campaigns did reinforce working class gardening.¹⁶⁷

In spite of its wartime legacy, importance in battling the H.C.L., and aims of teaching children and assisting the working class, the home garden movement suffered from waning support from the City Council by the middle of 1920. The Council continued to be in favor of gardening in principle, but no evidence suggests that it

¹⁶⁶ City of Los Angeles Commission of Social Service Annual Report July 1, 1918- July 1, 1919, pg 38, Los Angeles City Clerk’s Office, Records Management Division, Los Angeles, CA.

¹⁶⁷ Chicago *Tribune* 5/11/1913; Becky M. Nicolaides, *My Blue Heaven: Life and Politics in the Working-Class Suburbs of Los Angeles, 1920-1965* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 3 and 34.

maintained its financial commitment the movement. On the contrary, the Council even declined to offer the reduced water rates that home gardeners had enjoyed throughout the previous years of the movement. The Council received letters from at least one citizen protesting the decision, asserting, “The city should encourage everyone to cut down the H.C.L. and home gardens are the means of doing that.”¹⁶⁸

Local governmental support for the movement fissured for a number of reasons. First, already facing a limited budget, the City no longer received substantial pressure from above to support the movement. Absent were the massive wartime bureaucracy of the United States Food Administration and accompanying wartime rhetoric from national politicians.¹⁶⁹ Second, even at the onset of the movement, the City Attorney had informed the Council that providing financial support for the movement was of questionable legality. Without the urgency of supporting the war, the Council may have been more prone dissolve its support. At least one seed dealer, upset that the city was undercutting his profits by distributing free seeds, opposed the movement in its current form and claimed that the city government had no legal authority to lend its support financially. He brought the case before a judge and rested his argument on the idea that “there is no authority in the law” to appropriate money for home gardening. While the outcome of the case is unknown, L.A. City Council records include another protest “against the

¹⁶⁸ Records of the City Council of Los Angeles 6/3/1920, Los Angeles City Clerk’s Office, Records Management Division, Los Angeles, CA.

¹⁶⁹ It is worth noting that although the extensive local, state and federal government support of the movement declined, it had not entirely disappeared. In February of 1921, Congressman Osborne asked if the Los Angeles Chamber of Commerce would distribute up to 2000 or 3000 seed packages to Los Angeles residents. Los Angeles Chamber of Commerce Board of Directors Minutes February 17, 1921, ID 27, Carton 13, Los Angeles Chamber of Commerce Records, University of Southern California Special Collections Library.

distribution of free garden seeds” before the Council. Most of all, however, middle class residents exerted less pressure on the Council, because food prices had dramatically decreased. By December of 1921, food prices in Los Angeles decreased to early 1917 levels and some consumers began to express optimism that the trend would continue.¹⁷⁰

Middle class home gardening persisted into the 1920s, but it lacked the coordination and publicity of the period from 1917 to 1921. Los Angeles newspapers continued to publish gardening advice that promised to reduce living costs and included stories of middle class residents, such as James G. Owen, an attorney, whose garden “produc[ed]...part of [his] living.” Yet, these stories were not part of an organized and extensive movement. By 1921, food prices in Los Angeles had plummeted. The fissuring of the movement at this point suggests that middle class Los Angeles had gardened in the postwar period to protect their own pocketbooks. The progressive goal of teaching producerist values to children and the poor had been secondary, and in some cases, may have been used for rhetorical purposes.

During the war and immediate postwar years, the home garden campaign represented a popular movement inspired by the potent combination of the high cost of food and wartime/postwar patriotism. The movement also showcased the desire among middle class consumers to work in conjunction with multiple levels of government to fight a seemingly unjust economy. In this endeavour, middle class residents embraced the value of diligent production and gardened to strengthen their own pocketbooks

¹⁷⁰ Los Angeles *Times* 3/1/1919, Records of the City Council of Los Angeles 3/10/1919, Los Angeles City Clerk’s Office, Records Management Division, Los Angeles, CA; Price changes calculated from “Retail Prices, 1913 to December, 1921, Table 4.- Relative Family Expenditure for All Articles of Food in Specified Cities, 1913 to 1921, By Months and Years- Continued” *Bulletin of the United States Bureau of Labor Statistics* (Retail Prices 1913 to December 1921) 315 (Jan. 1923): 44-47.

against profiteering middlemen. As a secondary goal, they also continued to draw on the Progressive Era impulse to protect and uplift children and the poor. They provided them with resources and claimed to inculcate both children and indigent residents with producerist values. By organizing as consumers facing an increasingly unfair economy, but also by becoming producers, middle class home gardeners made producerism as an important part of their consumer identities.¹⁷¹

Municipal Markets in Their Initial Stages

Los Angeles residents also embraced municipal markets as means for and symbol of economic fairness in the war and postwar periods. As early as the middle of the nineteenth century, local governments established municipal markets to assert local control over urban economies that were increasingly supplied by widening food production, distribution and retail systems. After creating public markets, local communities and city governments policed and regulated them in the interest of community health and economic justice. In the mid-1910s, Los Angeles municipal markets re-emerged after a 52 year absence as a response to rising food prices and an increasing public vilification of the “middleman.” Middle class Americans patronized them, sought to shape them to their needs and desires, and, in the postwar period, fought to keep them open as a bulwark against the H.C.L. When the markets closed, they looked to a state-wide market initiative for relief. In each of these efforts, middle class residents

¹⁷¹ Los Angeles *Times* 4/10/1921.

supported municipal markets as a way of policing the honesty of those engaging in their community's economy.¹⁷²

Los Angeles's first attempt to establish a municipal market occurred in the mid-late nineteenth century during a period of government deregulation. As one historian explains, Los Angeles "grew into city" during the Gilded Age when the feeling of laissez-faire dominated political discussion and policy. The establishment of these first municipal markets in Los Angeles differed from the rise of public markets in other American cities, which "evolved when medieval ethics, or a residual thereof, infused the authorities with distrust of the middleman and his profit motive." Advocates of public markets in these cities argued that they would bring the producer and consumer together, a mutually beneficial arrangement. However, in Los Angeles, as food retail and distribution networks expanded in the middle to late nineteenth century, the city relied on laissez-faire policy and only placed minimal restrictions on middlemen, namely only the occasional restriction for sanitary reasons, or for city revenue. In this context of deregulation, Los Angeles's original public market only survived for fourteen months, from December 1859 to February 1861. It would be a half a century later and in a markedly different political climate before Los Angeles would again pursue municipal markets.¹⁷³

¹⁷² In her work on public markets in nineteenth century America, Helen Tangires argues that the late nineteenth century and Progressive Era municipal market can be understood as the "moral economy" of nineteenth century public spaces adapting to the continually rising capitalistic economy. Helen Tangires, *Public Markets and Civic Culture in Nineteenth-Century America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003).

¹⁷³ Karen J. Friedmann, "Urban Food Marketing in Los Angeles, 1850-1885" *Agricultural History* 54:2 (1980): 433-34.

Facing unparalleled food prices, Los Angeles residents supported new municipal markets during the late Progressive Era and World War I as part of a rapidly intensifying trend of state, federal and local governmental immersion into the economy. This period was marked by what one historian calls the “state building character of progressive action and thought.” During the first two decades of the twentieth century, federal, state and local governments intervened into the economy by enacting new labor laws, pure food and drug laws, combating “trusts,” settling strikes and expanding tax structures. Many of these new endeavours developed in conjunction with the organizing efforts of middle class citizens. In this political-economic context, on April 15, 1913, the City Council passed an ordinance for the establishment of four “experimental” municipal markets “as a possible means for reducing the cost of living.”¹⁷⁴

On May 4th, the markets opened to “a high degree of popularity among consumers.” Approximately 30,000 residents visited the markets. Scores of automobiles lined up, and the supply of farmers’ goods could not keep up with demand. The director of the Hollywood market, Mrs. Ingle Carpenter explained, “it was disappointing not to be able to accommodate them. But we are going to make this municipal market a success and the people of Hollywood are determined to stand by us.” Encouraged by the demand, residents were optimistic for continued success.¹⁷⁵

Throughout World War I, middle class consumers patronized and advocated for municipal markets as an antidote to the high cost of food. While municipal markets

¹⁷⁴ Leon Fink, ed., *Major Problems in the Gilded Age and Progressive Era: Documents and Essays* (Lexington, MA: D.C. Heath and Company, 1993), 341; *Los Angeles Times* 4/6/1913.

¹⁷⁵ *Los Angeles Times* 4/6/1913.

attracted a variety of patrons, by the Progressive Era, middle class consumers constituted a major constituency. Municipal markets built near the turn-of-the-century reflected the needs and desires of middle class shoppers. Architects crafted aesthetically-pleasing buildings for middle class consumers, who had developed heightened expectations for their shopping experiences with the rise of the department store. Among the chief patrons of the markets were women's clubs, the Housewives' League and the progressive, chiefly middle class, Municipal League of Los Angeles. It was an attorney who coordinated the acquisition of signatures of "approximately 6000 voters, taxpayers and property owners" for a petition that would have expanded the markets and the power of their operators.¹⁷⁶

¹⁷⁶ Records of the City Council of Los Angeles 10/26/1917, Los Angeles City Clerk's Office, Records Management Division, Los Angeles, CA; Records of the City Council of Los Angeles 10/30/1917, pg. 4, Los Angeles City Clerk's Office, Records Management Division, Los Angeles, CA; United States Census, Year: 1920; Census Place: *Los Angeles Assembly District 63, Los Angeles, California*; Roll: T625_106; Page: 19B; Enumeration District: 151; Image: 256; Municipal League of Los Angeles *Bulletin* date unknown, Los Angeles Public Library; For a list of members of the Municipal League and their professions, see Municipal League of Los Angeles *Bulletin* 9/29/1919, p. 9-19, Los Angeles Public Library; Los Angeles *Times* 12/15/1916. The secretary of the Housewives League was married to a newspaper solicitor. United States Census, Year: 1920; Census Place: *Monterey Park, Los Angeles, California*; Roll: T625_102; Page: 1A; Enumeration District: 13; Image: 375. Helen Tangires, *Public Markets and Civic Culture in Nineteenth-Century America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003). 181.



A Los Angeles Municipal Market.

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Nevertheless, throughout the war and postwar periods the Los Angeles municipal markets encountered a number of problems that threatened their existence. First, the markets brought significant operating costs, including a market director's salary and the necessary level of upkeep to maintain the safety of the markets, as well as to continue to attract customers. Second, some press accounts treated the markets as merely a "fad" that offered little real value to the public. Official reports and investigations into the prices charged at markets provided conflicting evidence. Thirdly, the markets suffered from a scam by a local private merchant to capitalize on the name "municipal market." The "Municipal Market Co." opened 23 locations throughout Los Angeles featuring signs stating "municipal market" that drew customers who mistakenly thought that they were shopping at city-operated markets. Stating that the public had been "deceived" by the

¹⁷⁷ Los Angeles Times 1/1/1916.

company, the Municipal League issued a protest with the City Council. “Municipal Markets Co. has undoubtedly contributed to this erroneous opinion and tends to confuse a private enterprise with the markets, which are maintained by the City,” the League exclaimed. Resolving that “in the opinion of the Council of the City of Los Angeles these names are being illegally used with the object in view of misleading the general public, thinking that same are municipal markets operated by the City of Los Angeles,” the Council instructed the City Attorney to prepare an ordinance to outlaw such deception. Two months later, the City Attorney concluded that whereas “the use of this designation by private concerns is no doubt misleading,” the city lacked the legal authority to prevent it. The Council grew increasingly frustrated.¹⁷⁸

The fact that middlemen found their way into municipal market stalls represented a greater blow to the aims of the market. In July of 1918, the Superintendant of the Municipal Markets defended a decision to move a “Mr. Cohen” from a front stall to a back stall in a municipal market. What to do with Cohen represented a difficult decision. Cohen was a producer, but “does not produce all of the stuff he brings to the market,” while the new occupant of the stall “does and it has always been the policy to discriminate in favor of the producer.” On other occasions, occupants of municipal market stalls sold “groceries and other commodities” instead selling only self-produced

¹⁷⁸ Records of the City Council of Los Angeles 5/14/1917, Los Angeles City Clerk’s Office, Records Management Division, Los Angeles, CA; Records of the City Council of Los Angeles 7/10/1917, Los Angeles City Clerk’s Office, Records Management Division, Los Angeles, CA; Records of the City Council of Los Angeles 7/18/1917, Los Angeles City Clerk’s Office, Records Management Division, Los Angeles, CA; Records of the City Council of Los Angeles 10/10/1917, Los Angeles City Clerk’s Office, Records Management Division, Los Angeles, CA; Records of the City Council of Los Angeles 9/20/1918, Los Angeles City Clerk’s Office, Records Management Division, Los Angeles, CA; Records of the City Council of Los Angeles 10/7/1918, Los Angeles City Clerk’s Office, Records Management Division, Los Angeles, CA; Los Angeles Municipal League *Bulletin* date unknown, pg 4, Los Angeles Public Library; Los Angeles *Times* 4/1/1917, 5/20/1919.

goods. A December 1918 report by the “Special Committee with reference to the workings of the Municipal Market,” stated that the municipal markets were failing to “eliminate there from the peddler,” which prevented the “citizens at large” from “reap[ing] the benefit.” Exasperated by these circumstances, members of the City Council first attempted to close the markets in December 1918/January 1919.¹⁷⁹

Throughout the postwar period, middle class residents made repeated attempts to keep municipal markets open. Both middle class organizations and private individuals pressed the City Council to sustain its support of the markets. The Ebell Club of Los Angeles wrote the finance committee to speak “on behalf of the continuation of City Markets.” According to the City Council Public Welfare Committee, the Friday Morning Club had shown itself to be “strongly in favor of maintaining the public markets.” The Friday Morning Club¹⁸⁰ consisted of largely middle class members and undertook an “anti-extravagance campaign” in conjunction with a widespread Department of Justice-led “Women’s Division” campaign to reduce the postwar cost of living (discussed at length in chapter 3).¹⁸¹ The City Council Public Welfare Committee also reported that the

¹⁷⁹ Records of the City Council of Los Angeles 7/3/1918, Los Angeles City Clerk’s Office, Records Management Division, Los Angeles, CA; Records of the City Council of Los Angeles 12/18/1918, Los Angeles City Clerk’s Office, Records Management Division, Los Angeles, CA.

¹⁸⁰ Clark Davis identifies the Friday Morning Club as a middle class progressive organization that focused on public welfare, social reform, and the ability of women to engage in civic affairs in the Progressive Era, but embraced a more “passive social-oriented elitism” during the 1920s. On the eve of this transition from emphasizing social activism to passively focusing on social life (the war and immediate postwar periods, when prices peaked), the club appears to have been concerned for welfare of the less-fortunate, but also perhaps increasingly interested in their own pocketbooks. Clark Davis, “An Era and Generation of Civic Engagement: The Friday Morning Club in Los Angeles, 1891-1931” *Southern California Quarterly* 84:2 (2002): 135-168; The quotation “strongly in favor of maintaining the public markets,” refers to the support of public markets by both the Friday Morning Club and the Hollywood Women’s Club.

¹⁸¹ Speakers at the club blamed the postwar H.C.L. at least in part on “high wages,” one claiming that “the most serious of all is the fact that the wave of high prices is actually beginning to undermine the home.” “The Friday Morning Club, November 14, 1919, 940 South Figueroa Street, Los Angeles. Topic- ‘Causes

Hollywood Women's Club's opposed to closing the markets. Summarizing citizens' support for keeping the markets open, Councilman Cleveland stated, "only one or two persons appeared to advocate the closing of the markets, while several persons, as individuals and representatives of Women's Clubs, were strongly insistent for their continuance." In response to the overwhelming support for the markets, the Council voted to continue them, in spite of the markets' failure to sufficiently bar middlemen and the fact that they were "run at a loss of approximately \$3000 per year."¹⁸²

Like home gardens, municipal markets became a physical space of middle class consumer activism throughout the war and postwar periods. They represented a symbol of economic fairness and a means to combat the economic injustices levied by middlemen and other profiteers. The Reverend G.D., one of Washington D.C.'s "salaried employees," believed that municipal markets would provided literal spaces for residents to enjoy a just economy. Bringing the producer and consumer "into direct contact through the intervention of the government" city markets gave consumers relief from "soaring prices" and held the potential to create a "social center." In these spaces, patrons could enjoy band concerts, a wide park, and, most of all, "an end to the middle man."¹⁸³

and Cures for the High Cost of Living.' Ralph P. Merritt," Folder 3, Box 32, John Haynes Papers, UCLA Special Collection, Charles Young Library.

¹⁸² Records of the City Council of Los Angeles 11/11/1918, Los Angeles City Clerk's Office, Records Management Division, Los Angeles, CA; Records of the City Council of Los Angeles 11/28/1918, Los Angeles City Clerk's Office, Records Management Division, Los Angeles, CA; Records of the City Council of Los Angeles 1/24/1919, Los Angeles City Clerk's Office, Records Management Division, Los Angeles, CA; Letter from Councilman Cleveland to the Los Angeles City Council, read on 1/24/1919, Records of the City Council of Los Angeles 1/24/1919, Los Angeles City Clerk's Office, Records Management Division, Los Angeles, CA.

¹⁸³ *Washington Post* 6/22/1917.

These physical spaces of middle class consumer activism took shape alongside of a mutually reinforcing discursive space in magazines, newspapers and other mediums that encouraged middle class consumers to protest the political economy. In this discursive space, which developed in the 1910s and flourished in the immediate postwar period, countless media sources fanned the flames of frustration for middle class Americans. As just one example, an *Outlook* article declared, “The middle class finds that it is being crushed between its fixed income and rising prices. If need and merit ever gave the right to strike, the middle class has the right on its side.” Such articles tacitly encouraged middle class consumer protest. Others directly suggested that salaried employees form home garden associations, petition municipalities for city markets, or engage in other forms of consumer organizing. The ubiquity of articles describing the plight of the middle class fueled a desire among “salaried” citizens to create physical spaces of protest. These spaces, in turn, heightened interest in middle class discontent and provided real examples for articles discussing middle class consumer woes and activism. The physical and discursive spaces of middle class consumer protest held a symbiotic relationship.¹⁸⁴

Fighting Produce “Combinations” and the Whiteness of Municipal Market Campaigns and Anti-High Food Price Activism in Los Angeles

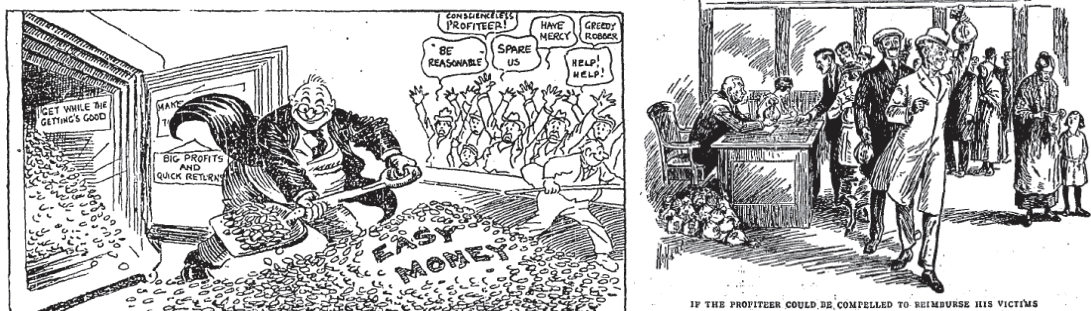
This discursive space of middle class consumer organizing, at times, contrasted the honesty and whiteness of middle class consumers with non-white, dishonest and un-American speculators and profiteers. While white middle class consumers organizing

¹⁸⁴ “If the Middle Class Should Strike” *Outlook* 11/12/1919, pp. 337.

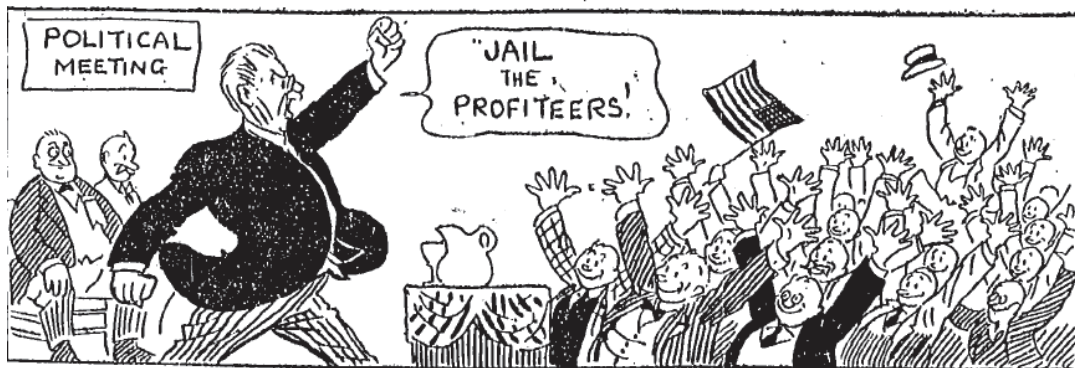
against the H.C.L. (through a variety of methods including the formation of municipal markets) only occasionally spoke of themselves in ethnic terms, their nemeses took on nearly all shapes and forms. Stereotypes of profiteers, hoarders and speculators ranged from gluttonous white millionaires and money-hoarding Jews to socialist workers or “cunning” Chinese food peddlers. Visual depictions of profiteers in popular magazines and newspapers displayed primarily images of fat, white millionaires, but also portrayed non-white profiteers. The victims of profiteering in these depictions, however, were almost uniformly white, middle class-looking Americans.



The above pictures represent different visual depictions of profiteers. While the image of the fat rich man was more common in national popular newspapers and magazines, such as *Life* and the *Chicago Tribune*, portrayals of non-white profiteers, such as the Mexican and the devil with stereotypical African American features, were also printed.



¹⁸⁵ *Chicago Daily Tribune* 8/27/1919; *Life* 1/30/1919, 2/23/1919 and 1/22/1920.



Whereas images of profiteers could be both white and non-white, portrayals of victims in national popular magazines and newspapers were overwhelmingly white and middle class-looking.

In vilifying the supposed ethnic culprits of the unfair postwar economy, white middle class consumers appealed to popular ethnic categorizations and fears of the era. Only a few years before the National Origins Act, which severely limited immigration to the United States from “undesirable” locations/“races,”¹⁸⁷ many white Americans of 1910s and early twenties differentiated themselves from scores of immigrants that had traveled to American soil in the preceding decades from southern and eastern Europe, and on the west coast, particularly from Mexico and Asia.¹⁸⁸ As historian Matthew Frye Jacobson argues, this period featured an extensive milieu of unstable racial categories that reflected immigration patterns. A variety of racial categorizations, such as Celt, Slav, or Hebrew, defied a black-white dichotomy, and the character and extent of racism and

¹⁸⁶ Chicago *Daily Tribune* 5/21/1920 and 9/20/1920; *Life* 2/20/1920.

¹⁸⁷ The Act virtually barred immigration from Asia and Africa and placed strict limits on immigration from southern and eastern Europe.

¹⁸⁸ According to United States Census data, the number of Asian residents of Los Angeles jumped from 1,881 in 1890 to 11,028 in 1920. The number of Mexican residents of Los Angeles increased from 493 to 21,653 in the same period. See Robert M. Fogelson, *The Fragmented Metropolis: Los Angeles, 1850-1930* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1967), 76.

racial classification were often relative to factors such as geography.¹⁸⁹ As such, Asians and Mexicans became popular racialized villains in California, while residents in other localities often preferred different malevolent faces. The anti-ethnic tendencies of first red scare intensified fear of foreigners and non-white Americans and their impact on the livelihood of white Americans.¹⁹⁰ In this context, an image of the profiteer, a despised enemy of the white middle class, could take on a variety of white or racialized identities.¹⁹¹

White Los Angeles consumers and the politicians seeking to appeal to them, or to shift blame away from white retailers, identified “un-American” Japanese speculators as profiteers.¹⁹² According to these voices, Japanese growers and retailers combined to set their prices and limit the supplies of their crops to extract high prices from white consumers. As Los Angeles resident Dr. George P. Clements noted to the *Times*, “The

¹⁸⁹ Jacobson also notes that between 1840 and 1924, “race was the prevailing idiom for discussing citizenship...” Since Americans frequently spoke of profiteering in “patriotic” terms, it is unsurprising that profiteers would occasionally take on different racial forms. Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 7-9, also see pp. 39-90.

¹⁹⁰ See, for example, Theodore Kornweibel Jr., “*Seeing Red*”: *Federal Campaigns Against Black Militancy, 1919-1925* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998), or Patrick Renshaw, “The IWW and the Red Scare, 1917-24” *Journal of Contemporary History* 3:4 (October 1968): 63-72.

¹⁹¹ Los Angeles was no exception. According to one historian’s analysis, whites overwhelmingly dominated the ranks of the middle class in Los Angeles. According to a random sample of clerical employees included in the 1920 census, 99 percent were listed as white. The *Los Angeles Times* represented just one local media source that often took on an anti-immigrant tone, whether condemning immigrant food peddlers or supporting open shop. It comes as little surprise that, at least locally, middle class victims of profiteering would be depicted as white. Clark Davis, *Company Men: White-Collar Life and Corporate Cultures in Los Angeles, 1892-1941* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000).

¹⁹² United States Census data lists an increase in the number of Japanese residents of Los Angeles from 40 in 1890 to 8,536 in 1920. Robert Fogelson remarks that the change resulted from a reversal in the policy of the Japanese government that had forbidden its subjects from leaving the country. He also notes that a number of Japanese sought to flee poverty in Japan, that Japanese immigrants preferred Los Angeles to San Francisco, and that many migrated to Los Angeles after living elsewhere in the West. Robert M. Fogelson, *The Fragmented Metropolis: Los Angeles, 1850-1930* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1967), 76-77 (census table also printed in Fogelson).

Jap combines in his selling, and in his buying... The Jap pushes the small man out, excludes him from the market places and the consumer pays what a smiling Nipponese gentleman requires.” Councilman Neal Olsen registered an even greater complaint against Japanese combinations of dishonest farmers and sellers. Olsen supported the expansion of the Municipal Market Department and voiced frustration that the markets had hitherto inadequately eliminated the middleman. He also, however, was the former president of the Southern California Retail Grocers’ Association, which represented white retailers and had been accused of profiteering.¹⁹³ In spite of his background in food retail, Olsen skillfully appealed to the masses by speaking in popular anti-profiteering language and combining it with anti-ethnic rhetoric. At a June 2, 1919 City Council meeting, Councilman Olsen declared, “the war is over and the food profiteers must be stopped from continuing to make their raids.” “After making a complete investigation of the matter of the strawberry situation,” Olsen continued, “I find, upon irrefutable proof that an ironbound combination exists and that this trust or combination has been organized by Japanese fruit and vegetable growers.” Drawing on stereotypes of the Japanese, Olsen asserted that Japanese growers’ and sellers’ “cunning” “schemes” were operated with “arrogant authority.” According to Olsen, Japanese growers sold goods at an agreed-upon price to only “The Japanese Association” each night and sent excess crops to Japanese canneries. Independent packers and buyers had to pay exorbitant prices

¹⁹³ In September of 1919, Arthur Lee, Secretary of the Retail Grocers’ Association of Southern California, noted, “Contrary to the popular opinion of the public, the grocers deplore the high cost of living.” *Los Angeles Times* 9/2/1919.

to receive goods from the Association.¹⁹⁴ By identifying Japanese growers and retailers as major profiteers, Olsen may have been attempting to shift blame for high prices away from white grocers to a popular ethnic culprit. In any case, his words resonated with the widespread nativist fears of the immediate postwar period.

Olsen described these speculators and middlemen in nativist anti-ethnic terms that held the potential to appeal to whites across classes. To Olsen, they were distinctly non-white and un-American- categories that were antithetical to both white retailers and white middle class consumers. Olsen called Japanese food trust “our Japanese food profiteering menace” and further racialized Japanese-Americans by identifying them as “a rapacious cunning, selfish race...which can never become assimilated with true Americanism.” Juxtaposing Japanese growers with the honesty, care, productiveness and empathy of whites, Olsen declared that Japanese farmers “Japped” the productiveness out of American soil by having it “sucked of all richness by the intensive farming.”

In an attempt at political theater, Olsen followed his rhetoric by proposing to expand the powers of the municipal market department to shut down the Japanese Association altogether. During the 1919 session, Olsen introduced a resolution to give the Municipal Market Inspector czar-like power beyond the inspection of municipal markets. The resolution, which had little chance at passing, sought to give the inspector “complete and arbitrary power over the entire food distribution system” to prevent profiteering by

¹⁹⁴ In addition to writing in the *Los Angeles Times*, Clements had written the Los Angeles Chamber of Commerce regarding “the destruction of fruits and vegetables by Japanese Gardeners in restraint of trade and the nuisance of the Japanese highway vegetable stands.” Los Angeles Chamber of Commerce Board of Directors Minutes September 16, 1919, ID 25, Carton 9, Los Angeles Chamber of Commerce Records, University of Southern California Special Collections; *Los Angeles Times* 1/15/1920; Records of the City Council of Los Angeles 6/2/1919, Los Angeles City Clerk’s Office, Records Management Division, Los Angeles, CA.

all persons, white or non-white. The resolution predictably failed, but Olsen and others making similar accusations, including the claim that Japanese Californians willfully destroyed crops, had the attention of the Japanese Association of Southern California. The Association issued a statement that blamed high prices on railroad congestion and offered to provide examples of white farmers who had allowed crops to spoil because they could not reach the public. Most importantly, the Association asserted, “there is no organization among” Japanese famers in Los Angeles, and that they “are powerless in the regulation of prices.” In spite of these statements, Japanese famers and sellers remained a popular culprit of high prices. Months later, the Los Angeles *Times* accused Japanese growers of destroying melons to inflate prices.¹⁹⁵

The Faltering of City-Run Markets and the Rise of a State Government Solution

Olsen’s unsuccessful resolution was just one sign of the apparent failure of municipal markets to solve to city’s food problems. Not only could alleged food “combinations” like the “Japanese Association” ignore them, middlemen continued to find their way into market stalls. To make matters worse, the buildings and facilities of the municipal markets were deteriorating, which may have served to discourage frequent attendance from middle class consumers. For some middle class Americans “cash and carry” shopping was a relatively new experience. According to a *Ladies Home Journal* article, middle class consumers, who had abstained from having groceries delivered because of the high cost of living, had only recently stopped shopping at food stores with

¹⁹⁵ Records of the City Council of Los Angeles 6/2/1919, Los Angeles City Clerk’s Office, Records Management Division, Los Angeles, CA; Los Angeles *Times* 9/8/1919, 8/15/1920.

somewhat elegant-looking décor in favor of a “middle class market.” Dilapidating buildings at the municipal markets could have only discouraged frequent patronage from this segment of middle class shoppers.¹⁹⁶

Municipal markets also suffered from underwhelming support from farmers. Nationally, farmers expressed only mixed opinions of municipal markets. One Indiana farmer asserted that municipal markets had brought benefits to producers and consumers, but “farmers can not afford to go to the city market and sell their products for the same price that dealers would pay for them.” Another farmer from Michigan exclaimed that the markets had not been completely successful, because of a confluence between the fact that some farmers would only charge retail prices and “the practice of many city folks in refusing to pay a fair price for the farmer’s products.” City Council records suggest that farmers in and around Los Angeles also had misgivings for city markets. In an August 17, 1920 report on the municipal markets, Sterling Boothe, Superintendant of the Municipal Market Department, argued that “the present system of Public Markets in this City...does not serve its intended purpose.” The markets intended to bring producers and consumers together, but there was a “difficulty in keeping producers on the market” because of license fees and the inability to sell a large amount of crops at once. Boothe favored municipal markets in principle and cited those in St. Louis, Dubuque, IA, Des Moines, Reading, PA, Philadelphia, Portland and Seattle as just a few examples of

¹⁹⁶ “The High Cost of Living” *Ladies Home Journal* 3/1920; Records of the City Council of Los Angeles 8/17/1920, Los Angeles City Clerk’s Office, Records Management Division, Los Angeles, CA.

success. Since the L.A. Municipal Markets struggled to achieve similar results, Boothe offered his resignation and suggested that the Council close the markets.¹⁹⁷

Los Angeles consumers fought to keep the markets open. In particular, residents “living in the vicinity of the Vermont Avenue and Forty-Eighth Street Municipal Market” requested that the mayor visit the market and amassed over one thousand signatures for a petition urging its continuance. The mayor visited the market and “found it very active.” “It seems that this particular market has been of great benefit to a large number of people living in the city,” the Mayor observed. After hearing that the Council would again attempt to close the municipal markets, John G. Brophy, who worked under the Municipal Market Superintendant, also wrote the City Council to request that the Council allow him to continue to operate the market on 48th Street and Vermont Avenue.¹⁹⁸

In spite of these appeals, the City Council voted to close the markets. Frustrated by the substantial costs to the city and the markets’ divergence from intended purposes, the Council even overruled the Mayor’s support of keeping the Vermont and 48th street market open. Unceremoniously, the Council sold the remaining market equipment and building materials.¹⁹⁹

¹⁹⁷ *Indiana Farmer’s Guide* 1/3/1920 and 3/13/1920; Records of the City Council of Los Angeles 8/17/1920, Los Angeles City Clerk’s Office, Records Management Division, Los Angeles, CA.

¹⁹⁸ Records of the City Council of Los Angeles 6/1/1920, Los Angeles City Clerk’s Office, Records Management Division, Los Angeles, CA; Records of the City Council of Los Angeles 9/1/1920, Los Angeles City Clerk’s Office, Records Management Division, Los Angeles, CA; Records of the City Council of Los Angeles 8/25/1920, Los Angeles City Clerk’s Office, Records Management Division, Los Angeles, CA; Records of the City Council of Los Angeles 8/19/1920, Los Angeles City Clerk’s Office, Records Management Division, Los Angeles, CA.

¹⁹⁹ Records of the City Council of Los Angeles 9/3/1920, Los Angeles City Clerk’s Office, Records Management Division, Los Angeles, CA; Records of the City Council of Los Angeles 9/8/1920, Los

With the city-operated markets closing, many citizens and local city officials shifted their attention to a proposed California initiative to open state-operated city markets as a last effort for relief from high food prices. In August of 1920, Los Angeles residents read newspaper reports of Municipal Market Superintendant Sterling Boothe's advocacy of a plan for a state market initiative promoted by State Senator William Brown. Boothe, who had encouraged the Council to close the city-operated markets, supported them in theory, but preferred a state government-controlled solution. Senator Brown's initiative aimed to create new and stronger city markets that would operate under a consignment system.²⁰⁰ The State of California would become a direct buyer of a myriad of foodstuffs at a reasonable profit for farmers and a direct seller to consumers in Los Angeles and San Francisco, who could patronize new city markets and buy food at cost. These not-for-profit state-run markets would become the new middleman between producers and consumers. "It is my belief that if the people of California were to adopt the plan as proposed by Senator Brown for Public Market Act providing for the Commission houses operated by the State," Boothe concluded, "the Public Markets such as we have maintained in Los Angeles would serve benefit to the people as the minimum

Angeles City Clerk's Office, Records Management Division, Los Angeles, CA; Records of the City Council of Los Angeles 9/10/1920, Los Angeles City Clerk's Office, Records Management Division, Los Angeles, CA; Records of the City Council of Los Angeles 10/13/1920, Los Angeles City Clerk's Office, Records Management Division, Los Angeles, CA; Records of the City Council of Los Angeles 10/14/1920, Los Angeles City Clerk's Office, Records Management Division, Los Angeles, CA; Records of the City Council of Los Angeles 9/2/1920, Los Angeles City Clerk's Office, Records Management Division, Los Angeles, CA.

²⁰⁰ Brown authored the original State Market Act in 1915 and intended for it to benefit both producers and consumers by providing for "opening State markets and selling food products at public auction directly to the consumer," but the Market Director instead focused on organizing producers to attain better prices for them. Brown hoped to rectify this problem through a new initiative. Mansel G. Blackford, *The Politics of Business in California, 1890-1920* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1977), 29-39; Los Angeles Times 1/13/1917.

retail price would be regulated through supply and demand and the entire product being marketed as against the conditions existing today.” To achieve this end, consumers and supportive politicians would face the formidable task of compiling the 80,000 signatures needed to place the initiative on the ballot.²⁰¹

The proposed 1920 market initiative represented a rebirth of a previous effort undertaken by consumers and state politicians to establish state-run markets during the late Progressive Era and World War I. In 1915, Assemblyman H.E. McPherson and Senator William Brown successfully spearheaded a bill to enable a new director of state markets to purchase fruits and vegetables directly from farmers and sell them immediately to consumers through public markets. Yet, the Governor’s appointee as state market director, Harris Weinstock, a longtime supporter of farming interests, neglected to undertake this role. Erroneously claiming that the opening of public markets was a discretionary power of the market director, he opted to instead focus his efforts on obtaining higher prices for farmers. Weinstock raised crop prices by expanding distribution networks and by strengthening cooperative marketing associations, which allowed farmers to collectively influence prices. Seeking to validate his undertakings, Weinstock asked Senator E.A. Luce to propose a bill during the 1917 session to absolve him of any duty to open public markets and to confirm his authorization to organize cooperative marketing associations. Furious with Weinstock’s departure from his supposed duties, Senator Brown and consumers throughout California, who simultaneously supported municipally-funded markets, fought the proposed legislation. They were unsuccessful, as farmers provided a key block of support for Luce and

²⁰¹ Records of the City Council of Los Angeles 8/17/1920, Los Angeles City Clerk’s Office, Records Management Division, Los Angeles, CA.

Weinstock's measure. In a last legislative effort, Brown proposed in the 1919 session a bill that mandated that the state market director open public markets and prohibiting him from organizing cooperative marketing associations. The bill failed, and Brown decided take his quest to open state-run public markets to the people.²⁰²

In conjunction with Boothe's support of Senator Brown's postwar plan to amass enough signatures to place state-run markets on the ballot, middle class consumers organized the Producers and Consumer's League to advocate on behalf of the plan. Katherine James, served as secretary of the League, while A.G. Bartlett, former president of the Los Angeles City Club, L.B. Phelps, a doctor, and Mittah Abrams, the wife of a salesman, were among the League's other organizers. Attorney Fred Spring also presided over at least one meeting. Collectively, they sought to "put [the] State Market Act on the Initiative Ballot."²⁰³

The League's motives for action reflected the same impulse for middle class support of municipal markets- to protect consumers from profiteering middlemen. One Los Angeles *Times* headline asserted that the organization sought to "Start War on Middlemen." The League employed the slogan "Swat the Profiteer." In an open letter to California Governor William Stephens, Katherine James asserted that during the war the state market director organized food producers to "a greater degree than ever before," which "was fine for the producer but the consumer suffered and the middle man did most

²⁰² Mansel G. Blackford, *The Politics of Business in California, 1890-1920* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1977), 29-39.

²⁰³ Records of the City Council of Los Angeles 5/27/1920, Los Angeles City Clerk's Office, Records Management Division, Los Angeles, CA.; Records of the City Council of Los Angeles 6/24/1920, Los Angeles City Clerk's Office, Records Management Division, Los Angeles, CA.

of the actual profiteering.” James continued, “In nearly all cases the producers were benefitted by the organization and were able to demand thru their organization fair prices for their products. But then what happened? The middle man paid the increased price because he had to and then tacked on enough more to his price to make sure that he had not lose anything by the producers’ increase.” By serving as a competitor to the middleman, the state of California, James hoped, would bring lower food prices to consumers.²⁰⁴

Creatively placing the word “Producers” in the title of the Producers’ and Consumers’ League, the League misleadingly portrayed themselves as an alliance of farmers and consumers. Among of the primary middlemen targeted by Los Angeles consumers were cooperative marketing associations, of which most farmers supported. For the Producers’ and Consumers’ League, it was the only the honest producer, the type that desired to market his produce only directly to the consumer, who needed protection. This farmer represented, for the most part, only a paragon of organizing consumers. It comes as no surprise that sources documenting the League’s activities provide no evidence of support from farmers, nor a presence of farmers among the League’s organizers. Farmers by and large were on record opposing measures to expand the Market Department in this way and shift the State Market Director’s role from aiding cooperative marketing associations to establishing and maintaining state-supported city markets.²⁰⁵

²⁰⁴ Oxnard, CA. *Daily Courier* 1/22/1920; Los Angeles *Times* 6/20/1920, 6/24/1920.

²⁰⁵ Mansel G. Blackford, *The Politics of Business in California, 1890-1920* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1977), 29-39.

The Producers and Consumers' League represented a collaborative effort between middle class citizens and members of the local and state governments. Both politicians like Brown and middle class consumers served as figureheads of the movement. Alongside middle class residents, Mayor Snyder, Ex-Congressman Kent, Judge Taft and State Senator William E. Brown, the author of the plan, spearheaded a campaign committee to gain enough signatures to place the State Market bill on the initiative ballot. At a public meeting, consumers and politicians collectively expressed their support of the petition. They reiterated that the markets would fight a common enemy in the profiteer-the markets, in Brown's words, "will prevent profiteers from squeezing the market, causing the destruction of foodstuffs and keeping prices up."²⁰⁶

Existing organizations of middle class residents also lent their support for the plan. In particular, the City Club and the Women's City Club helped to amass signatures for the petition. The Club even appointed a chairperson to help coordinate the club's efforts to help secure the 80,000 necessary signatures for the petition. The City Club held publicized meetings on the issue, in which Senator Brown delivered speeches. In these meetings, Brown continued his anti-profiteering rhetoric exclaiming that "the public markets will hurt only the profiteer, not the honest merchant, and will reduce the high cost of living." By all accounts, the City Club, Women's City Club, the Producers' and Consumers' League, and other participants in the campaign for state-run city markets, appeared to be optimistic.²⁰⁷

²⁰⁶ Los Angeles *Times* 5/27/1920, 6/25/1920.

²⁰⁷ Los Angeles *Times* 6/11/1920, 6/22/1920.

Conclusion:

The petition for state-run municipal markets in Los Angeles and San Francisco failed to appear on the November, 1920 California ballot. The initiative received a mere 7,294 qualified signatures. 6,883 signatures came from Los Angeles, while San Bernardino accounted for 367. Residents of Ventura supplied the remaining 44 signatures. It is unclear how many signatures were disqualified or how many, if any, came from San Francisco or other areas of California. The last hope for public markets in Los Angeles had vanished.²⁰⁸

By 1922 the impetus for middle class consumer organizing for fair food prices had diminished. In Los Angeles, after food prices had increased by fifty-six percent from January of 1917 to July of 1920, prices began to slowly decrease in August of 1920. By December of 1921, prices returned to early 1917 levels, though still considered high by many accounts. Nationally, food price levels exhibited a similar trend. As food prices dropped approximately three percent below 1917 prices, home garden organizations disbanded and municipal markets in localities ranging from Oshkosh, WI to Hartford, CT closed or reduced capacity. The national discursive space of middle class consumer organizing against high food prices that had reinforced the protests of the Los Angeles middle class was shrinking, as politicians, the press and organizing citizens elsewhere in the country began to abandon their anti-high food price activism.²⁰⁹

²⁰⁸ "State Market Commission" (1920), Initiative and Referendum Petition Files (Proposed Ballot Measures), Secretary of State Elections Division, California State Archives, Sacramento, CA. I would like to thank Linda Johnson at the California State Archives for her correspondence on this matter.

²⁰⁹ Price changes calculated from "Retail Prices, 1913 to December, 1921, Table 4.- Relative Family Expenditure for All Articles of Food in Specified Cities, 1913 to 1921, By Months and Years- Continued," *Bulletin of the United States Bureau of Labor Statistics* (Retail Prices 1913 to December 1921) 315 (Jan. 1923): 44-47, "Relative Retail Prices of Food," in Department of Commerce, Bureau of Foreign and

During the duration of these movements, middle class Americans expressed the importance of older middle class producerist values as a part of their consumer identity. Middle class citizens incorporated industriousness and thrift- producerist values that had shaped the worldview of the nineteenth century middle class- into their consumer identity. They took on the role of an actual producer and embraced consumption practices that would avoid the supposedly indolent and greedy middleman- both white and non white. Middle class residents and sympathetic or opportunistic politicians championed the value of honest hard work and thrift as universal values and condemned speculators, such as “The Japanese Association,” who allegedly indolently stood by and counted its profits as white middle class consumers suffered from high prices.

Inspired by a Progressive Era and World War I practice of organizing in cooperation with the state to instill fairness into a seemingly unjust economy, home gardeners and municipal market supporters looked to the state for support in the immediate postwar period. They pressed for new laws and programs that would expand the power, reach and size of government market departments, and fund and support home gardens. Activists and supportive politicians contended to be protecting and uplifting children and the poor, as many in the Progressive movement had claimed to have done in previous years, but placed a greater emphasis on looking out for middle class pocketbooks. Middle class activists also frequently invoked a powerful combination of the themes of patriotism and the high cost of living in their attempts to garner support for

Domestic Commerce, *Statistical Abstract of the United States 1921* (Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1922), 631, and “No. 351 Relative Retail Prices of Specified Articles of Food,” in Department of Commerce, Bureau of Foreign and Domestic Commerce, *Statistical Abstract of the United States 1922* (Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1923), 507 ; *Hartford Courant* 10/5/1921; *Daily Northwestern* 8/11/1921.

the movements. City, state and federal politicians spoke in favor of the movements and even joined middle class organizations, but the massive bureaucracy of supportive wartime organizations like the USFA and the School Garden Army disappeared in the immediate postwar period. Initially, the Los Angeles City Council maintained its financial support of home gardens and municipal markets, but it became increasingly saddled by costs, questions of legality, and the persistence of middlemen in market stalls, and received less pressure from above, and eventually from below, to resume its previous role.

But for middle class citizens like Mary Anderson, food prices had not been their only concern. The price of wearing apparel had advanced rapidly, leading to an unprecedented federal peacetime program to prevent clothing profiteering and encourage conservation. It too became a space of middle class consumer activism; an opportunity to promote the values of diligence and thrift. Mary Anderson was one of many volunteers to participate in the United States Department of Justice High Cost of Living Division, which faced the formidable task of reducing the cost of clothing. Its story follows.

Chapter 3: The “Flying Squadron” Declares War on the Profiteers: The U.S. Department of Justice High Cost of Living Division and Federally-Sponsored Middle Class Consumer Organizing

In the summer of 1919, the Bridgeport *Daily Telegram* declared that without immediate action from the Federal Government to lower the price of wearing apparel, “the buying public” would stage a “revolt” and the country would undergo a “panic.” One cloak and suit manufacturer predicted, “the public will stand just so much and then it will rebel.” Citizens would cease to buy clothing, “the balance of trade will be upset, firms will be driven out of business and huge numbers of people will be thrown out of work.” Frederic J. Haskin, a journalist writing for the *Telegram*, wondered, “How any man can afford to have a family.” A few years ago, “The mother who went downtown with a ten-spot could buy three complete outfits for her child, and still have enough left over to buy a boy a bag of peanuts and a game of dominoes. Today she is fortunate if she is able to obtain one lone outfit for \$10” and “\$15 for anything with real wool.” Numerous Americans, who expressed their grievances in newspapers, popular magazines and letters to politicians, shared Haskin’s sentiments. These voices, though arising largely from middle class individuals, rather than from specific organizations, demanded swift and decisive action from the U.S. Government.²¹⁰

By the end of the war, it became clear to federal lawmakers that they could no longer ignore public outcry over high clothing prices. In particular, in letters to newspapers, editorials, literary magazines and correspondence to government officials, many Americans began to associate their concern over the cost of wearing apparel with a

²¹⁰ Bridgeport *Standard Telegram*, 8/21/1919.

middle class identity. The state's response to consumer uproar originated from the highest levels of government. President Woodrow Wilson and Attorney General A. Mitchell Palmer devised a two-pronged approach to tackle the high cost of clothing. First, after gaining the legal machinery from Congress, the Department of Justice would prosecute the "profiteers" in the clothing industry to set an example for any who chose to "gouge" the American public. Second, they would use existing women's organizations to build a movement that would educate American women, whom they estimated made ninety percent of all clothing purchases, on how to be thrifty agents in family consumption of clothing. Congress and the Wilson administration hoped to meet preexisting and rising expectations from the public that the state had the ability to solve the high cost of living (HCL).²¹¹

This two-pronged approach drew on an organizing tradition of middle class state-centered voluntarism. During the Progressive Era, groups, ranging from Jane Addams's Hull House to Florence Kelley's National Consumers League, attempted to tackle social and economic injustices through volunteer work. They also called on local, state and federal governments to institute new laws, programs and agencies to address prices, wages, and working and living conditions. In conjunction with these new laws, government programs and agencies, middle class progressives were willing to provide much of the organizational muscle necessary for their execution. They often worked in these agencies, or monitored compliance of these laws and regulations as part of their activities in their existing organizations. The Federal Government and middle class

²¹¹ Edith Strauss to "Madam" 11/8/1919 (form letter to leaders of women's organizations), Records of the High Cost of Living Division, Department of Justice Records, RG 60, National Archives II, College Park, MD.

citizens built on this tradition through their participation in U.S. Food Administration programs during the war. Through the USFA, middle class Americans organized conservation committees and policed the consumption habits of neighbors. A wider range of Americans brought a political meaning to their consumption practices and those of their neighbors.

With the approval of middle class citizens, the Wilson administration expanded this form of voluntarism in the postwar period by making clothing profiteering punishable by law and relying on middle class Americans to report violations. The Department of Justice also enlisted middle class female volunteers to teach women in their communities how to be diligent and thrifty consumers in accordance with specific DOJ guidelines. In spite of the importance of voluntarism in Wilson/DOJ approach, their strategy also expanded the power of federal state well beyond this voluntary component. Middle class Americans expected the DOJ to conduct expensive and complex prosecutions against every merchant, middleman or big capitalist they deemed to be a profiteer.

This two-sided, top-down approach was virtually guaranteed to achieve, at best, limited results, especially given the lofty expectations of middle class consumers. Prosecuting clothing profiteers and using women's organizations to change consumption patterns ignored any larger structural reasons for the high clothing costs. Against the burden of inflated expectations, these strategies also suffered from collective action problems, constraints arising from the American legal system, and tension within middle class ideals for women's fashion. Ultimately, the perceived failure of the government's

top-down approach encouraged the eruption of middle class grassroots movements that demanded even stronger state action.

Rising Expectations: Discourses on High Clothing Prices Before and During World War I

During the 1910s, the Wilson administration fueled expectations among the middle class that the federal government could and should control prices. Wilson appealed to middle class voters by connecting price increases to monopolies, capitalizing on a middle class anti-monopoly tradition. By the post-World War I period, middle class Americans grew increasingly restless over continually rising prices and demanded action from the Federal Government.

On the eve of the presidential election of 1912, Woodrow Wilson sought to make the high cost of living a central aspect of his campaign. Wilson aimed to appeal to a middle class anti-monopoly tradition that had developed during the previous decades of industrialization. As Arthur P. Dudden notes, “the antimonopoly spirit of the Gilded Age took shape as a widespread but essentially middle class protest.” Middle class anti-monopoly sentiment remained strong in the Progressive Era, as many believed that monopolies played a major role in causing high prices. Upon accepting the Democratic nomination, Wilson seized on this sentiment, declaring to a roaring crowd in Sea Girt, New Jersey “the majority of us have been disturbed to find us growing poorer, even though our earnings were slowly increasing... prices are fixed by private arrangement.” The cause of declining purchasing power, Wilson elaborated, “is an unwholesome inflation created by statutory enactment.” Underscoring the power of the Federal

Government to manipulate prices, Wilson asserted that reasonable prices and business competition “can be revived by changing the laws and forbidding the practices that killed it, and by enacting laws that will give it heart and occasion again.” He repeated this message in numerous speeches throughout his campaign, while supporters campaigning for a Wilson presidency echoed his statements to crowds of onlookers and to the press. Backing Wilson, Dr. Madison C. Peters spoke of the necessity of ensuring that the government would prevent exploitation of the consumer by business and exclaimed, “the high cost of living is the issue in this campaign.” In essence, Wilson and his supporters asserted that legislative and executive action could solve the H.C.L. and promised the American public that the Wilson administration would be up to the task.²¹²

Of the rising costs for “the necessities of life,” clothing prices became a hotly debated issue. From 1900 to 1912, prices for clothing and textile products rose by eighty-five percent, prompting Wilson to respond to public concern by addressing specifically the price of wearing apparel throughout his campaign. While not proposing strict price controls, Wilson embraced the “common notion” that high prices resulted from monopolies and trusts, which the Federal Government facilitated through protective tariffs. In a campaign speech in Columbus, Ohio, Wilson exclaimed, “Take the shoe industry... [they felt] it was absolutely necessary that the shoe combination should kill the competitor by buying him out.” These men “bought him out at three or four times the value of his plant and of his business, and then proceeded to put upon the shoes which we wear the burden of the extra load of capital which they had to carry in order to buy him

²¹² Arthur P. Dudden, “Men Against Monopoly: The Prelude to Trust-Busting” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 18:4 (October, 1957): 588; Arthur Link ed., *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson* vol. 25 (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1966-), 10-12 (hereinafter: Wilson Papers). *New York Times* 7/7/1912.

out.” Ultimately, the fault resided with the government, as “law enforcer of this country have stood on one side and let the giants kill the pigmies.” On the eve of his election, Wilson repeatedly asserted that it was the duty of the government to exercise its power to lower prices by pursuing policies that would be favorable to the consumer, rather than big business.²¹³

Throughout the war, middle class discontent over rising clothing prices surfaced sporadically in the popular press. Stuart Chase, identifying as a member of the middle class, told the readers of the *Independent* of his inability to maintain a white-collar standard of living with wartime increases in the necessities of life, even after using an itemized household budget. Chase noted, “Our clothing item has advanced 36 percent over the last year,” further informing his readers that his family “allowed only \$150 for ‘advancements,’” such as “recreation, education, books, periodicals, gifts, charity, club dues, etc.” Yet, “we did not have the grit to sacrifice the moderate extras that our middle-class standard of living had accustomed to us.” An article in *Life Magazine* presented a more-pointed portrayal of wartime middle class consumer grievances: “The laboring classes will benefit extremely [from the war], because while they have to pay more for the necessities they can get all the work they want at double the old wages. The rich people pay a few thousands down now and then, which is a small price for the excitement of having a war,” but “the middle-class people contribute about everything.” Or as an article in the *Forum* asserted, “the salaried man” has “not enjoyed the increased in

²¹³ Figures represent wholesale prices, United States Census, *Historical Statistics of the United States: Colonial Times to 1970, Part I* (Washington: GPO, 1975), 200; Wilson Papers, 200, 237.

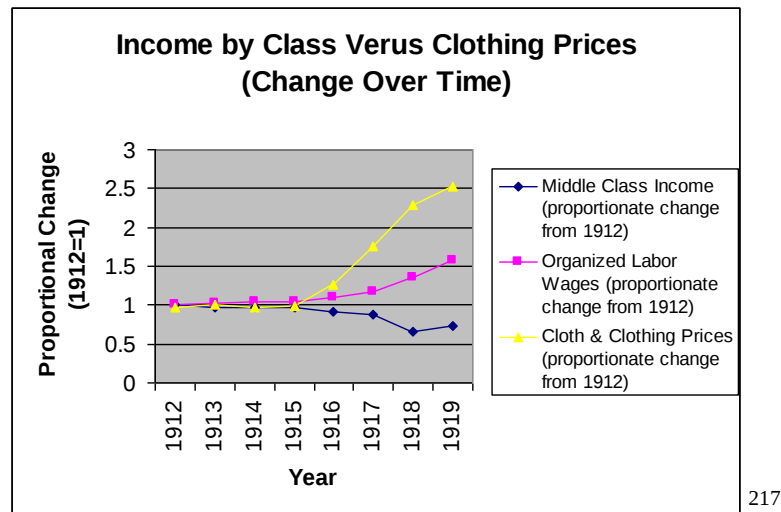
earnings that have come to the laboring classes...however, [he is] not striking or sending out ultimatums.”²¹⁴

When clothing prices reached unprecedented levels shortly after the armistice, middle class disgruntlement in the popular press over clothing prices came closer to the point of “sending out ultimatums.”²¹⁵ An increasing number of voices complained of the profiteering of large and small capitalists and reiterated its disproportionate effect on the white-collar class. Suggesting cause for “middle class protest,” the *New York Times* and *Fort Wayne Gazette*, for example, complained that the U.S. Commissioner of Labor Statistics overestimated the necessary amount of funds to clothe a working class family. Middle class Americans, they asserted, clothed their families on less money even though they worked just as diligently and also had to pay the exorbitant prices charged by profiteers. Or as the *Pinnacle News* stated, the price increase “has hit the so-called ‘middle class’ or ‘salaried people’ so hard that their affairs are in far worse shape than those of ‘wage earners.’”²¹⁶ A comparison of income differences between a selection of middle class professions and unionized labor from 1912-1919 versus price changes, suggests that this assessment had an economic basis (in relative terms).

²¹⁴ *Independent* 8/4/1917, p.169; *Life* 8/2/1917, p.169; *Forum* 9/1918 p.325.

²¹⁵ United States Census, *Historical Statistics of the United States: Colonial Times to 1970, Part I* (Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1975), 200.

²¹⁶ Ft. Wayne *Journal Gazette* 8/8/1919; *Pinnacle News* 8/26/1919.



According to these commentators, the problem resided not just in the greed of organized labor or capital, but also the inactivity of the Federal Government. While during the war the U.S. Food Administration had set up fair price committees, which published price lists, and Congress had enabled the Department of Justice to prosecute profiteers and hoarders through the Lever Food Control Act of 1917, these measures did not apply to clothing.²¹⁸ The Wilson administration was left only with the Sherman and Clayton antitrust acts, as well as influence over federal economic policies and labor relations, to fight the high cost of clothing. As a result, throughout the war, the Department of Justice arrested no hoarders or profiteers of wearing apparel, and the price of clothing continued to soar.

²¹⁷ For data and sources, see appendix 4.

²¹⁸ Since the Lever Act represented a vast expansion of federal intervention into the economy and daily life, its passage required compromise with a number of interests, including cotton growers and textile manufacturers. As such, when Representative Gilbert Haugen advocated price limits of all wearing apparel, because of these influences, the Lever Act passed without any provision preventing profiteering in clothing sales. Meg Jacobs, *Pocketbook Politics: Economic Citizenship in Twentieth Century America* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 2005), 59.

Writers also complained of the Federal Government's active role in encouraging high labor costs. Under the Wilson administration, the U.S. Government had for the first time officially recognized the right of labor to collectively bargain as a wartime measure. Unsympathetic to the aims of organized labor, many Americans understood high wages to mean higher prices and criticized an "unproductive" or "unconstructive" working class. In the context of a national wave of strikes in 1919, individuals ranging from the president of the Illinois Freemasons to Oliver M. W. Sprague, a Harvard banking professor, viewed previous governmental support of collective bargaining and the current inability of the U.S. Government to prevent strikes as central causes of high prices. According this understanding, inflated collectively-bargained wages and the lack of production engendered by strikes formed a deadly combination in producing advancing prices. One "member of the middle class" summed up such sentiment in his poetry: "when workers win a shorter day, the cost is passed along to me. And so it goes down the line, from shoes and clothes to light and heat; No old-time luxuries for mine- I'm thankful now if I eat... When someone wins, I always lose."²¹⁹

But, as many in the popular press noted, the middle class lacked the necessary organizations to undertake any formal action. They only needed to take this crucial step, popular writers asserted, before the country would face a new crisis. Charles Henry Meltzer's polemic of the middle class as "the intermediate millions" reflects the feeling of the latent organizing potential of the middle class and the havoc it could wreak on the status quo. To Meltzer the salaried class was becoming "restless" in large part, because

²¹⁹ "Proceedings of the Grand Lodge of the Most Worshipful Grand Lodge: Ancient and Free Accepted Masons of the State of Illinois: Eighteenth Annual Meeting, Held at Chicago, October 14, 15, and 16, 1919," p. 112, Boston Public Library. *Forum* 9/1918 p.326; *Life* 6/5/1919.

“the cost of shoes and suits and gloves has gone up by leaps and bounds.” Much like the sentiments of other social and cultural critics, Meltzer’s assessment emphasized how these price increases “meant little to the rich,” and had minimal impact on wage laborers, “but to the helpless and unorganized intermediaries it may be calamitous.” Although the outlets for organization were few, Meltzer suggested that unless prices declined, the intermediate millions would take action.²²⁰

Though not always expressing middle class grievances, letters from citizens and politicians to government officials also demanded that the state take measures to bring down the price of clothing. Over the closing months of 1919, the Department of Justice received scores of letters from citizens reporting individual cases of clothing profiteering. Even earlier, correspondence between Wilson, staff members and other politicians made reference to “letters and telegrams from constituents in our districts in regard to the cotton situation.” While much of the correspondence to the DOJ expressed a general discontent over the price of clothing, many letters came from farmers who complained that they had not received their fair share of cotton profits. They suggested that labor, middlemen and merchants, rather than farmers, had extracted large profits from the general public and worried that consumers would misplace blame. Even though lowering the cost of wearing apparel would involve mitigating numerous competing interests and would not be as simple as setting maximum selling prices, as early as March 17, 1918, a government official stated, “something should be done to stabilize the textile market.”²²¹

²²⁰ *The North American Review* Feb 1919, p.229.

²²¹ For DOJ correspondence, see Boxes 1-3, Records of the High Cost of Living Division, Department of Justice Records, RG 60, National Archives II, College Park, MD; Charles H. Brand and Thomas M. Bell to

The Wilson administration received particularly pointed criticism from opponents in Congress for allowing profiteering to flourish and failing to lower prices. Perhaps attempting to redirect any blame on Congress to the president, critics such as Senator Robert La Follette of Wisconsin, argued that Wilson should have found a way to make good on what they interpreted as the most central promise of his first presidential campaign. To a divided and discontented Senate, La Follette declared,

I say if you study the Democratic platform of 1912, that there never was a clearer-cut issue made than that platform...there never was a campaign in which all other platform pledges were so ignored and the whole contest narrowed to one single issue as was the case in Mr. Wilson's campaign of 1912.²²²

Believing that an empowered government had simply failed to act, many politicians and citizens alike, remembered the promises of 1912. Such a situation demanded an immediate response from the highest levels of government.

“We need not hesitate to handle a national question in a national way”: The Department of Justice’s National Strategy

President Wilson and Attorney General A. Mitchell Palmer devised a two-part federal strategy to bring down the high cost of clothing. While they would wait a couple of months to pursue the second half of the strategy, the first part required immediate

Wilson 11/20/1918, Wilson Papers, vol. 53, p.149; F. Taussig to Wilson, Wilson Papers, vol. 53, p. 133; F. Taussig to Wilson, Wilson Papers, vol. 53, p. 166.

²²² *Congressional Record* 8/30/1919.

attention from Congress. Claiming that high prices were “created by vicious practices” and “ought immediately to be checked by law,” Wilson, as previously mentioned, made the first part of the plan to prosecute profiteers. Since Palmer reasserted to Wilson that the DOJ lacked the legal means to prosecute clothing profiteers and that the 1917 Food Control Act was devoid of a specific penalty for any kind of profiteering, Wilson wasted no time in bringing their strategy before Congress. Mandating that Congress postpone their upcoming recess, Wilson exclaimed to the Republican floor leader in the House, “I feel that it is my duty at the earliest possible moment to present certain recommendations now ready for submission to Congress,” and called for special joint session of Congress on August 8, 1919.²²³

Before a packed chamber, Wilson reasserted that the Federal Government had the ability to control prices. He began by declaring that the supposition that high prices were natural and inevitable was “hasty” and “shallow.” While admitting that the Sherman Antitrust Act and the Lever Act empowered his administration to tackle many cases of profiteering, Wilson implored Congress to add a specific penalty to price gouging and to amend the Lever Act to include wearing apparel. In effect, Wilson reiterated the assumptions of the masses- that the prices of leather and textiles “have been materially affected by forms of concert and cooperation among the producers and marketers.”²²⁴

²²³ *New York Times* 8/7/1919; For Palmer’s report to Wilson on the causes of the HCL and suggestions on how to lower prices, as well as a summary of the existing laws that could be used to fight profiteering, see Memorandum by A. Mitchell Palmer: High Cost of Living, 8/6/1919, Wilson Papers vol. 62, p. 171; “An Address to a Joint Session of Congress,” 8/8/1919, Wilson Papers vol. 62., p. 209.

²²⁴ “An Address to a Join Session of Congress,” 8/8/1919, Wilson Papers vol. 62., p. 209.

Yet, how could the government address such a widespread problem? Could authorities prosecute every profiteer, every opportunistic middleman or merchant, every striking laborer who drove up prices by not producing? Wilson admitted that doing so would be impossible, but argued that by setting examples, other profiteers would discontinue injurious action “of their own motion.” Stating that the world was looking to the United States in the critical period of postwar readjustment, Wilson implored Congress to not falter. With swift action, people within and outside of U.S. borders “will not then have looked to us for leadership in vain.”²²⁵

While Wilson’s Republican opponents wasted little time in criticizing the tardiness of his attention to rising clothing prices, most intended to provide him with the legal machinery to prosecute clothing profiteers. Even though a number of Republicans insisted that further legislation was unnecessary, they did not want to give Wilson an excuse to avoid taking responsibility. Others just reiterated the urgency of the situation. Sen. Pat Harrison of Mississippi asserted, “we must answer to the American people...[profiteers] have grown fat at the expense of the many,” further stating, “the country is expecting the U.S. Senate to act because the man who to-day works upon a fixed income, with a family to support, can not do it with the profiteers running mad in the country.” Unsurprisingly, House and Senate Committees reported the Lever Act amendments quickly and with few additions. It was only up to a Congress, united in the

²²⁵ “An Address to a Joint Session of Congress,” 8/8/1919, Wilson Papers vol. 62., p. 210, 213, 214, 219.

desire to prevent price gouging, but divided by different understandings of the identity of the true culprits, to empower the DOJ with powerful and clear legislation.²²⁶

Most notably, Congress had to cope with the apprehension of congressmen from cotton-producing states over the prospect of passing a law that might be used to target cotton farmers. These congressmen received substantial pressure from both citizens and state-level politicians not only to protect cotton farmers from prosecution, but also to actually raise prices at the crop level. In North Carolina, under Governor Thomas Walter Bickett's encouragement, citizens congregated in local courthouses to discuss the cotton situation.²²⁷ These meetings were not unique. Citizens in all cotton producing states pressed for higher cotton prices in local newspapers and letters to politicians. Thus when Rep. Walton Newton of Minnesota offered an amendment to include not just wearing apparel under the profiteering provisions of the Lever Act, but also the materials and crops that make clothing, representatives from cotton growing states protested. Newton broached the topic by stating, "Mr. Chairman, I have an amendment I wish to offer... after the word 'apparel' insert 'cotton.'" Fittingly, Senator Thomas Blanton of Texas retorted, "Raw Cotton is not wearing apparel, Mr. Chairman." The exchange continued:

Mr. Chairman: it is not but-

Mr. Blanton: Will the Chair hear me?

The Chairman: The Chair will hear the gentleman on the point of order.

²²⁶ For Committee discussion, see U.S. Senate Committee on Agriculture and Forestry, *Hearings Before the U.S. Senate Committee on Agriculture and Forestry, 66th Congress, first session, on 8/19/1919* (Washington D.C.: G.P.O., 1919). *Congressional Record* 1919, p. 5165, 4589.

²²⁷ "The Cotton Situation," Appeals to the Public, Public Letters and Papers of Thomas Walter Bickett: Governor of North Carolina 1917-1921, North Carolina Historical Commission, 1923.

Mr. Blanton: This bill seeks to control the price of foods and feeds and fuel and the containers, and clothing, and shoes, but it does not in any way embrace raw materials, and especially raw cotton, which is merely an element of clothing. For instance, fuel could embrace gasoline and oil, and yet an amendment was offered to embrace gasoline and oil was voted down by this committee...”

Mr. (Caleb) Layton (of Delaware): I want to suggest that a live hog is not food. It has to be killed first. Neither is a grain of wheat a loaf of bread. Cotton enters into clothing.

Mr. Blanton: Raw cotton does not come with the purposes of this bill...

Blanton continued by projecting the HCL to be a product of both profiteering and the indolence of organized labor. According to Blanton, cotton farmers were not profiteers and needed a fair monetary incentive to produce. To strip more income from the farmer would both victimize the farmer and through decreased production, cause a further increase in the price of clothing to the consumer.²²⁸

But, it was this consumer that many congressmen sought to protect, and they too knew how to appeal to emotion. For example, Rep. John Summers of Washington exclaimed, he wanted to “punish the profiteer, be he great or small, who fattens his bank account on the blood of little children.” And specifically in response to Blanton’s victimization of the cotton farmer, Rep. Philip Campbell of Kansas retorted, “There is not a child in the United States to-day whose necessities do not require cotton everyday, just as they require food.” Rep. James Young (Texas) fired back by rhetorically inquiring: “Do children wear cotton or cotton clothes?” Campbell then pointed out the flaw that would help to doom future prosecutions of clothing profiteers under the Lever Act amendment. “Children do not use fertilizer,” Campbell declared,” “yet it is included in this bill. This bill is to insure an adequate supply of clothing. Clothing is made of raw

²²⁸ *Congressional Record* 1919, p. 4208-9.

cotton.” By including food and the materials that produced food and not those that went into clothing, Congress would only enable the DOJ to prosecute profiteers selling the finished clothing product. Judges and juries could point to the inclusion of fertilizer as an indication that the act only intended to target retailers of wearing apparel, narrowly defined. The legal ability to charge organized textile workers, capitalists involved in the production process, or various middlemen, would be far more ambiguous.²²⁹

Ultimately, Campbell’s reasoning failed to change the bill. The intention of the bill seemed clear: to bring the clothing profiteers to justice and to clothe American families at a reasonable price. Yet, when congressmen inquired as to the true identity of profiteers, and the true identity of the victims, these categories overlapped. Was the cotton farmer a profiteer, or another exploited member of the public at the hands of this nefarious threat? The ambiguity of this situation led Congress to silence Campbell’s complaints. While many in Congress had sought to include cotton farmers under the Lever Act, they were forced to abandon this desire to ensure the passage of the bill.

When, on October 22 Congress presented the amendments for Wilson’s signature, most congressmen had high hopes. Only a few recognized the impossible task of meeting the expectations that they, along with Wilson, had collectively helped to enlarge. Reps. William Venable and Anthony Griffin were among the few who sensed the full extent of the public’s hopes and assumptions.²³⁰ Venable declared, “the people are restless and I fear the results if they be disappointed in their expectations.” But perhaps Griffin said it best: “you are only sowing the seeds of discord; planting mistrust in the hearts of the

²²⁹ *Congressional Record* 1919, p. 4221, 4209.

²³⁰ William Venable was a Rep. from Mississippi and Anthony Griffin was a New York representative.

people who have their eyes centered, with longing gaze, upon this Congress to give them a modicum of relief.”²³¹

Prosecutions and “The Flying Squadron”

Before Wilson signed the Lever Act Amendments, the DOJ began the process of mobilizing its forces. Since Palmer sought to make “conspicuous examples of profiteers,” time was of the essence.²³² As early as August of 1919, DOJ officials wrote to former fair price committees and commissioners, as well as state and local politicians, to organize new city and state fair price committees. These committees were entirely voluntary and constructed from “members of the general public,” local businessmen, housewives, who represented primary agents of consumption, and occasionally organized labor officials. Middle class citizens, who in their wartime experiences as U.S. Food Administration volunteers, had developed political meanings for the consumption practices of themselves and others, were eager to participate. By 1920, fair price committees existed in all but six states. Rather than setting prices, these committees conducted investigations into local conditions, published fair price lists in local newspapers, and reported violations to federal prosecutors. Upon receiving a complaint, the DOJ sent a “flying squadron” of

²³¹ *Congressional Record* 1919, p. 4225, 5165.

²³² U.S. Senate Committee on Agriculture and Forestry, *Hearings Before the U.S. Senate Committee on Agriculture and Forestry*, 66th Congress, first session, on 8/19/1919 (Washington D.C.: G.P.O., 1919), 63.

investigators to compile information of the alleged violation before making the decision of whether to indict.²³³

Unfortunately, this strategy was costly, time-consuming and perhaps un-winnable. The state did not set prices and one form of clothing differed in cost and material from another, often with greater variation than fair price committees were able to investigate. Thus, many local merchants argued that the law was too vague. To what degree could a merchant charge above a price recommendation without facing prosecution? Would the DOJ leave room for variation in prices relative to a price recommendation? And for the DOJ, investigations might take too long relative to public expectations. Although Palmer declared “it is now possible to deal vigorously with all cases of profiteering,” he recognized that “in every campaign of this character time is required to perfect an organization.”²³⁴ In sending investigators to local locations, preparing indictments, compiling witnesses and having to coordinate between various localities and Washington, the DOJ would also incur substantial costs- up to \$150,000,000.²³⁵

Perhaps deterring the DOJ most of all, investigators and prosecutors faced the obstacle of determining what fit under the rubric of “wearing apparel” and constantly had

²³³ U.S. Senate Committee on Agriculture and Forestry, *Hearings Before the U.S. Senate Committee on Agriculture and Forestry, 66th Congress, first session, on 8/19/1919* (Washington D.C.: G.P.O., 1919), 79; “Statement of the Work of the Cost of Living Division of the Bureau of Investigation for the Fiscal Year 1919-20,” Records of the High Cost of Living Division, DOJ Records, RG 60, National Archives II, College Park, MD (Hereinafter: of the High Cost of Living Division, Department of Justice Records, RG 60, National Archives II, College Park, MD = DOJ-HCL)

²³⁴ United States, Department of Justice, *Annual Report of the Attorney General of the United States* (Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1919), 17-18.

²³⁵ This figure also represents the HCL Division full appropriation, including costs associated with the Women’s Division. U.S. Senate Committee on Agriculture and Forestry, *High Cost of Living. Hearing Before the United States Senate Committee on Agriculture and Forestry, and House Committee on Agriculture, Sixty-Sixth Congress, first session, on Aug. 16, 1919. Part 1*, (Washington: GPO, 1919), 58.

to fight over the constitutionality of the Lever Act. The question over the constitutionality of the Lever Act led every case to become a test case. This issue controlled the legal discourse of and surrounding the prosecutions, making discussion of cases focus primarily not on whether defendants were profiteers, but on whether the Federal Government possessed the constitutional power to reach this decision. Such a constraint on the speed and efficacy of DOJ prosecutions did not mesh well with the public impatience with the high cost of clothing.

One of the first of these test cases concerned allegations of price-gouging for women's shoes in Providence, RI. Palmer and Assistant Attorney General Howard Figg reasoned that since many shoe dealers only sold shoes, "it would seem less difficult to show that the profit of a particular sale was unreasonable" and establish a consistent pattern of profiteering.²³⁶ As Figg told a price commissioner in Pensacola, FL, we "suggest action on most flagrant cases first."²³⁷ But before local price commissioners and federal prosecutors would act, they observed as the DOJ prosecuted a crucial initial case.

A flagrant case is what Palmer and Figg thought they found in Providence. On October 30, 1919, Henrietta Sharpe of North Providence traveled into the city to buy a new pair of shoes. She walked into the one of three stores owned by F.G. Collins Shoe Company on Westminster Street. After deciding on a pair, she asked the salesman about the cost of the shoes. He quoted the price of six dollars. Unbeknownst to her, the company had already set the price for that type of shoe at \$3.98. The company, it seems, had offered a commission of 50% of the difference between the actual sale price and the

²³⁶ Figg to Francis Caffey, DOJ-HCL.

²³⁷ Figg to Neely, 1/5/1920, DOJ-HCL.

set price to any salesman who could convince a customer to pay above the original set price. Realizing that she had overpaid for the shoes, Sharpe reported her case to the authorities.²³⁸

By late November, with the help of the DOJ in Washington D.C., Providence federal prosecutor Harvey Baker had compiled enough evidence to indict. In response to Sharpe's complaint, Baker and his staff interviewed F.G. Collins employees and inspected the company's financial records. They found multiple violations, with percentages of the discrepancies between sale prices and set prices seemingly paid to salesmen. All in all, the company had charged up to 800% of what it had cost them to purchase the original product.²³⁹ "Gratified with the extent of the evidence," Figg provided funds for Baker to hire an additional accountant and stenographer solely for the F.G. Collins shoe case.²⁴⁰

After the U.S. Attorney's office filed the indictment on December 8, 1919, the four members of the firm entered a plea of not guilty. The government alleged that the company and its four agents "did unlawfully, knowingly and willfully engage in a discriminatory, unfair, deceptive practice and device." The *Providence Evening Bulletin* added the words "feloniously conspire" and "combine" for sensationalized emphasis in reporting on the case. From the standpoint of whether the company had charged inconsistent prices for shoes and that some of these prices surpassed what was commonly

²³⁸ Indictment, U.S. vs. F.G. Collins File, National Archives Northeast Division-Waltham, MA.

²³⁹ *Providence Journal* 12/13/1919, 12/17/1919, 1/20/1920, 1/21/1920, 1/24/1920, *Providence Evening Bulletin* 12/17/1919, 1/20/1910.

²⁴⁰ Figg to Baker, 12/12/1919, DOJ-HCL; Figg to Baker, 1/12/1920, DOJ-HCL.

considered fair, the defendants had a weak case. They denied being profiteers for two reasons. First, operating sales on a commission system did not differ from the practices of other shoe dealers. Secondly, the company reported a total profit for 1919 of a modest six percent. Nevertheless, F.G. Collins Co. faced charges for profiteering in individual sales, not for profiteering in total profit margin. Sensing the merits of the government's case, Judge Brown held each the defendant on a bond of \$3000.²⁴¹

The DOJ's strategy centered on using the company's account books as evidence and offering testimony from an investigator for shoe prices for the Federal Trade Commission as an expert on "reasonable" shoe prices.²⁴² Between travel and coordination expenses and funds for the investigator, Baker and his staff, the case became costly, but the prospects for conviction looked promising.²⁴³ Though not entirely surprising, when Michael Lynch, council for the defendants, filed a motion to quash declaring the Lever Act amendments unconstitutional, the eventual outcome seemed less forgone.

Lynch argued for the unconstitutionality of the Lever Act amendments on numerous grounds. First, since what constituted a fair price varied based on location, size of business, quality of material used in wearing apparel, labor conditions, and other factors, Lynch claimed that the profiteering provisions violated the Sixth Amendment, which entitles the accused "to be informed of the nature and cause of the accusation." In essence, the price of one item could vary from another for legitimate reasons, thereby

²⁴¹ Indictment, U.S. vs. F.G. Collins File, National Archives Northeast Division-Waltham, MA; Providence *Bulletin* 1/26/1920; Providence *Journal* 12/17/1919.

²⁴² Figg to Baker, 1/15/1920, DOJ-HCL; Figg to Baker, 1/24/1920, DOJ-HCL.

²⁴³ No actual amount is listed in DOJ records.

preventing the government from using “language with such certainty to inform a person of the nature and cause of the accusations.” The state could only claim that a defendant charged “unfair” prices; they could not tell a merchant precisely what was “fair.” A fair price committee published suggested price levels, but, as volunteers, they had no authority to actually set prices. Even their lists could not be so specific as to cover every exact shoe. Without set prices, dealers of wearing apparel had no way of knowing how much would be considered too much. That Lynch challenged the indictment by referencing the vagueness of the crime, contradicted Palmer’s assumptions and reassurances to the Senate Committee on Agriculture that the nature of the crime would be obvious. If both prosecuting attorneys and citizens in the community objected to the prices, Palmer had contended, the courts would “follow their reasoning.”²⁴⁴ The actual situation proved more indefinite.

Lynch did not stop with these objections. According to the motion, section 4 of the Lever Act “is unconstitutional and void because it deprives said defendant of its property and liberty without due process of law in violation of the Fifth Amendment.” The defendant could not be given due process, once again, since the “indictment is vague and uncertain because it does not...state facts to show in what respect it ‘made unjust and unreasonable charge’ so that this defendant can with any certainty prepare its defense.” Lynch also argued that the government’s strategy of using flagrant cases to set examples discriminated between different persons, a violation of the equal protection clause of the

²⁴⁴ U.S. Senate Committee on Agriculture and Forestry, *Hearings Before the U.S. Senate Committee on Agriculture and Forestry*, 66th Congress, first session, on 8/19/1919 (Washington D.C.: G.P.O., 1919), 80; Motion to Quash, U.S. vs. F.G. Collins Shoe Company File, National Archives Northeast Division-Waltham, MA.

Constitution. Lastly, Lynch asserted that the Lever Act amendments infringed on the Tenth Amendment, because it “attempts to interfere, control and regulate purely internal and interstate matters concerning the business relations of persons which are reserved to the states.” If a level of government did have the authority to regulate prices in commerce within rather than between states, the Constitution mandated that, since not specifically enumerated in the document, this power belonged to the states.²⁴⁵

The DOJ anxiously waited for Judge Brown’s decision on whether to grant the motion to quash. In addition to the time and funds the government had invested in the case, the indictment had received publicity in newspapers throughout the entire country. The case, after all, represented a window into the status of the government’s attempt to use the legal system to assuage public discontent over the high cost of wearing apparel. Sensing the importance of the precedent that Judge Brown’s decision might set in deciding on the motion to quash, fair price commissioners from Phoenix to Los Angeles also eagerly awaited. In the meantime, Figg continued to fuel public expectations by telling a St. Louis audience that prices would significantly drop within ninety days.²⁴⁶

On January 23, 1919 Judge Brown overruled the motion to quash with no written opinion.²⁴⁷ At this point Lynch and his clients understood the outcome of the case to be a

²⁴⁵ Motion to Quash, U.S. vs. F.G. Collins Shoe Company File, National Archives Northeast Division-Waltham, MA.

²⁴⁶ Figg to O’Connor 2/26/1920, DOJ-HCL; Figg to Flynn 2/3/1920 DOJ-HCL; *Women’s Wear Daily* 1/19/1920; For examples of *U.S. vs. F.G. Collins Shoe Company* publicity, see *Chicago Tribune* 1/27/1920; *New York Times* 2/1/1920; *Republican Press* (Salamanca, NY) 3/9/1920; *Bridgeport Telegram* 1/24/1920, *Philadelphia Public Ledger* 1/29/1920.

²⁴⁷ Criminal Docket, U.S. vs. F.G. Collins Shoe Company File, National Archives Northeast Division-Waltham, MA; A letter from Assistant Attorney General Howard Figg to a U.S. Attorney makes reference to the fact that Brown rendered no written opinion; Figg to Flynn 2/3/1920.

forgone conclusion. As a result, the defendants each issued a plea of nolo, thereby not admitting to guilt, but accepting the punishment of a guilty plea. Lynch asked Judge Brown to consider that the indictment had not taken account of “all costs in the handling of the shoes sold” before sentencing his clients, whereas Baker declared that the facts were clear. “This is a case of trying to exact from the public unfair and unreasonable profits from shoes,” Baker asserted. Judge Brown agreed. Stating that profiteers “should be substantially punished,” Brown sentenced three of the defendants to pay a fine of \$1000 and instructed the fourth to pay \$500. While victorious, the time and effort and perhaps even the funds expended to convict just one company engaging in profiteering of wearing apparel outweighed the \$3,500 penalty with no jail time. Nevertheless, the outcome offered potential symbolic significance. The Federal Government had publicly recognized the greed of the three profiteers and forced them to pay the consequences.²⁴⁸

Yet, *U.S. v. F.G. Collins Shoe Company* alerted the DOJ and U.S. attorneys, fair price commissioners and fair price committees all over the country to the substantial burden that the Constitution would place on future prosecutions. As a result, the constitutionality of the Lever Act would control the legal discourse within the Federal Government’s strategy of prosecuting profiteers to bring down clothing prices. It would also define the parameters of a significant degree of the public discussion surrounding the issue. Nevertheless, the verdict and penalties far from signaled the end of the DOJ’s strategy. As the New York *Times* reaction stated, Judge Brown’s upholding of the Lever

²⁴⁸ A few newspapers outside of the Providence area oversimplified the stance of the defendants, claiming that they uttered “we have no defense to offer,” indicating an understanding in the press (outside of Providence) that the federal government struggled to convict profiteers even when the issue of guilt was not in question. Neither court records nor local reporting indicates that anyone from F.G. Collins spoke these words. *The Mixer and Server* 4/15/1920, uncataloged periodicals, Littaur Library, Harvard University (reporting on other press coverage).

Act might “furnish the Department of Justice with a strong lever- no pun intended- to dislodge a very mean way of extorting undue profit.”²⁴⁹

Over the next few months, the DOJ prosecuted numerous defendants who objected to the Lever Act on similar grounds. On the whole, the DOJ received mixed results. While judges in district courts in Missouri, Michigan and Colorado found the Lever Act amendments to be constitutional, courts in eastern North Carolina, southern West Virginia and northern Washington declared the act to be in violation of numerous constitutional amendments.²⁵⁰ Even with victory, not only did the DOJ face future appeals, but also prosecutions rarely met public demand that the DOJ target all profiteers, or at least, the right offenders. For every story of a profiteer being brought to justice, countless other anecdotes of price-gouging in the clothing trade surfaced in the popular press, chamber of commerce and fraternal lodge meetings, and in correspondence to local, state and federal officials. Many resembled an incident discussed by the Cedar Rapids, Iowa Chamber of Commerce on February 3, 1920. Citizens were outraged by an alleged transaction in which a local merchant sold a dress to a woman for \$82, while her neighbor paid only \$22 at a different store for the same dress.²⁵¹

The Other Villain: Labor and the Case of DOJ Prosecution in Buffalo, NY

²⁴⁹ New York Times 2/1/1920.

²⁵⁰ Those listed are only a sampling of Lever Act decisions in Federal District Courts in early 1920. “To All Fair Price Commissioners” re: constitutionality of Lever Act 4/12/1920, DOJ-HCL; Opinion by Judge Faris, *U.S. v. L.L. Cohen Grocery*, Supreme Court Opinion delivered 2/28/1921, 255 U.S. 81; 41 S. Ct. 298; 65 L. Ed. 516; Opinion by Judge Tuttle, *Detroit Creamery Co. et.al. v. Kinnane et.al.*, No. 331 District Court, E.D. Michigan, S.D. 264 F. 845; 1920 U.S. LEXIS 1281; “Cases in which the United States Attorney was Restrained by Action of the District Judge,” DOJ-HCL.

²⁵¹ Cedar Rapids *Evening Gazette* 2/4/1920.

In spite of frequent U.S. Government obstruction of labor activism in 1919 and early 1920, numerous citizens complained of the failure of the DOJ to prosecute labor as part of its campaign against clothing profiteers. Howard Figg, government officials and other politicians had to respond to numerous letters from citizens complaining of labor's role in rising clothing costs. For example, replying to L.A. Sarrow of New York City, Assistant Attorney General Howard Figg explained, "I quite fully agree with you that the continually increasing demands of workers are largely responsible for the high prices in the clothing industry."²⁵² Seeing success against merchants or wholesalers in Providence, or even in Missouri and Colorado, did not satisfy members of the public seeking a more aggressive attack on the "profiteering" of striking workers. Some merchants accused of profiteering attempted to exonerate themselves by appealing to this sentiment.

Indeed, in the midst of a national upsurge of work stoppages, striking workers had become a popular villain for middle class consumers. The number of strikes in 1919 increased by 300 percent from the previous year. Throughout the United States, railroad workers went on strike, paralyzing transportation; coal miners walked off the job; steel workers went on strike; a broad cross section of Seattle workers left work in sympathy with the demands of dockworkers. Not the least significant, textile workers struck in protest of wage cuts. The connection between strikes and the high cost of living was not lost of the middle class.²⁵³

²⁵² Figg to L.A. Sarrow 2/9/1920, DOJ-HCL.

²⁵³ David Montgomery, *Workers' Control in America* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 97; *Outlook* 11/26/1919, pg. 337.

In a coordinated group of prosecutions by federal attorneys in Buffalo, NY, at least one defendant attempted to redirect blame on organized labor for the exorbitant prices the company charged for clothing. The defendants, Buffalo Shirt Company, Reliable Credit Clothing Company, C.A. Weed and the Antwerp Diamond Clothing Company, in separate cases were charged with selling items of clothing for more than double the cost of production and labor. Similar to *U.S. v. F.G. Collins Shoe Company*, these cases involved costly coordinating efforts between the DOJ and local federal prosecutors, and served as additional public test cases for the Lever Act. Given that publicity stood at the heart of the Wilson/Palmer plan to prevent profiteering by setting examples, Buffalo seemed to offer an ideal location for multiple prosecutions. As Howard Figg exclaimed, it was “very pleasing to know that we have a Fair Price Commissioner in Buffalo that has the confidence of the press.” Yet, like the cases before, it would not be an easy fight.²⁵⁴

U.S. v. Antwerp Diamond Clothing Company provides an excellent window into the Buffalo clothing profiteering trials, since an extensive record of trial documents is available. In later half of 1919, the “brothers,” Ira and Samuel Cohen, sold items of clothing to 61 patrons with an alleged average profit of 150 percent. Based on complaints of profiteering, in the early months of 1920 the DOJ sent investigators from the “flying squadron” to the store to examine account books. The Cohen brothers fully cooperated with federal investigators, one member of the flying squadron later noting, “when I was at Mr. Cohen’s store I do not recall that they hesitated about showing me their books.” However, their cooperation did not prevent the DOJ from prosecuting. Simply because

²⁵⁴ Figg to Stafford 12/13/1919, DOJ-HCL.

account books showed that the Cohen brothers charged significantly above their costs in obtaining inventory, the DOJ served an indictment.²⁵⁵

Attorneys for the Cohen brothers immediately objected on constitutional grounds. They filed a demurrer in the Erie County Federal District Court, citing violations of the Fifth and Sixth Amendments that mirrored the reasoning of the F.G. Collins Shoe Company defense. The motion was denied, forcing the Cohen brothers' attorneys to abandon constitutional objections at least for the time being. The judge's action represented a sign of things to come.²⁵⁶

The defendants readily admitted to the disparity between their costs in purchasing inventory and sale prices, but asserted that such a stark comparison of numbers failed to account for the particulars of their business. The Cohen brothers ran a credit-retail clothing firm. From the nature of a credit retail operation, they incurred additional costs due to not receiving money up-front, and more importantly, because of delinquent accounts. The Antwerp Diamond Company argued that the DOJ should have considered these special costs before filing charges. Rollin Davis, an investigator in the "flying squadron," admitted to paying little attention to company expenses, instead relying on hearsay. Davis testified, "I didn't get the expenses, someone else got them... I did not make any inquiry as to how much these boys lost in the business." After emphasizing the DOJ's narrow and sloppy approach to determining the company's costs, the defense

²⁵⁵ Indictment, *U.S. vs. Antwerp Diamond Inc.*, U.S. vs. Antwerp Diamond Inc. File, National Archives Northeast Division- NYC; Transcript, *U.S. vs. Antwerp Diamond Inc.*, U.S. vs. Antwerp Diamond Inc. File, National Archives Northeast Division- NYC; *Oneonta Daily Star* 6/4/1920.

²⁵⁶ Petition of writ of error, *U.S. vs. Antwerp Diamond Inc.* File, National Archives Northeast Division- NYC.

sought to demonstrate the extent to which sale prices varied with the volatility of delinquent accounts. The makeup of their customer base and the fluctuations that occurred in their daily lives led to large and inconsistent operating costs for the firm. In Buffalo, this customer base was organized labor, in the midst of frequent strikes.²⁵⁷

The defense's strategy centered on the impact of an irresponsible, volatile and undiligent organized labor force in causing the Antwerp Diamond Company to charge alleged "excessive" prices. James Moore, Cohen's attorney, called Joseph Goldstein, a Rochester clothing manufacturer and wholesaler, to the witness stand as an expert on the clothing market to testify on organized labor's relationship to clothing prices. Goldstein explained that, given the high prevalence of strikes in postwar period, the scarcity of a consistent labor force engendered high prices for consumers. If textile laborers would work harder and steadily, prices would decline.

This sentiment was shared even by the man who had reported local price violations to the DOJ. Fair Price Commissioner James B. Stafford deplored profiteering in clothing retail, but publicly acknowledged the role of labor in inflating prices. At the onset of the investigation, Stafford explained, "union workers in the clothing factories of Rochester and Buffalo were largely responsible [for high prices]. They loitered on the job and demanded a higher wage than ever. Production has been cut and this forced up wages." Defense witnesses, such as Joseph Goldstein, merely echoed this sentiment.²⁵⁸

²⁵⁷ Transcript, *U.S. vs. Antwerp Diamond Inc.*, U.S. vs. Antwerp Diamond Inc. File, National Archives Northeast Division- NYC.

²⁵⁸ *Women's Wear Daily* 2/27/1920.

Workers did not cause high prices merely though lack of production, Goldstein continued. Their dishonesty and capriciousness as consumers played an equally substantial role in causing the high cost of wearing apparel. Goldstein testified, “There is a large fluctuation amongst industrial workers. That class of people constitutes a large portion of the customers of credit clothing business in places like Buffalo.” Goldstein elaborated by pointing to “the foreign element” as a central reason why credit clothing merchants increased prices. These laborers even more than other workers, Goldstein claimed, often skipped town or outright refused to pay. And, because of their proclivity to striking, foreign workers sometimes simply lacked the wages to make good on their credit. Goldstein testified that in an industrial city- “a place like Buffalo”- it was customary for clothing merchants dealing on credit to have a markup of anywhere between 150 to 200 percent on the cost price to mitigate the losses of a largely inconsistent and transient customer base. According to Goldstein, the professional or middle class consumer stood as the victim of labor’s irresponsibility in driving up prices. The defense sought to pass blame onto organized labor for the high cost of clothing, a strategy that had the potential to resonate with an increasingly un-labor-friendly middle class public. Labor’s supposed lack of diligence on the job and as consumers stood in direct contrast to the self-proclaimed middle class values of industriousness and thrift.²⁵⁹

Moore called other witnesses who echoed Goldstein’s emphasis on labor’s influence on clothing prices, most notably, Samuel Cohen. Cohen testified that a great strike at Lackwana Works, as well as a Buffalo switchmen’s strike, led him to increase

²⁵⁹ Transcript, *U.S. vs. Antwerp Diamond Inc.*, U.S. vs. Antwerp Diamond Inc. File, National Archives Northeast Division- NYC.

prices. As Cohen explained, “strikes...people moving away or changing addresses and a great many cases changing the names and giving us the wrong name or they may buy their clothes in the name of another person, are some of the hazards of the clothing business.” The switchmen’s strike had a special impact on the volatility of the labor force, as it caused “other plants to close up on account of not being able to get material, coal, etc.” The resultant unproductive workers were not named “Jake, Pete or John,” as one witness stated, and thus were especially unreliable.

Even when these customers returned sold merchandise, Cohen treated it as a complete loss. “They are rags,” Cohen exclaimed. According to Cohen, customers often returned worn-out clothes and even if in good condition, they had often gone out of style. Cohen added that he would sell the delinquent accounts that the government had counted as over \$18,000 worth of revenue for \$1,000. To Cohen “They [were] worthless.” The brothers assured the jury that they did their best to weed out the most unreliable customers, but they usually had no way of checking on the character of their patrons or determining their credit history. Most of the defense’s witnesses, including the Cohen brothers, also asserted that other credit clothing dealers in Buffalo had similar markups on the account of industrial unrest. Of course, a few of these companies- C.A. Weed, Reliable Credit co., Buffalo Shirt co.- had also been indicted.²⁶⁰

After the last witness, Judge Hazel all but instructed the jury to return with a guilty verdict. Even though the charges centered on offenses committed in later half of 1919, January and February of 1920, Hazel referred to some offenses “very likely”

²⁶⁰ Transcript, *U.S. vs. Antwerp Diamond Inc.*, *U.S. vs. Antwerp Diamond Inc.* File, National Archives Northeast Division- NYC; Files for *U.S. v. Reliable Credit co.*, *Buffalo Shirt co.* and *U.S. v. C.A. Weed*, National Archives Northeast Division- NYC.

committed “in the months of March and April, 1920.” In addition, rather than allowing the jury to assess the reliability of the facts and arguments presented by prosecution and defense completely on their own, Hazel mentioned the value of delinquent accounts and returned clothing to be many thousands of dollars without reiterating the defense’s argument that these accounts lacked any saleable value.²⁶¹

Fittingly, the jury returned with a guilty verdict. They had decided that the Cohen brothers were profiteers and deserved to be penalized. However, perhaps sympathizing with the Cohen’s predicament in needing to set prices that would make up for the delinquent accounts prevalent among working class customers, they “recommended that the punishment be as lenient as possible.” Immediately, Moore interjected and asked for a new trial, again calling the Lever Act unconstitutional. Judge Hazel denied the motion and fined the company \$18,000 but ordered no jail time.²⁶²

By mid-1920, another DOJ victory seemed to represent only partial success. Once again, the DOJ had to defend the very law that allegedly had been broken. Equally significant, the battle was not over. Moore immediately appealed to the Supreme Court, and the case would not be resolved until February 28, 1921, when the Supreme Court found the Lever Act to be unconstitutional on the account of its vagueness. *U.S. vs. Antwerp Diamond Clothing Company* as much as any Lever Act case, demonstrated that using the legal system to stop profiteering was a slow process, perhaps too slow to meet public expectations.

²⁶¹ Transcript, *U.S. vs. Antwerp Diamond Inc.*, *U.S. vs. Antwerp Diamond Inc.* File, National Archives Northeast Division- NYC.

²⁶² *Oneonta Daily Star* 6/4/1920; Transcript, *U.S. vs. Antwerp Diamond Inc.*, *U.S. vs. Antwerp Diamond Inc.* File, National Archives Northeast Division- NYC.

Additionally, just a few days before the end of the trial, Buffalo Fair Price Commissioner James Stafford resigned. In his letter of resignation, Stafford cited disagreements with Howard Figg, the strategy of the DOJ, and the impotence and vagueness of the Lever Act relative to public expectations. “The public expects me to do things I have not the authority to do,” Stafford explained.²⁶³ After a set of disagreements over procedural matters with Figg, Stafford resorted to an ultimatum. He requested that Figg either endow him with a unilateral ability to set prices in Buffalo as a preventative measure to profiteering and to make cases of price gouging more clear, or accept his resignation.

Figg accepted his resignation. Afterwards, Stafford elaborated to the local press that even with the ability to set prices, the DOJ “is empowered to enforce the penal statute and cannot consider the economic situation entirely,” rendering the Lever Act of limited use. Given Buffalo’s prominence in profiteering prosecutions, Stafford’s resignation “stirred up a hornets nest” in Congress. Pointing to the DOJ’s failure to cooperate with Stafford, one congressman declared it “another example of the inefficiency” of the Department of Justice, even though Stafford had also implicitly criticized congress for furnishing the DOJ with inadequate legal machinery.

Lastly, the main issue discussed in the trial, the relationship between the indolence or inconsistency of organized labor and high clothing prices, pertained to a group that the DOJ had not targeted in clothing profiteering prosecutions. While not concentrating on textile workers, the DOJ was in the process of moving toward pursuing

²⁶³ Buffalo *Courier* 6/2/1920; Buffalo *News* 6/2/1920; Buffalo *Morning Express* 6/5/1920.

clothing profiteering cases based on a wider interpretation of the Lever Act, by building a case against America's most prominent woolen manufacturer: William Wood.²⁶⁴

“Is cloth apparel?”

William Wood, arguably the most notorious robber baron of the textile industry, offered a target that would generate substantial publicity and might even satisfy public demand. Described as “the most notorious profiteer in America,” Wood had been in the public limelight for quite some time. Wood owned the Lawrence/Andover Massachusetts-based American Woolen Company. It was the largest company of its kind in America, responsible for approximately 20% of the country's output of woolen cloth.²⁶⁵ The son of a poor Portuguese immigrant, Wood fashioned himself as the ultimate American rags to riches story. Many, however, understood his riches to be built on the backs of the Lawrence-Andover working class community. Wood had received a large amount of publicity for his alleged role in the repression of the famous 1912 “bread and roses” strike of Lawrence textile workers, who had protested sudden wage cuts. Involving numerous foreign workers and the leadership of the Industrial Workers of the World, battles between strikers and police and militia became bloody, which prompted workers to send their children to Philadelphia to escape the violence. The police and the militia responded by beating the children and their mothers, and Wood was charged with

²⁶⁴ For Supreme Court declaration of the unconstitutionality of the Lever Act, see *U.S. v. L.L. Cohen Grocery Company*, Supreme Court Opinion delivered 2/28/1921, 255 U.S. 81; 41 S. Ct. 298; 65 L. Ed. 516.

²⁶⁵ *Oshgosh Daily Northwestern* 9/8/1920.

attempting to repress the strike by sending a stick of dynamite to the place where IWW organizer Joseph Ettor received his mail. While Wood was acquitted and the general public by no means sympathized with the IWW, Wood's reputation was forever damaged.

In numerous respects, William Wood was a larger-than life figure. One contemporary described him as a "generalissimo...he had a round face and sleek hair, was short, fat, brusque to the point of impoliteness; wore spats and fancy clothes; surrounded himself with yes-men and therefore had few intimates."²⁶⁶ His loyal office manager called him "a friendly, sympathetic man, possessed of a great driving force" and his son referred to Wood as "generous," "brilliant," "broad minded," "far sighted," "industrious," and "kindly." Rather than an oppressor of the working class, Wood presented himself as a paternal figure, an assessment mirrored by historians and some of his contemporaries.²⁶⁷ Wood ran Andover and Lawrence as company towns, owning or influential over everything from the newspapers to the mayor's office. He claimed to deeply care about his workers, wishing to protect them from outside influences, including radical labor organizations like the IWW.²⁶⁸

Wood had made a killing as a result of the war. Due to increased demand for textiles by the U.S. Government, he "landed the largest single textile order that had ever

²⁶⁶ "Shawsheen Village: A Fantasy Unfulfilled," Box 5, Roddy Papers, American Textile Museum Library.

²⁶⁷ See, for example, David Goldberg, *A Tale of Three Cities: Labor Organization and Protest in Patterson, Passaic, and Lawrence, 1916-1921* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1989) or Edward Roddy, *Mills, Mansions, and Mergers: The Life of William M. Wood* (North Andover: Merrimack Valley Textile Museum, 1982). It should be noted that many historians view Wood as both a self-fashioned paternal figure and oppressor of labor.

²⁶⁸ Oral history interview with J.W. Dairymple, Box 3, Roddy Papers, American Textile Museum Library; C.A. Wood Autobiography pg. 150, Box 4, Roddy Papers, American Textile Museum Library.

been allocated,” amounting to \$50 million for the one order with another \$52 million to come through separate orders from the government. Wood’s son recalled, “The financial position of the company at the end of World War I was impregnable. The price of its stock had tripled on the New York Stock Exchange. It was rich plumb for vultures to pluck.” Wood decided to take advantage of the situation. As his son noted, “Now that the war was over, the impetus of government orders ceased. Dad thought it wise to cash in on a large part of his holdings in the company at then all-time peak prices.” For the year 1919, Wood “cashed in” on a total profit of \$15,513,415.²⁶⁹

Wood had no intention of spreading his wealth to his workforce. In spite of his profits, in the early months of 1919 Wood angered his workers by denying them a 12.5 percent increase in pay. In response, a large contingent of the workforce went on strike for 107 days. Not only did his employees win the strike, within a year many of them asked for a 25 percent increase in pay and a 44 hour work week, leading them to set another strike date. Wood conceded to a 12.5 percent increase to avoid “agitation.” Of such wage increases, Wood was creative enough to absolve himself for rising prices in clothing, instead blaming workers by stating, “of course it will be passed on to the public.”²⁷⁰

Yet, just as he blamed labor and took enormous profits, he simultaneously cast himself as the protector of his workers’ interests against profiteering retailers. Perhaps sensing future public outcry over his own profits, Wood sought to place blame for the

²⁶⁹ C.A. Wood Autobiography pg. 289-90, Box 4, Roddy Papers, American Textile Museum Library; New York Times 4/28/1920.

²⁷⁰ Chicago Tribune 5/20/1920; David J. Goldberg, *A Tale of Three Cities: Labor Organization and Protest in Paterson, Passaic, and Lawrence, 1916-1921* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1989).

H.C.L. on local merchants, setting himself as a caring paternal figure against opportunistic Lawrence businessmen. On December 17, 1919 Wood let employees off work in the morning to allow them to attend a public gathering, in which he publicly attacked Lawrence merchants for profiteering after the recent wage increases. Calling his company “a great humane institution,” Wood exclaimed to the crowd “You live in Lawrence, you work in Lawrence. It is in Lawrence that you must buy your clothes and your food, I want to see that the workers of the American Woolen Company get all of the advantages that I can give them.” Wood’s remarks received national attention in the press, as did his threat to open a department store in Lawrence that would sell merchandise at cost, a measure that a local labor leader called an attempt to drive workers into “slavery” by making them dependent on “a company store.” Regardless of Wood’s intentions, one magazine proceeded to describe him as the “apostle of lower living costs.”²⁷¹

Though not representing all types of profiteers, William Wood was precisely the kind the figure the public hoped the DOJ would put behind bars. Already a famous capitalist, the disclosure of his wartime profits led many to consider him the largest robber baron of the clothing industry. One newspaper inquiring as to “where the consumer comes in,” declared Wood’s practices to be “bold profiteering, nothing else.” Others called him the “most notorious profiteer in America.” The DOJ responded to such sentiment by launching an investigation that would ultimately lead to perhaps the most noteworthy Lever Act prosecution then to date. To the DOJ, pursuing charges against

²⁷¹ *Boston Globe* 12/18/1919; *Women’s Wear Daily* 1/17/1920; Untitled article, Roddy papers, American Textile Museum Library.

Wood provided a grand, but risky, opportunity to demonstrate the efficacy of Wilson and Palmer's approach. Wood would be well prepared, choosing Charles Hughes, an unsuccessful 1916 presidential candidate, as his attorney. A DOJ defeat would draw national attention to the DOJ's ineffectiveness in bringing down the cost of clothing. A victory, however, could work toward building public confidence.²⁷²

To cover all bases, the DOJ did encourage Wood to be mindful of his profits before he set prices. As early as January of 1919, Howard Figg sent agents of the Department of Justice to Boston to discuss plans for price-setting and express his hope to Wood that "your opening prices may not be based upon an anticipated increase but upon actual operating cost to carry only a reasonable profit." After Wood set his prices, he offered to allow DOJ investigators to examine his books. However, when they arrived, Wood was far from accommodating. Figg wrote him an angry reply: "If I have enlarged the scope of your offer or misunderstood the spirit of same, namely that you welcomed investigation and unbiased judgment of the reasonableness of your prices and were content to rest your justification before the public and the law on that basis, I beg you will correct me." Denying any wrongdoing, but refusing to be more cooperative, Wood was served with an indictment.²⁷³

According to the District Attorney's office, Wood's profits amounted to between 300-400 percent. Wood claimed them to be only 12 1/2 percent and cast himself as a victim. News of the indictment was ubiquitous in nearly all forms of the press, many expressing hope of a DOJ victory. On the surface, local sentiment differed. Immediately

²⁷² Reno *Evening Gazette* 4/27/1920; Oshgosh *Daily Northwestern* 9/8/1920.

²⁷³ Figg to William Wood 1/29/1920, DOJ-HCL; Figg to William Wood 3/12/1920, DOJ-HCL.

after the indictment, Wood's "loyal" workers held a parade in his honor against the DOJ. A 40-piece brass band led the procession and *Andover Townsman* described the sound of "ringing cheers." The mayor and a few employees made speeches to the crowd. One employee exclaimed, "there are people who are anxious to make a victim of some man who stands high in the eyes of his fellow men." Like a grateful father figure, Wood expressed gratitude for their loyalty. "You can never know how fully I appreciate this expression of your loyalty," Wood exclaimed, "I cannot find the words adequately to thank you." Wood's employees stood united behind him against the wrongful accusations of the DOJ.²⁷⁴

Or, at least this is the story Wood wanted his contemporaries to believe. In scattered sources, we find the real sentiments of many of his workers, the same workers who, less than a year before, had resorted to threats of a strike because of Wood's labor practices. George Soule interviewed Wood's employees and found that "the workers are tired of pretending Mr. Wood is popular. On several occasions they have been taken out of the mills on full pay during working hours, and mobilized with brass bands for demonstrations of welcome, or what not, for Mr. Wood, who has entered the city... like a little king greeting his loyal subjects."²⁷⁵ The *New York Call* similarly reported, "When news came that Wood had been indicted for profiteering his agents staged a demonstration in his favor marching out to his residence a body of his workers who expressed their confidence in him."²⁷⁶ Whether for Wood's own campaign against the

²⁷⁴ *Mountain Democrat* 6/5/1920, Placerville, CA; *Andover Townsman* 6/4/1920.

²⁷⁵ "Shawsheen Village: A Fantasy Unfulfilled," Box 5, Roddy Papers, American Textile Museum Library.

²⁷⁶ *New York Call* 5/30/1920.

alleged profiteering of Lawrence merchants or for a protest against Wood's indictment, Wood expected workers to respond to his directives: work hard, for low pay, and rally by his side when so commanded. Fed up, some workers staged a one-day strike in protest.

The defense strategy was simple. Defense attorney Charles Hughes could underscore the numerous constitutional objections to the Lever Act that had been successful before other judges throughout the country, but that would serve as a second option. Rather, Hughes filed a demurer stating that cloth is not wearing apparel and therefore falls outside of the intent of the Lever Act.

Judge Mack agreed. Reasoning that Congress had included not just fertilizer in the bill, but also the ingredients needed to make fertilizer, Judge Mack declared that if they had intended the DOJ to prosecute profiteers in the woolen mills, they would have included cloth in the language of the act. Mack was at least partially correct. Congress had voted down an amendment to include gasoline and oil as part of what constitutes "fuel." Rep. Blanton had also plainly stated that cotton was not and should not be included in the bill, a sentiment echoed by congressmen in cotton-producing states. On the other hand, Rep. Layton did assert, "cotton enters into clothing." In any case, Congress had inhibited the DOJ by not using explicit language. As a result, Wood was a free man and he fittingly celebrated by having his workers stage another parade featuring a band concert and bonfire.²⁷⁷

The press fumed with outrage. The Modesto *Evening News* exclaimed that a profiteer of cloth buttons, linens, silk and cotton "may gouge all he pleases." "Justice is

²⁷⁷ Andover *Townsmen* 6/18/1920. The U.S. Government appealed the decision to the Supreme Court, but this was a slow process. In 1921, the Supreme Court dismissed the case along with other Lever Act appeals after finding the Lever Act unconstitutional.

blind,” the paper decaled, “totally blind.” The *Atlanta Constitution* called the decision “a dangerous precedent” and compared it to an incident in which a criminal escaped conviction for “stealing a horse” by stating that it was actually a mare, which resulted in a public lynching. According to the *Constitution*, “the dismissal of the case upon a flimsy technicality cannot but leave upon the public mind an impression that the court has not ‘played fair’ with the people.” The *Buffalo News* described “the technicalities of the law” an “abomination to the public.” And the *Chicago Tribune* stated that ultimately both Wood and his workers were profiteers: “Its employees naturally took advantage of this prosperity to force up their own wages.” The public that was neither capital nor labor seemingly stood as innocent bystanders while Wood and his laborers enjoyed a celebratory concert, parade and bonfire.²⁷⁸

In fact, public outcry was so intense, that many of Wood’s buyers cancelled orders, prompting him to temporarily close a number of the mills. As a result, many of his workers became unemployed. Wood naturally blamed Palmer and the DOJ, but also placed blame on his workers for the role of production costs in leading to high prices. Wood claimed, “The only reasonable course was to suspend operations of the mills until a new demand for cloth warranted our opening again.” The National Association of Wool Manufacturers, of which Wood was a leading member, concurred. In their published report, the NAWM argued that the \$40,000,000 worth of cancellations were a function of

²⁷⁸ Modesto *Evening News* 6/18/1920; *Atlanta Constitution* 6/14/1920; *Buffalo News* 6/7/1920; *Chicago Tribune* 6/17/1920.

labor's demands and "far flung pledges of price reductions in clothing" by the U.S. Government.²⁷⁹

Representatives of labor disagreed, arguing that closing the mills in the wake of the outcome of the case merely served as an excuse to slash labor costs. Sidney Hillman, president of the Amalgamated Clothing Workers, pointedly stated that the shutdown "will permit continued profiteering." Samuel Gompers, President of the American Federation of Labor queried, "For months we have heard the cry 'increased production.' How can a policy of increased production be accomplished under a policy of laying off thousands of workers?" The United Textile Workers passed a resolution condemning the closings and Governor James Cox of Ohio, a 1920 presidential candidate, told crowds that Wood was "seeking to depress wool prices in the face of increased demand and to force employees to accept lower wages." By December of 1920, a number of Wood's former employees became convinced this was precisely Wood's intention and threatened to forcibly take over control of the mills if Wood failed to address the situation.²⁸⁰

Ultimately, Wood's employees ended up in worse shape than before the strikes of 1919-20. They did not "relieve [Wood] and his class of the control of industry." Rather, when the mills reopened in early 1921, they were forced to accept significant wage cuts, while Wood again catered his justification to his crowd of listeners. "The public... will not pay the prices which the present wages involve," Wood explained, "we must all of us bow to the public will." William Wood's employees felt the effects of the move toward

²⁷⁹ *Bulletin of the National Association of Wool Manufacturers* (Boston: NAWM, 1920), 410, 412.

²⁸⁰ *Bulletin of the National Association of Wool Manufacturers* (Boston: NAWM, 1920), 405, 406, 409; *Los Angeles Times* 7/29/1920; *Chicago Tribune* 12/22/1920.

what historians have defined “the lean years” for organized labor first hand. In the wake of an upsurge of labor activism in the immediate postwar period and auspicious gains, workers soon found themselves again under the direct control of the American Woolen Company. The public, eager to blame both labor and capital for the high cost of clothing, would not come to the rescue.²⁸¹ While far from sympathizing with the aims of organized labor, they also were largely disgruntled with the Wilson-Palmer approach to tackling rising clothing costs through Lever Act prosecutions. Of the decision in *U.S. vs. American Woolen Company*, the *Sandusky Star Journal*, for example, called the Lever Law “a joke” and referred to “a great public outcry since the decision was announced.” Another paper perhaps best summed up public sentiment expressed in letters to the press and editorials: “In their blissful ignorance Palmer and his satellites rushed into battle; they won a few, a very few case.”²⁸²

“So finally it’s up to the women!”²⁸³

Well before the failure of Lever Act prosecutions, on October 17, 1919 Attorney General Palmer outlined the second part of the DOJ strategy to decrease the cost of wearing apparel. According the DOJ estimates, women constituted ninety percent of buyers of wearing apparel. Prosecuting profiteers, Palmer reasoned, would address rising clothing prices by curbing greed among clothing dealers, but would do little to impede

²⁸¹ *Chicago Tribune* 12/22/1920; For an overview of many historians’ periodization of the 1920s as the lean years, see Melvyn Dubofsky and Foster R. Dulles, *Labor in America: A History* (Wheeling: Harlan Davidson, 2004).

²⁸² *Chicago Tribune* 12/22/1920; *Washington Post* 1/11/1921; *Sandusky Star Journal* 6/18/1920; *Bulletin of the National Association of Wool Manufacturers* (Boston, NAWM, 1920), 402.

²⁸³ *Cedar Rapids Evening Gazette* 1/17/1920.

women from agreeing to purchase items of clothing from profiteering merchants. It would also not discourage women from developing extravagant fashion habits. Thus, Palmer decided to not use the DOJ Lever Act congressional appropriation solely for prosecutions.

The DOJ asserted that women needed to exhibit economy in dress and be thrifty consumers for the household. To accomplish this goal, Palmer sought to build a movement from the top down that would use existing women's organizations to "discourage extravagance in dress" among American housewives. Women would develop new habits, Palmer reasoned, by building on previous experience in World War I conservation campaigns. Palmer placed the duty of organizing the movement to the newly created Division of Women's Activities, headed by Edith Strauss, a former member of the women's motor corps who had participated in the Paris peace conference and would later become the wife of Howard Figg. Brimming with confidence, Strauss stated "if we all actively unite and put our best effort [in] back of this movement, normal conditions will be restored before we know it."²⁸⁴

Before publicizing their strategy, Palmer and his assistants conferred with the National Consumers' League (NCL), the League of Women Voters and the General Federation of Women's Clubs (GFWC) to enlist their support. Though in many ways differing in their political outlook and purposes, these organizations were largely constructed from middle class women. They sought to use the growing political power of American women to address contemporary problems.

²⁸⁴ New York Times 10/18/1919; Cedar Rapids *Evening Gazette* 1/17/1920.

While the impetus for building a thrift in clothing movement came from the highest levels of government, the DOJ drew support from middle class women ranging from those in the NCL to former members of fair price committees. In October, the DOJ sent letters to prominent middle class women in activist organizations not only asking for their support, but also for their input on how to encourage thrift in clothing consumption. Cognizant of the success of women's role in the conservation campaigns of World War I, Palmer and Strauss solicited participation by alluding to past efforts. To Edna White of the American Home Economics Association, for example, Palmer asked, "May I count on your organization to unite and actively help win the war of reconstruction?" Similarly, in a form letter to leaders of women's organizations, invoking the language of battle, Strauss stated, "Women who occupy responsible positions in a community can put the power of their influence and position behind the movements designed to kill the cost of living." Making the majority of clothing purchases, Strauss asserted that women, "stirred by patriotic enthusiasm," "can to a large extent control prices."²⁸⁵

Women would undertake this task within a hierarchy. Each level would be responsible for educating those below on which clothes and fabrics to purchase and how to rework them to make them last longer. Palmer and Strauss stood at the top of the hierarchy. Below them were state chairmen, followed by state advisory boards, county or district chairmen and then local women's organizations. Local Women's Division officials often came from women who had previously served on World War I fair price

²⁸⁵ A Mitchell Palmer to Edna White 10/31/1919, DOJ-HCL; Edith Strauss to "Madam" 11/9/1919; For other examples of letters seeking the advice and cooperation of women, see "Form Letter to Fair Price Commissioners" 11/6/1919, Assist. Attorney General to 10/30/1919, Edith Strauss to Evelyn Ellsworth 11/10/1919, Asst. Attorney General to Lee Brock 3/1/1920, all DOJ-HCL.

committees. Local clubs participating varied from the Kentucky “Monday Afternoon Club” to the Rhode Island “Housewives League.” The DOJ circulated educational literature through the hierarchy to each participating club, which would then instruct women in local communities as to how to fight the high cost of living through proper consumption of wearing apparel.²⁸⁶

For the most part, the campaign of the Women’s Division was strictly educational. Although participants reported cases of profiteering to the DOJ, they mainly sought to spread the message of thrift- through word of mouth, panels, round-tables, speakers, pledge cards, circulating pamphlets, using the local and national press, as well as slides in motion pictures. As Strauss told many participants, “I do not think you can put into the hands of the public a stronger weapon than knowledge.” The Women’s Division spelled out this knowledge clearly in instructions to women’s organizations. One memorandum outlined in ten points what each organization should do, beginning with spreading interest in the Women’s Division among other local women’s clubs and ending with a directive to install bulletin boards in club meeting halls that would display information on combating high clothing prices. Other instructions were more specific. A manual titled “Information of Value in Choosing material for Blouse” provided recommendations on 22 different kinds of material in regards to weight, weaving and ability to be laundered relative to price, as well as guidelines on proper laundering for cotton and silk. Such manuals aimed to help middle class women make their clothes last longer without making them look old or ragged. The paragon for middle class women’s

²⁸⁶ Untitled chart, DOJ-HCL; Clubs Co-Operating with H.C.L. in Various States, DOJ-HCL.

fashion under the Women's Division campaign emphasized quality (rather than cheap) fabric, infrequently purchased and of a plain, unostentatious, style.²⁸⁷

Such an emphasis on plain but quality clothing fit within a developing tension between a middle class desire to differentiate itself from the working class in fashion style and rising working class access to more styles of dress. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, consumer goods including mass produced clothing increasingly became available to virtually everyone. As noted by Daniel Horowitz and Nan Enstad, middle class women in particular responded to the "democratization of fashion" not by embracing extravagant styles, but by placing a premium on quality grades of clothing and "disparaging cheaply made goods," increasingly worn by working women.²⁸⁸ While this trend was very much in place before World War I, the high cost of living alongside of stagnant middle class salaries heightened a middle class desire to culturally define the boundaries dividing them from the working class. The fact that the working class could now afford styles that resembled middle class and elite fashion brought urgency to the situation. Yet, to emphasize quality clothing, placed limits on how and the extent to which middle class consumers could exercise thrift.²⁸⁹

²⁸⁷ Edith Strauss to "Madam" 11/8/1919; *Annual Report of the Attorney General of the United States for the Year 1920* (Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1920), 182; Dept. of Justice, Division of Women's Activities, H.C.L, Information of Value in Choosing material for Blouse, DOJ-HCL; 21, Reg 5091, Dept. of Justice Division of Women's Activities, H.C.L., Committee of Women's Organizations, "It shall be the duty of this committee...", DOJ-HCL.

²⁸⁸ Daniel Horowitz, "Frugality or Comfort: Middle-Class Styles of Life in the Early Twentieth Century" *American Quarterly* 37 (Summer 1985); Nan Enstad, *Ladies of Labor, Girls of Adventure: Working Women, Popular Culture, and Labor Politics at the Turn of the Twentieth Century* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999).

²⁸⁹ Daniel Horowitz, "Frugality or Comfort: Middle-Class Styles of Life in the Early Twentieth Century" *American Quarterly* 37 (Summer 1985); Nan Enstad, *Ladies of Labor, Girls of Adventure: Working Women, Popular Culture, and Labor Politics at the Turn of the Twentieth Century* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999).

Rather than telling consumers to buy cheap clothes and wear them as long as possible, the Women's Division emphasized how to make quality goods last longer. Even though this approach built on existing trends in middle class consumption, longer-worn quality clothing could potentially blur the boundaries between working and middle class women. Thus, in instructions telling women how to exercise thrift, the Women's Division had to mitigate the idea of practicing economy in dress with the need to maintain middle class standards of fashion. A "pledge" for women's division of Texas epitomized the tension between class differentiation and thrift in requiring adherents to adopt the slogan "PLAIN LIVING and HIGH THINKING." While nearly the entire pledge stressed paying low prices, one section resolved, "we will be guided by quality and not by price." A "Do's" and "Don'ts" of clothing consumption circulated by the central office of the Women's Division similarly told women not to look cheap by paying attention to fabric quality and avoiding extravagant styles, or "clothes extreme in style or color." While the guidelines directed women to "Judge by quality," they also told them to "Wear clothes as long as possible." Doing so involved extensive instructions on how to rework clothing. Spreading this kind of detail to all middle class homes represented an onerous, if not impossible task. Moreover, whether or not the DOJ intended to spread its message beyond the middle class was ambiguous. Though never stated in DOJ documents, an adoption of DOJ instructions by the working class might serve to blur class boundaries.²⁹⁰

Even women who strictly adhered to DOJ instructions faced limitations. Susan Williams, a student at Duvall High School in Jacksonville, FL, described the substantial

²⁹⁰ Report of Activities of Women's Organization, H.C.L. in Different States, Exhibit C., DOJ-HCL; Dept. of Justice Division of Women's Activities, H.C.L. Wearing Apparel Do's and Don'ts, DOJ-HCL.

amount of time required to acquire “knowledge of textiles, their properties and the rules governing” their alterations necessary to “make up the pretty garments that the young girl naturally craves.” Gertrude Sheppard instructed her readers to practice on “dummy dresses” and “gradually” work toward real articles to “beat the H.C.L,” while declaring “always buy good material.” Mothers of students at the Hibbard School in Chicago used Women’s Division guidelines to produce “made over” clothes from remaining quality cloth in “big sister’s serge dress that was too small, or from dad’s coat.” But their supply of quality cloth or clothing was not endless. They wanted quality cloth to supplement recycled clothing. But the chairman of the local Women’s Department of the Chicago Fair Price Committee noted that these “women refuse to buy articles offered a lower prices because they are afraid that they might be of inferior quality.” As a result, they continued to pay high prices.²⁹¹

Because quality clothing was more expensive than cheaply-made “extravagant” working class attire, at least one major women’s organization focused not on spreading the Women’s Division’s message, but rather on preventing profiteering in quality cloth and clothing sales. The National Consumers League attempted to mobilize consumers to pressure the U.S. Government to pass legislation that would prevent merchants and manufactures from profiteering by misleading consumers on the quality of fabric in their products. This movement of consumers, the NCL hoped, would press for the enactment of the French-Capper “Truth in Fabric” bill, legislation intending “to prevent deceit and profiteering.” Modeled on the 1905 Pure Food and Drug Act, the French-Capper bill

²⁹¹ “The Oracle,” yearbook of Duvall High School of Jacksonville, Fl, Florida Collection, Jacksonville Public Library; *Ladies Home Journal* 4/1920; *Women’s Wear Daily* 1/31/1920.

simply required manufactures and dealers of cloth and clothing to list the percentage of “shoddy” versus “virgin” material in the end product.

Palmer and Strauss had not intended to build a movement for the enactment of more legislation, but Women’s Division speeches and pamphlets did encourage consumers to pay attention to quality of cloth. One Women’s Division speech nostalgically remembered the days of the mid nineteenth century when housewives “knew more about the quality of cloth” and “could buy intelligently,” while the modern housewife “cannot tell whether cloth...contains part shoddy or other inferior fiber.” Before circulating many of its pamphlets on choosing proper clothing material, the Women’s Division had even asked for the input of a “Standardization of Textile Fabrics Committee” of the American Home Economics Association, who, like the DOJ encouraged the consumer to avoid cheap, extravagant styles. Members of the Home Economics Association completed Women’s Division forms that asked about the wearing and laundering qualities of different kinds of garments. The Women’s Division even asked for samples of material in an attempt to study the quality of each material before telling women’s organizations what consumers should buy.

By drawing on women’s organizations for information in its campaign against the high cost of clothing, the Women’s Division avoided a full top-down approach. However, its focus on determining cloth quality and its declaration of the inability of housewives to distinguish shoddy versus virgin fabric, unintentionally encouraged women’s organizations to focus on the need for more government action. The National Consumers

League and even the American Home Economics Association pushed for “truth in fabric” legislation, rather than simply spreading the message of thrift as the DOJ had intended.²⁹²

The NCL used many of the Women’s Division’s methods in redirecting pressure onto the Federal Government to pass the French-Capper bill. Leaders of the NCL delivered speeches all over the country, asked newspapers to include information on the “honest cloth” movement, wrote editorials, held mass meetings, wrote philanthropic organizations for support, handed out “truth in fabric” stickers to be placed on envelopes, and constructed pamphlets and posters. The NCL even set up a hierarchy with national, state, county and city directors, that resembled the organization of the DOJ’s Women’s Division. In many ways, the NCL was more creative than the Women’s Division. For example, one plan of action stated, “many, who might not be interested, may be interested in this movement through their children,” and encouraged participants to set up essay writing contests and debates on the topic in classrooms. Ultimately, the NCL sought to build a movement around the honest cloth bill. A pamphlet outlining the campaign summed up their aims:

The fate of truth in fabric can not be settled in legislative or congressional committee rooms, unless the need and justice of this issue is brought convincingly before meetings of women’s clubs...dinner of Kiwanians and Rotarians, and under kerosene and electric lights all over the state and nation.²⁹³

²⁹² Untitled Speech beginning in “I would like to call your attention to recent reports...,” DOJ-HCL; Division of Women’s Activities, H.C.L. An Experience Pool in Clothing Values, DOJ-HCL. Questionnaire, Dept. of Justice Division of Women’s Activities, H.C.L Record of Wearing Qualities, DOJ-HCL; Questionnaire, Dept. of Justice Division of Women’s Activities, H.C.L “experience pool of...,” DOJ-HCL; Division of Women’s Activities H.C.L. Wanted 6’ X 9’ Samples of your outworn silk petticoats and coat linings.” DOJ-HCL. For the American Home Economics Association, see Circular Letter to Advisory Committee Members and Others re Status of Misbranding and Other Textile Legislation, DOJ-HCL.

²⁹³ For Immediate Release, Reel 84, National Consumers League Records (hereinafter NCLR); Untitled document beginning with “Social Justice by Congressional Action...,” Reel 84, NCLR; Statement of Mrs. Raymond Robins- Presenting the Delegation of Women, on Social Justice Women’s Day, Reel 84, NCLR.

The NCL also directly solicited support for the Truth in Fabric bill in letters to congressmen and all major political parties in hopes of capitalizing on the fact that the election of 1920 was not far off. “The purchasing public knows how much candy is in the box...the druggist must state on a label whatever is in his patient[‘s] medicine...”, one letter asserted, “why then can the clothes dealer sell us an excellent suit of ‘all wool,’ one in which the wool has perhaps seen service as window curtains, as furniture upholstery, and finally, as people’s old clothes.” The NCL also interviewed presidential candidates and publicized their responses regarding the truth and fabric bill alongside of other pressing issues in newsletters and newspapers.²⁹⁴

The NCL was not alone in changing focus toward “truth in fabric.” Divisions of the General Federation of Women’s Clubs also turned their attention to “honest cloth” and misbranding. Referring to the Barkley Misbranding Bill (a similar act also pending in congressional committee), Mildred Weigley, St. Paul chairman of the home economics committee of the Minnesota Federation of Women’s Clubs, declared to an audience at their January 1920 statewide meeting, “We must secure sufficient interest to secure reporting out of committee, discussion and action.” “The passage of this bill,” Weigley exclaimed, “would mean more opportunity for efficient buying and hence be a step in decreasing the cost of living.”²⁹⁵

²⁹⁴ Memo to Governor Cox, Oct. 1920, Reel 84, NCLR; Proposed Planks for National Party Platforms, Reel 84, NCLR; Summary of Interviews with Presidential Candidates, Reel 84, NCLR.

²⁹⁵ *Women’s Wear Daily* 2/19/1920.

Even the American Home Economics Association, which wholeheartedly supported the campaign of the Women Division, ultimately focused its efforts on honest cloth legislation. Local divisions of the AHEA hosted lectures by departmental officials, distributed DOJ literature and endorsed the work of the Women's Division. Less focused on the protective labor practices endorsed by the National Consumers' League, in response to the campaign of the Women's Division, the organ of the AHEA declared, "If this powerful class of consumers will unite in effort, their concerted resistance will demonstrate that the producer is insulting their patriotism." "Plain Living and High Thinking," it asserted, would result in "a reduction of prices." Yet particularly by mid 1920, the AHEA dedicated more of its attention to truth in fabric legislation. The AHEA Committee on the Standardization of Textiles had and continued to work with the Women's Division by undertaking studies for government pamphlets that would instruct women on how to be thrifty consumers of clothing. But, the committee increasingly spent its time discussing the fate of the French-Capper Act and Barkley Misbranding bills in Congress. Advisory committees of the AHEA secured the endorsement of women's clubs for "truth in fabric" and the Association's journal dedicated more space to op-editorials in favor of honest cloth legislation.²⁹⁶

In the end, the NCL and AHEA had little to show for their efforts. Numerous manufactures and merchants of clothing disagreed with the bills, calling them "ill-conceived." Many merchants underscored the tension between emphasizing pure or quality fabric and trying to promote thrift to battle rising clothing costs. In a letter to the

²⁹⁶ American Association of Home Economics, *Journal of Home Economics* February 1920, p.69-76; *Ibid.*, March 1920, p.101-08, April 1920, p. 191-92, 221-23, August 1920, 359-63, November 1920, p.491-95.

NCL, Richard A. Feiss of the Cleveland Clothcraft Shops explained, “In our efforts to keep down the cost of living and for the conservation of our resources, it is not only essential to the buying public that reworked wool be used as extensively as possible, but that no bad name be attached to its use.”²⁹⁷ In a statement to members of Congress and the general public, the National Association of Wool Manufacturers (NAWM) argued that many “shoddy” grades of wool were actually of higher quality than “virgin” wool. Under this reasoning, manufactures would be encouraged to use higher percentages of lower quality “virgin” fabric, a form of deceit that would not be revealed by French-Capper labeling. The NAWM also noted that conspicuous labels on clothing would “put an end to the thrifty practice of ‘turning’ and remaking dresses.” The best solution, the NAWM claimed, was to let free market competition regulate honesty.²⁹⁸

Perhaps most important to cloth and clothing manufacturers and merchants, honest cloth legislation would likely damage them financially. From the standpoint of a retailer or manufacturer of clothing, any increased revenue from a boost in sales for quality clothing or fabric would have to be reconciled with an accompanying emphasis on making these items last longer. As a result, consumers would buy less frequently. They opposed labeling and ironically used arguments for thrift to undermine Truth in Fabric legislation.

Lastly, the popular press expressed only mixed feelings for the legislation. While some newspapers wholeheartedly backed the French-Capper bill, the *New York Times*

²⁹⁷ Joseph Feiss to National Consumers League 10/31/1919, Reel 50, NCLR; F. Kelley to B. Smith 12/20/1919, Reel 84, NCLR, Suggestions for A Truth in Fabric Campaign, Reel 50, NCLR.

²⁹⁸ National Association of Wool Manufacturers, “Arguments Against the ‘Truth in Fabric’ Bills Pending in the United States Congress, Sixty-Sixth Congress- Second Session,” p.13, New York Public Library.

went as far as stating that the general public opposed the bill. Many articles pointed to the idea that it sent contradictory messages regarding thrift. In spite of their efforts, the NCL and other women's organizations failed to convince Congress to pass the bill, though the issue of "honest cloth" did resurface occasionally in the years to come.²⁹⁹

Ultimately, the Women's Division faced an impossible task. In addition to battling the tension between thrift and the maintenance of middle class fashion standards, women's organizations focused on legislative action rather than simply doing the work of the Women's Division. On a smaller note, the Women's Division also encountered accusations of scandal within its ranks, when Olivia Brueggeman, former executive secretary of the Missouri Division, alleged that two officials used their positions to promote Mitchell Palmer's presidential candidacy. The allegations generated negative publicity and led to a Senate committee investigation. Perhaps most of all, amid inflated public expectations that the Federal Government could reduce the cost of clothing, the task was too large of a burden to place on a subdivision of a U.S. Government department. As Mrs. J. R. Leighty, chairman of the Missouri Women's Division, noted while publicly criticizing Strauss and the DOJ, "\$150 for an executive secretary and a small sum for a stenographer are inadequate" to bring down the cost of clothing.³⁰⁰

Yet the Women's Division did claim success, at least in the reduction in prices for women's apparel. Amidst the disbanding of the Women's Division in mid-late 1920, Figg wrote to the *New York Times* "The work of the women's organizations cannot be too highly praised," while telling fair price commissioners "the Women's Division...has

²⁹⁹ *New York Times* 3/28/1920; *Women's Wear Daily* 1/7/1920.

³⁰⁰ *Women's Wear Daily* 1/30/1920.

succeeded in turning the trend of prices of women's wearing apparel in the direction of reasonable levels." While no official statistics were taken, a survey of advertised retail prices for a variety of women's apparel sold at three different department stores suggests that prices for women's apparel actually increased by forty-eight percent from mid-1919 to mid-1920. Wholesale prices published by the Bureau of Labor Statistics suggest a similar trend.³⁰¹

Conclusion:

Whereas the Women's Division claimed slight success, by mid-1920 most viewed DOJ prosecutions as a universal failure. Attempting to put a positive spin on at least half of the DOJ strategy to bring down clothing prices, a DOJ official wrote to a citizen reacting to the termination of the Women's Division, "The educational campaign as conducted by the women was of far more value than the prosecutions under the Lever Act." Retail prices for clothing increased by 24 percent from October 1919 to August 1920. The constant battle over the constitutionality of the Lever Act put the Attorney General's Office on the defensive. Every case became a "test case," since defendants rarely based their cases on their innocence of the crime. Rather, they focused on the

³⁰¹ In Re Senate Investigation of Department of Justice Women's Organization in Connection with Campaign Expenditures, DOJ-HCL; Figg to Fair Price Commissioners 8/2/1920, DOJ-HCL; Figg to Van Anda 5/19/1920, DOJ-HCL; See appendix 3 for the analysis of women's clothing prices from mid-1919 to mid-1920 as advertised at three department stores. Wholesale prices, calculated from averaging price changes of articles designated as "women's" clothing from 1919 to June of 1920 by the Bureau of Labor Statistics indicate an average price increase by 30.15%, U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, "Wholesale Prices 1890 to 1920" *Bulletin of the Bureau of Labor Statistics* 296 (June 1922): 116-123. It is worth noting that Figg and Strauss became romantically involved, perhaps further discouraging Figg from declaring the Women's Division a failure.

constitutional merits of the Lever law itself. As an official report of the Attorney General's office recounted, "the Bureau was seriously hampered in its efforts... judges held those sections under which its principle activity was carried on to be unconstitutional." The constraint the Constitution placed on the fight against profiteering exacerbated the inherently limited strategy of fighting the high cost of clothing by attacking individual profiteers.³⁰²

The focus on prosecuting profiteers and using the DOJ to convince women to exercise thrift as consumers to combat the high cost of clothing ignored other potential structural economic reasons for a rise in prices. The Wilson/Palmer strategy also did not adequately assuage the middle class's antipathy of the seemingly growing power of organized labor and its role in causing the H.C.L. As just one discontented voice, the leadership of Masons Odd Fellowship of Jacksonville, identifying as "clean, substantial people of the great middle classes," posed the question "What is the real business of the Department of Justice besides ignoring profiteers?" Complaining of rising working class wages, they further remarked that "the one ambition of the salaried man is to live up to the standard established by the unskilled laborer." Many middle class Americans viewed striking workers as lazy and lacking thrift, enjoying the fruits of a consumer economy while the middle class struggled. They lacked true producer values of industriousness and thrift that middle class Americans had incorporated into their consumer identity. In a

³⁰² Attorney General Assistant to Mrs. J.T. Anderson 10/7/1920, DOJ-HCL; "Statement of the Work of the Cost of Living Division for the Bureau of Investigation, For the Fiscal Year 1919-1920," DOJ-HCL; U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics "Retail Prices 1913 to December, 1920" *Bulletin of the Bureau of Labor Statistics* 300 (May 1922): 57. Another survey cites an increase of twenty-one percent from October 1919-August 1920; Eugene Rotwein, "Post-World War I Price Movements and Price Policy" *Journal of Political Economy* 53 (Sep. 1945), 249.

speech to citizens in West Virginia, an official of the High Cost of Living Division pointedly summarized the sentiments of many in the general public: “they are constantly complaining that nothing is being done, or at least if anything is being done, it is not being done right.”³⁰³

It was continued frustration with the inability of elected officials to solve the high cost of clothing that encouraged the American middle class to undertake grassroots organization. The top-down Federal Government strategy that drew partially on middle class voluntarism did not go far enough. The disgruntled “forgotten folk” responded to these failures of the Federal Government not just by sustaining their assertions of middle class victimhood in the postwar economy, but also by building on their growing consciousness as consumers by forming new organizations. As Edith Strauss reported while the work of the Women’s Division was nearing an end, “Overall and gingham dress clubs have been organized in many states.” The middle class would soon don denim to fight the HCL and demonstrate producer values to the working class. This strategy aimed to directly influence prices, but also to convince local, state and federal governments to immerse themselves into the economy even more boldly to stifle organized labor and profiteers.³⁰⁴

³⁰³ Untitled speech in W.V., DOJ-HCL; Jacksonville Fraternal Record, May-June 1920, Florida Collection, Jacksonville Public Library.

³⁰⁴ Edith Strauss, summary of activity in individual states, DOJ-HCL.

Chapter 4: A Nation in Overalls: Middle Class Clothing Boycotts

On April 29, 1920, the Reverend New Harris of St. Paul's Methodist Church in Muskogee, Oklahoma performed not one, but two weddings. On the surface, the "double header" of ceremonies seemed far from unusual. It was the culmination of two classic war romances. The first couple, Parker Watson and May Gibson, intended to marry in 1917, but Watson was called to arms when the United States entered World War I. At the conclusion of hostilities, Watson returned home and intended to marry "his bride" only to be again summoned for duty. For the next few months he served in France while Gibson longed for his return. When the couple finally stepped to the altar, they were joined by Watson's business partner, Harry Rex Whaley, and his bride Golda Miley. Like Watson, Whaley had served two tours in the Armed Services since the beginning of his engagement, delaying his wedding for three years. It seemed only natural that the two men would share the same wedding date. But what united these two marriages was not simply their common war romances or the fact that Watson and Whaley were business colleagues. Rather, the couples chose to combine ceremonies because both men had decided to abandon formal wear in favor of bib-overalls.³⁰⁵

The popularity of wearing overalls had recently spread throughout Oklahoma. Across town from the wedding, W.G. Robertson, a trial lawyer, pleaded a case in overalls in the district court house. Nine days earlier, numerous citizens paraded in overalls down the streets of Oklahoma City to celebrate the opening of the Western League baseball season. On the same day, a group of students at the local high school forced a classmate

³⁰⁵ *Daily Oklahoman* 4/29/1920.

to put on overalls after he had remarked that the wearing of such attire was “all foolishness.” The students “held him by force, removed his stylish clothes and dressed him in overalls.” Reports of the event mentioned no disciplinary action.³⁰⁶

By May of 1920 similar stories could be found virtually anywhere in the United States. The “overall movement” had spread to the point that ministers preached in overalls, politicians wore them to appeal to their constituencies, and students attended dances in overalls. Perhaps most noticeable, citizens in localities ranging from Milledgeville, GA to New York City paraded in the streets holding signs with slogans, such as “To Hell With the High Cost of Living” and “Down With the Profiteers in All Lines,” while donning nothing but denim. As economist Henry W. Macrosty recalled, “by the middle of April, the storm broke.”³⁰⁷

Using the weapon of consumption, the “white collar” or “middle classes” turned to the overall to undertake a grassroots protest of rising clothing costs. While the movement did not begin as an exclusively middle class protest, it very quickly became one. The overall movement continued the middle class consumer activism discussed previously in this dissertation. Simultaneous with the emergence of the overall movement, middle class citizens persisted to protest high prices by pressing for municipal markets, planting home gardens, serving on fair price committees, and writing letters to newspapers and politicians with other ideas of how to reduce prices. Middle class Americans continued to complain that soaring prices placed a special burden on white

³⁰⁶ *Daily Oklahoman* 4/29/1920.

³⁰⁷ *New York Times* 4/25/1920; Henry W. Macrosty, “Inflation and Deflation in the United States and the United Kingdom, 1919-23” *Journal of the Royal Statistical Society* 90 (1927): 52.

collar workers, whose salaries had remained stagnant since the onset of the war.

Believing that the Wilson administration and the Department of justice had not gone far enough in reducing clothing prices, middle class Americans embraced a new strategy. “Striking” against the high cost of clothing, participants in the movement signed pledges agreeing to wear only overalls until clothing prices returned to more reasonable levels. Newly formed “overall clubs” organized formal protests and enforced compliance by instituting penalties ranging from collecting fines to “ducking” noncompliant members in a local pond, river or lake.³⁰⁸

Like home garden clubs, organizations lobbying for municipal markets and the many groups working in conjunction with the USFA and DOJ-HCL, “overall clubs” served as vehicles for the organization of the middle class, and placed blame on merchants and middlemen for the high cost of clothing. By refusing to pay exorbitant prices, overall clubs sought to attack price-gougers directly. Profiteers, they believed, would suffer from a reduction in new clothing purchases. Overall club members would display this “buyers’ strike” visually by wearing overalls on the streets, in the schools, at church and at home. Participants hoped that retailers and middlemen would respond by lowering prices.

Appropriating of the clothing of productive labor also served as a means for the middle class to protest the role of the working class in causing high prices. Middle class citizens, who took part in home garden and municipal market campaigns or eagerly awaited the results of HCL-DOJ prosecutions, had also frequently lambasted laborers for inflating prices. The overall movement was perhaps even more antipathetic toward labor.

³⁰⁸ *Daily Oklahoman* 4/20/1920.

During 1919-20, 5,596,114 workers went on strike, including many in the textile industry. This represented a 227 percent increase from the previous two-year period. Club members and their supporters generally believed it was no coincidence that prices had skyrocketed throughout the same period, prompting them to identify working class greed and laziness as reasons for the high cost of living. As newspaper reporter Laura A. Smith proclaimed, the movement sought to oppose laborers undertaking a “whirlpool of strikes.” In the context of the “first red scare,” fears over the influence of bolshevism on organized labor further inflamed passions. The Atlanta overall club, for example, cheered when leaders denounced “bolshevists” at a meeting. Borrowing “the symbol of real work,” middle class Americans responded with direct and abrasive action.³⁰⁹³¹⁰

Through the overall movement, middle class Americans sought to impose the values of industriousness and thrift, which had been embraced by the producerist nineteenth century middle class, onto the growing consumer economy. They believed that these values would bring fairness to an economy was seemingly favoring profiteering laborers, middlemen and merchants. According to Laura A. Smith, overall club members adopted “the insignia of manual labor” to call for a “return to the pioneer days.” The “decedents” of these pioneers “are saying, ‘Strike without reason and we will show you that we can keep the wheels moving ourselves.’” Bridging the home garden and overall movements, Smith declared, “Force up the prices of vegetables and fruits and we will have our own gardens and fruit trees. Put clothing beyond our reach and we will go back to overalls.” Many overall movement proponents resented not just the impact of strikes

³⁰⁹ Atlanta *Constitution* 4/9/1920; Indianapolis *Star* 5/10/1920; Alexander Trachtenberg and Benjamin Glassberg eds. *American Labor Year Book 1923-1924 Vol. V* (New York: Rand School of Social Science, 1924), 97; La Crosse (WI) *Tribune and Leader-Press* 4/25/1920.

on prices, but also the idea that higher wages enabled workers to indulge in consumerism. As one newspaper editorial noted, the overall movement participants were part of a battle against working class “extravagance,” and an “orgy of spending.” Protesting both the greed of capital and the underproduction and over-consumption of the working class, the overall movement stood for the values of industriousness and thrift.³¹¹

While tangible success by the Federal Government in lowering clothing prices might not have prevented the rise of the overall movement, club members criticized the slow pace and ineffectual results of government solutions. The president of the Tampa overall association declared, “something must be done,” adding that “it is absolutely sure that the government isn’t going to do anything.” Walter Kingsley, president of the New York City overall club, asserted that individuals must “insist that the Government enforce its laws against profiteering.” At a meeting of the Columbia, S.C. overall club W.N. Graydon, a local attorney, declared, “we all know the country is full of profiteers. The government has investigated and investigated, but it can’t catch anybody.” Members of the U.S. Government also understood the implications of the movement. Commenting on the overall movement and general “middle class” anti-profiteering activism, Senator William S. Kenyon of Iowa spoke to his colleagues of “unrest”-“they are cursing the profiteer; they are damning Congress because it does not do something.” According to Kenyon, Congress’s lone effort, the Lever Act, had proved unsuccessful because it had been “construed in rather a limited way.”³¹²

³¹¹ Indianapolis *Star* 5/10/1920; Los Angeles *Times* 5/12/1920.

³¹² New York *Times* 4/19/1920; Tampa *Tribune* 4/1/1920; Columbia *State* 4/17/1920; *Congressional Record*, Senate 5/29/1920, p. 7283-91; United States Census, Year: 1920; Census Place: Columbia Ward 1, Richland, South Carolina; Roll: T625_1707; Page: 30B; Enumeration District: 80; Image: 130.

In spite of past failures, many participants believed that the eventual solution would require *more* government action. Only the state could penalize strikers and profiteers, and club members hoped that a “buyer’s strike” would persuade local, state and federal officials to take more aggressive measures.³¹³ Politicians did take notice, but many latched onto the movement largely to generate headlines. Ultimately, they offered virtually no grand or novel attempts to bring striking labor and profiteers to justice in the eyes of the organizing middle class.

The overall movement’s focus on government solutions represented a continuation of a Progressive Era and particularly World War I and postwar (DOJ-HCL) trend of middle class organizing for reform through the expanding state. While participants expressed anger with multiple levels of government for their failure to control prices, they simultaneously had faith that the state could solve the problem in conjunction with middle class consumer organizing. Overall movement participants demanded something beyond the DOJ-HCL strategy that featured the combination of middle class voluntarism and expanded government immersion into the economy. What this *precisely* was, however, was never clear. Rather than actually taking concrete action in response to club members’ calls, politicians used the movement as an opportunity to gain popular appeal among the middle class by simply enlarging national and local spaces of middle class consumer protest.

The Early Overall Movement: Jacksonville

³¹³ Seldom did such statements define specifically how the state should go about more aggressively tackling exorbitant clothing prices.

The movement began during the last week of March, 1920 in Jacksonville, Florida. Noticing a rise in the price of clothing at local stores, an eclectic group of citizens met to discuss an organized response. Seeking to “dethrone” “the king of high prices,” they decided to use their power as consumers to combat profiteering and encourage lower prices. The \$2.50 overall and “all [its] glory” would serve as the symbol and strategy of protest. Each participant signed pledges to don nothing but denim until clothing became more affordable. Within days, the Jacksonville overall club had enrolled 1000 members.³¹⁴

Membership in the early Jacksonville overall club neither exclusively came from the ranks of middle class nor did it place much blame on labor for high clothing prices. Among the original leaders of the club were a machinist and a fireman, and some organizers even used workplaces to build the movement. At least a few white collar participants wanted to ensure that the movement would not harm the working class. Club members working in the offices of the Seaboard Air Line Railway resolved that any purchases of overalls should be “at a reasonable price, and without injury to the cost of labor for producing.” Accurately summarizing the makeup of the early Jacksonville overall club, the Jacksonville *Metropolis* declared, “the movement is not confined to any one particular class of men in Jacksonville.”³¹⁵

³¹⁴ Florida *Times Union* 3/28/1920; Jacksonville *Metropolis* 3/31/1920.

³¹⁵ Florida *Times Union* 3/28/1920; E.D. Astin, an office worker in the Seaboard Air Line Railway, set up the first club among railway employees. Discussion of the overall garb soon grew in local offices and shopfloors. Within a few days, workers at the American Telephone and Telegraph Company, Western Union, Southern Bell, Atlantic Coast Railway Co. and the Drew Press Co. offered their support for the movement. James A. Davis, a fireman, served as secretary of the club and J.W. Sleeman co-organized an early overall parade, Data taken from: United States, Bureau of the Census, *Fourteenth Census of the United States Taken in the Year 1920*.

Many early Jacksonville overall club members hoped for inter-class cooperation in the movement. For example, the club passed one resolution stating that its membership came “from all walks of life” and that one of its goals would be the creation of “a sentiment to put a stop to the great extravagance and waste now prevalent among all classes.” The resolution also excused most local merchants from profiteering, so as to gain their support. Along the same lines, sympathetic newspaper reporting continued to emphasize the varied backgrounds of club membership and noted that excessive clothing prices affected all consumers.³¹⁶

While the early movement did have blue-collar participation, most of its leaders came from the middle class. William Nussbaum, president of the club, was a real estate lawyer, and, according to decedents, “was fairly well off during the Florida real estate boom.” E.D. Astin worked in the auditor’s office of the Seaboard Air Line Railway Co. William D. Vinzant, the Grand Marshal of the club, served as Chief of the Jacksonville Police. Thomas Brooks and Douglas Elliot, both major organizers, held the positions of investigator and clerk, respectively. John Martin, a prominent member, practiced law before becoming Mayor of Jacksonville. In spite of the participation of laborers in the early movement, even the first club members frequently referenced grievances specific to white collar workers. A resolution of participants in the Drew Press Company explicitly mentioned that the salary of “the office man” “had not been increased sufficiently to enable us to purchase clothing at the prices asked.” Such a statement corresponds with a

³¹⁶Florida *Times Union* 4/1920.

popular discourse that emphasized the particular burden of rising prices on the middle class.³¹⁷

The nascent organization expressed grand ambitions and sought to rapidly increase its membership. Beyond using the workplace as a site for organization, the overall club set up a registration headquarters on Hogan street, which enrolled as many as 200 members in one day during the first week of April. The new members “represented more than fifty different businesses, trades and professions.” Leadership further announced that they would create a number of regional registration sites located in different parts of the city and that the club would provide overalls for any participant lacking their own pair. Based on this initial success, club leaders optimistically declared that they would secure the names of approximately 5000 residents on pledge sheets by April 4. As the Jacksonville *Metropolis* reported, “the overall movement has spread with rapidity that seems very remarkable.”³¹⁸

³¹⁷ Though not blaming a lazy workforce for rising clothing prices, the leaders of the early Jacksonville overall club did have a history of making a point to extol hard work. Vinzant instituted the eight-hour workday, vacation leave and sick leave for police officers, but was a “strict disciplinarian,” who conducted “frequent drills and inspections with military fervor.” Martin won 1917 mayoral election by exalting his own efficiency in the context of the Jacksonville citizenry’s disillusionment with the “mismanagement” and ostentatious lifestyle of incumbent J.E.T. Bowden, whose house was described as “imposing.” Martin’s belief in efficiency, however, did not preclude him from supporting organized labor in “several major strikes” during his administration. In their correspondence, the Drew Family (of Drew Press Co.) also wrote of the value of “hard work” and company literature stated that a Drew printer should be “too wise to take advantage of a trusting customer.” Author’s Correspondence with William Nussbaum III Jan-Feb, 2007; *Jacksonville’s Sheriff’s Office 1822-2001* (Paducah, Kentucky: Turner Publishing co., 2002); John Wellborn Martin Biography File, Florida Collection, Jacksonville Public Library; United States, Bureau of the Census, *Fourteenth Census of the United States Taken in the Year 1920*; Jacksonville *Metropolis* 3/31/1920; Florida *Times Union* 4/9/1920; J.E.T. Bowden Biography File, Florida Collection, Jacksonville Public Library; “Columbus Drew, A Book Seller, Printer... and a Century of American Heritage,” Drew Company and Family Collection, Jacksonville Historical Society; “Proof of Faith in Florida” pamphlet, Drew Company and Family Collection, Jacksonville Historical Society.

³¹⁸ Jacksonville *Metropolis* 3/31/1920.

Rather than merely seeking to address local price increases, organizers wanted the movement to gain mass appeal among the public and the government. In hopes of accomplishing this end, leaders successfully solicited the support of the mayor and members of the City Council. City Council members even pulled a practical joke in the council chambers to publicize the movement. One member of the Council bet another councilman to wear overalls in the chambers and then jokingly proposed an ordinance requiring trousers during meetings. As early participants argued, these endorsements represented only the beginning. One organizer hoped the movement would “spread until it becomes a nation wide movement as originated here.” As soon as March 30, James A. Davis, secretary of the club, predicted that this would happen “in a short time.” While his prediction would hold true, neither Davis nor any other club member had voiced a desire for it to spread as a specifically *middle class* movement.³¹⁹

The club would use familiar tactics to expand the movement. Foremost, leaders and the supportive local press deployed the language of battle and war to make the movement appeal to the masses. In doing so, they carried on the practices of the U.S. Food Administration, the Department of Justice High Cost of Living Division (DOJ-HCL) campaign, and the organizations working with the Women’s Division.³²⁰ In the same tradition of DOJ-HCL calls to “win the war of reconstruction” and “kill the cost of living,” William Nussbaum described the intended actions of the overall club “as the fight” against “the worldwide bugaboo, the High Cost of Living.” Similarly, one of the

³¹⁹ Florida *Times Union* 3/28/1920; Jacksonville *Metropolis* 4/5/1920; Jacksonville *Metropolis* 4/7/1920; Records of the Jacksonville City Council, April 7, 1920, located in the Basement of City Hall, Jacksonville, Florida.

³²⁰ The language of battle and war was also frequently present in popular antiprofitteering discourse.

club's resolutions spoke of the movement's intention of "attacking" increasing costs. The Jacksonville *Metropolis* exclaimed that the overall association "has declared war upon persons who are responsible for the unusually excessive cost of clothing." And, the Florida *Times Union* reported on the growth of the overall club as an organization focused on "combating the evil" of those driving up clothing prices and declared the movement "a new battle front" in the war against profiteering. Such discourse cast the "overall brigade" as a new chapter in a battle of Americanism against worldwide and domestic evil.³²¹



This depiction of the overall movement in the Chicago *Daily Journal* embodied the sentiment that representing hard work by wearing overalls as a protest against the H.C.L. was a demonstration of American patriotism.³²²

³²¹ A Mitchell Palmer to Edna White 10/31/1919, HCL-DOJ; Edith Strauss to "Madam" 11/9/1919, HCL-DOJ; Jacksonville *Metropolis* 4/3/1920; Florida *Times Union* 4/4/1920; Florida *Times Union* 4/8/1920; Jacksonville *Metropolis* 3/31/1920; Florida *Times Union* 4/4/1920.

³²² Chicago *Daily Journal* 4/21/1920.

After adding as many members to the association as possible, club leadership called for a parade of overall-clad citizens down the streets of Jacksonville. In actuality, it would be the second overall parade to occur in the city. In late March, fifty employees of the Drew Press Company led by E.D. Astin had marched in the streets in overalls while wearing “little placards” labeled “The Overall Club.” Now the overall club leadership envisioned something larger - participation of all members, two brass bands, speakers, the mayor and a motion picture company to film the event. Leaders first decided to hold the parade on Easter Sunday. Then, hoping for maximum publicity and participation, the club twice postponed the event until finally setting April 8 as the date.³²³

Before the parade, the association had to decide what to do with the increasing number of women who wanted to participate. In fact, women had the most experience with the strategy of using consumption to combat profiteering both during and after World War I, in large part because they were often the primary consumers in a household (see chapters 1 and 3). Not only had women dominated the ranks of U.S. Food Administration volunteers, they had formed the backbone of middle class voluntarism in the DOJ-HCL’s postwar strategy to reduce prices. Beyond the experiences of women in middle class consumer movements, women led numerous working class consumer campaigns, such as boycotts and consumer cooperatives, that had taken place recently before, or concurrent with the middle class overall movement.³²⁴

³²³ Jacksonville *Metropolis* 3/31/1920; Jacksonville *Metropolis* 4/3/1920.

³²⁴ See, Dana Frank, “Housewives, Socialists, and the Politics of Food: The 1917 New York of Living Protests” *Feminist Studies* 11:2 (Summer, 1985), and Dana Frank, *Purchasing Power: Consumer Organizing, Gender, and the Seattle Labor Movement, 1919-1929* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

Nevertheless, the overall movement was organized around what participants often described as the masculine symbol of hard work, and women protesters created an interesting dilemma. The Jacksonville Masons, a self-identifying “middle class” order, supported the movement, but lamented the idea of female participation. The notion of women in working clothes represented a “shocking” and “disgusting” “disregard for female attire” and “the elementary principles of ordinary decency.” According to the Masons, “the disgusting realism of the modern fashions is fast extinguishing in the hearts of all noble minded men that spirit of reverence and civility which regarded the women of other days as something mystic and divine.” In the early twentieth century, women generally did not even wear slacks and were expected to abide by strict standards of dress. Even the *Metropolis* at one point expressed ambivalence toward female participation, noting that “a demonstration with womanalls... would be not impressive, but effective.” However, the paper used no ambivalent language in reporting on “the moral support” of women in the campaign.

Ultimately, the club marginalized the participation of women. The club attempted to minimize the issue by stating, “women may dress as they please” while insisting that every man equip himself with a suit of overalls. An April 8 advertisement in the *Florida Times Union* similarly printed in bold letters: “EVERYBODY TURN OUT TODAY IN OVERALLS... Women and Children Come Along.” This created a persistent tension within the movement, as women were not considered equal participants even though they were often primary consumers in their households.

The actions of the Jacksonville overall club resembled the gendered divisions present in working class consumer movements of the period and added a new dimension.

Throughout the postwar period, Seattle unionists simultaneously asked working class women to change their consumption habits (the equivalent to a “speedup” in terms of their labor as household consumers) to aid consumer cooperatives, boycotts, and union label campaigns, and virtually ignored their needs. Feeling marginalized, women often did not enthusiastically participate, and these movements enjoyed only limited success. Whereas in the Seattle working class consumer movements men ignored the needs of female consumers, overall club members actually masculinized consumption of clothing by choosing a masculine symbol of protest. Participants and both favorable and cynical commentators declared the movement to be “a masculine effort.” Male leaders hindered the movement not by demanding “speedups” of female consumer labor, but, rather, by minimizing women’s roles in the consumption of male clothing.³²⁵

The Jacksonville parade lived up to its billing as “one of the most unique demonstrations held in the South.” On April 8, thousands of Jacksonville residents converged on Hemming Park to march in overalls. Led by Grand Marshall and police chief Captain Vinzant, they chanted condemnations of profiteers and the high cost of living while “a large number of people lined the streets or hung from windows in stores and business houses to see what was going on.” Two brass bands blared patriotic marches. E.E. Cohen of the Cohen Bros. Department Store filmed a short movie of the

³²⁵ Also suggesting that many middle class Jacksonville residents were uncomfortable with encouraging women to participate in the movement, when the Jacksonville Rotary Club held a “Ladies’ Night Party” on May 4, 1920, participants “were requested to wear dark coats, white trousers and white shoes.” “A History of the Rotary Club of Jacksonville Florida Club No. 41,” pg. 26, Jacksonville Historical Society; The Fraternal Record of the Jacksonville Masons Odd Fellowship for May of 1920, Florida Collection, Jacksonville Public Library; Jacksonville *Metropolis* 4/13/1920 and 3/31/1920; Florida *Times Union* 4/8/1920; Elyria (OH) *Chronicle Telegram* 4/24/1920; For discussion of working class consumer movements in Seattle during the post-World War I period, see Dana Frank, *Purchasing Power: Consumer Organizing, Gender, and the Seattle Labor Movement, 1919-1929* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

event and forwarded it to a current events film company. Onlookers likely cheered as members of the club carted a stretcher around the park carrying a dummy with “High Prices” written on its body. Thomas Brooks delivered the keynote speech and Mayor Martin issued a proclamation stating “I feel it incumbent upon me to call special attention to these resolutions [of the overall club], and to the parade, and to ask for both the most earnest consideration of our people.”³²⁶

The signs and banners raised by marchers demonstrated the multifaceted nature of the movement, but also hinted at its potential to be co-opted as a middle class movement, disdainful of the working class. Most signs focused on profiteers, such as one stating “demand value for your money.” Others called for thrift by using slogans like “save your money” or “get the saving habit,” or appealed to patriotism and antiradicalism by asserting “let’s get rid of the red menace and be 100 per cent American by deporting the profiteer.” Yet, one banner foreshadowed a major characteristic of the movement as it spread from south Florida and entered the national scene. Taking a stab at the working class for the supposed role of underproduction in causing high clothing prices, one marcher’s sign declared “dignify the overall.” For some at the parade, it was those donning the costume of productive labor, rather than those wearing overalls by trade, who brought dignity to the garb.³²⁷

³²⁶ Jacksonville *Metropolis* 3/31/1920; Florida *Times Union* 4/8/1920; Florida *Times Union* 4/9/1920.

³²⁷ It is worth noting that as Americans across the country donned overalls as part of a middle class movement, the original Jacksonville movement discussed class more pointedly. Some citizens followed suit of the national movement and approvingly associated the overall movement with disdain for labor. One resident proposed transforming the overall clubs into “Strike Breakers Clubs.” In a letter to the editor to the Jacksonville *Metropolis*, she referred to strikers as “a disgrace to civilization,” and “black in the heart.” Unions “with their endless strikes, try to demoralize their own flesh and blood by every means in their power.” A few workers responded by further inflaming class conflict. One asserted that the original writer lacked the necessary dignity to be a member of the producing class, instead belonging to a “second class”

Spread of the Early Movement: Tampa

Before the movement spread to the rest of the United States, the city of Tampa spurred its growth. In fact, Tampa embraced the movement early enough to confuse newspapers throughout the country into calling it “The Tampa Idea.” Tampa served as a logical site for a grassroots and increasingly middle class movement. The formation of overall clubs continued a tradition of middle class grassroots activism that, Nancy Hewitt notes, adapted itself to constantly changing local circumstances. Over the previous decades, Tampanians had created organizations to address controversy over immigration, labor, urbanization, religion and patriotism. These groups had featured both combinations and divisions according to class, race and gender. How each organization formed, networked and fissured, Hewitt argues, depended chiefly on immediate historical context. In 1920, the immediate problem facing middle class Tampanians was the HCL.³²⁸

The increasingly anti-labor tone of the overall movement resembled the ideology behind some previous forms of grassroots activism in Tampa. From the late nineteenth century into the 1920s, elite and middle class Tampa residents formed “citizens committees” to promote anti-labor vigilantism. Robert Ingalls describes these actions as “establishment violence” designed to maintain the social and economic order of Tampa.

of “idlers,” consisting of “non-producing” workers, and individuals live on “invested interests,” “titles,” and “political intrigues.” Such individuals had “no conception of the struggles of the toiler or producing classes.” Other letters replied by referencing the oppressive condition of laborers around the world, one declaring that workers “must fight, and unions are his only weapons.” *Florida Times Union* 4/9/1920, 4/4/1920, 4/3/1920, 4/20/1920; *Tampa Tribune* 3/29/1920; Letters to the Editor, *Jacksonville Metropolis* 4/19/1920, 4/20/1920, 4/22/1920, 4/23/1920.

³²⁸ Nancy Hewitt, *Southern Discomfort: Women’s Activism in Tampa, Florida, 1880s-1920s* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2003).

Seeking to prevent tobacco companies, which constituted the backbone of the local economy, from moving elsewhere because of labor unrest, these committees intimidated and even lynched labor agitators. While the overall clubs were initiated in Jacksonville, it was in Tampa, with a tradition of grassroots activism and anti-labor vigilance, where the overall movement grew and received national press.³²⁹

The Tampa movement began on March 29, 1920 at a meeting place called “The Horseshoe.” A few men began discussing high prices, and before long a crowd congregated to weigh in on the issue. One of the men mentioned the unique strategy Jacksonville residents had chosen to address the problem. Within “a few minutes a score of men were enrolled in the club and they started out to get more.” Hafford Jones, a fire insurance agent and one of the more animated participants in the conversation, left the encounter as the president of the new Tampa overall club, telling residents, “Down with the new Easter suits; on with the overalls.”³³⁰

Wasting no time, the club began planning for an Easter overall demonstration. They requested that churchgoers “bloom out” by wearing overalls and solicited the participation of “doctors, lawyers, preachers and business men,” but invited all to join. The club held meetings and informed the local press that new members could sign up by leaving their names at “The Horseshoe.” Similar to the Jacksonville club, leadership and the local media did not propose that women wear overalls, but did encourage them to “adopt some method of combating the issue.” Some local women responded by forming

³²⁹ See Chapter 3. Robert Ingalls, *Urban Vigilantes in New South: Tampa, 1882-1936* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1988).

³³⁰ Tampa Tribune 3/31/1920; United States Census, Year: 1920; Census Place: Tampa Ward 2, Hillsborough, Florida; Roll: T625_222; Page: 2A; Enumeration District: 39; Image: 803.

the “Calico Club.” In addition to donning calico on Easter Sunday, the calico club sought to pressure the Tampa School Board to encourage women to wear the garb in place of more expensive dresses at graduation.³³¹

On the morning of April 4th, scores of Tampa residents got ready for church. Some pulled the price tags off recently purchased outfits, while others reached into the back of their closets for their oldest work clothes. Before church services numerous overall-clad Tampa residents converged on Franklin Street and walked toward the bandstand in the courthouse yard. They were led by a group of soldiers and an Army Lieutenant, who served as Grand Marshall of the parade. High school girls and “bungalow apron girls” followed closely behind. Observers had expected to see the city firefighters, but they were responding to a blaze in a different part of town. Some were also disappointed by the absence of a promised “mystery” band. However, they remained energized by a few speeches on the high cost of living, including one by Charles Metcalf, who spoke of the inability of the “salaried man” to “make ends meet.” At the conclusion of festivities, Attorney Lee J. Gibson presented a petition to Mayor McKay that protested clothing profiteering and the high cost of living.³³²

Even if participants organized in part because of the inability of the government to address rising prices, much of their focus remained on the need for government solutions. The petition presented by the Tampa overall club to the mayor, Governor Sidney Catts, and Florida’s two senators called for each “to use your good office” to end

³³¹ Tampa *Tribune* 4/1/1920, 4/2/1920.

³³² Dressing in aprons was one of the many ways in which women participated in the overall movement. Tampa *Tribune* 4/3/1920, 4/4/1920.

profiteering. The petition asserted that signers would cease to purchase clothing “until the different branches of government show an honest effort to curtail profiteering.” The mandate, however, provided no suggestions as to how civic bodies should or could achieve this aim. Through grassroots organization, Tampans took matters into their own hands, but ultimately looked to the expansion of the state into economic affairs to effect real change.³³³

Tampa’s demonstration attracted the attention of the national press. Numerous newspapers throughout the United States described the Tampa movement as led by “business and professional men,” “marching” with “spirit” and determination to “fight,” “battle,” or “combat the rapidly rising prices.” Even a Canadian newspaper reflected on the grit of the Tampa overall club, declaring “If someone would come along with a cartload of sabots [wooden shoe] then folks might buy and take revenge on the boot-sellers.” Within days, newspapers began referring to the formation of overall clubs as “The Tampa Idea,” “as the whole country now knows of it and has characterized it.” Through the press, Hafford Jones became the face that inspired what soon became a nationwide movement. In spite of originating the movement, the Jacksonville club was no more significant in the public eye than overall campaigns that would materialize in Detroit, Kansas City, San Francisco or anywhere else in North America.³³⁴

³³³ Tampa *Tribune* 4/3/1920, 4/5/1920.

³³⁴ For examples of national press coverage of the Tampa overall movement see Providence *Journal* 4/5/1920, New York *Times* 4/13/1920, 4/19/1920, Chicago *Tribune* 4/5/1920, Los Angeles *Times* 4/19/1920, Christian Science Monitor 4/13/1920; Record *Journal* of Douglas County (Colorado) 4/9/1920, Weekly *Ignacio Chieftan* (Colorado) 4/9/1920, Ogden (Utah) *Standard-Examiner* 4/14/1920, Lethbridge *Daily Herald* (Alberta, Canada) 4/20/1920, Syracuse *Post-Standard* 4/8/1920, Portsmouth (Ohio) *Daily Times* 4/5/1920, Helena *Independent* 4/5/1920; Ironwood (Michigan) *Daily Globe* 4/3/1920; *Industrial News Survey* April 5-12, 1920, Connecticut State Library.

The Tampa overall campaign focused primarily on the plight of the middle class. Accordingly, the leadership and first members consisted of two managers, an attorney, an insurance agent, the president of the Electric Motor Company, a clerk, a real estate agent, and an employee of the Masons Lodge. On March 31, Hafford Jones reported the club had gained the support of shipyard and railroad workers, but indicated that such support was ancillary to “businessmen and salaried men, who are really the greatest sufferers.” Thus, it comes as no surprise that newspapers such as the *Tampa Times* described the movement as made up of “business and professional men” One letter to the *Times* elaborated on the reasons behind such class divisions. The writer declared, “it is not our class who is making the trouble but the ones getting the fat [pay] envelopes.”³³⁵ Regardless of their motivations, Tampa club members made very little effort to coordinate with working class consumers. In fact, months before the onset of the overall movement, middle class Tampans failed to lend support to a somewhat similar grassroots effort to reduce clothing prices. In October of 1919, Tampa cigar workers had instituted a new clothes boycott to protest profiteering, only to receive no support from the

³³⁵ For composition of Tampa overall club: (names and professions taken from report of formation of overall club) Frank Hunter= Manager, Oscar P. Hillburn= Lawyer, Earl King= Insurance Manager, Guy Clarkson= Real Estate Agent, James Dyke= unknown profession with the mason lodge, Harry Wellacott=Clerk, Hafford Jones= Agent; The intended participation of firemen in the parade serves as the main example of working class participation. The letter to the *Times* seems to suggest ambivalence toward the movement from the writer, but indicates class division in suggested strategies of how to undertake consumer organizing in Tampa during April, 1920. United States, Bureau of the Census, *Fourteenth Census of the United States Taken in the Year 1920*; Karl H. Grismer, *Tampa: A History of the City of Tampa and the Tampa Bay Region of Florida* (St. Petersburg: St. Petersburg Printing Company, 1950), 397; *Tampa Tribune* 3/31/1920; *Tampa Tribune* 4/1/1920; *Tampa Times* 4/12/1920; *Tampa Tribune* 4/4/1920; *Tampa Times* 4/20/1920.

predominantly white collar Rotary and Kiwanis clubs, and rebuke from the mainstream press.³³⁶

Even unsympathetic local merchants defined the overall campaign as a middle class movement. One clothing merchant called middle class efforts to manipulate the consumer economy “a fool joke.” Salaried workers could abstain from new clothing purchases, the merchant argued, but a well-compensated working class would undercut middle class consumer organizing. “Just as long as folks who work for wages demand \$15 silk shirts, \$3 silk neckties and \$2.50 silk socks,” the merchant declared “they will get them.” He further added, “and while they’re buying that sort of stuff you may lay your heaviest bet on their also buying the best suits of clothing the market affords.” The working class, therefore, could not only engender the high cost of clothing through strikes, but also through irresponsible, spendthrift consumption.³³⁷

To participants in the early Jacksonville and Tampa movements, the overall garb served not just as a weapon for economic equality, but also as a symbol of moral fairness—a promotion of hard work and thrift. It was no accident that the first parades were set to

³³⁶ The boycott, endorsed by the Central Trades and Labor Assembly, received a significant amount of negative publicity from the *Tampa Tribune*. The *Tribune* carried editorial headlines, such as “A ‘Boycott’ is Doubly Dangerous,” “Shame on the Boycotters” and “Boycotting Unfair.” A statement that “Sane saving and prudent purchasing will accomplish far more than belligerent buying” represented the *Tribune’s* initial reaction to the boycott. Their opposition grew more intense with statements, such as “those who have started this unholy thing...have no right to call themselves American citizens, and should be ashamed to meet the average patriotic man or woman even on the streets,” and “No true-hearted American patriot will use the ‘boycott’ as a weapon...any sooner than he will sacrifice his honor to keep flying the red flag of disruption and ruin.” Tom Hammond, a member of the Kiwanis Club (and employed as a real estate agent), blamed the situation on labor agitators and made a motion that the president “commence an investigation” into the situation, “calling on any members he wishes” for assistance.” The motion was carried. *Tampa Tribune* 10/27/1919, 10/28/1919, 10/29/1919, 10/30/1919, 11/3/1919, 11/4/1919, 11/5/1919; United States, Bureau of the Census, *Fourteenth Census of the United States Taken in the Year 1920*; *El International* 14 November 1919.

³³⁷ *New York Times* 4/19/1920.

occur on Easter, a day in which the pulpit could aid in publicizing and expanding the movement.³³⁸ The Jacksonville overall club sent letters to every minister within city limits to encourage them to wear the attire and urge them to preach on how conservation could reduce the HCL. Such a strategy held great potential for success. First, popular writing on the high cost of living frequently highlighted the plight of ministers alongside of clerks, lawyers, doctors and people in other salaried professions. More importantly, the symbolic meaning of the overall garb appealed to many Christian preachers, whose Sunday morning sermons recounted New Testament tales celebrating thrift and discouraging greed, gluttony and sloth. The use of overalls represented one way to relate these lessons to everyday life. As Josiah Morse, professor of Religion at the University of South Carolina, would later state, “I look upon it as a religious movement.”³³⁹



³³⁸ Easter also served as an auspicious day to collectively inaugurate the movement because overalls would stand out especially on a day in which people normally wore their “Sunday best.”

³³⁹ *Florida Times Union* 4/14/1920; *Columbia State* 5/8/1920.

The Rev. Rollin S. Tuttle of the Medford (MA) Hillside Methodist Church pictured preaching in white denim, serves as one of many examples of ministers using the garb to connect biblical messages to the problem of the high cost of clothing.³⁴⁰

Many early participants in the overall movement drew inspiration from the story of John the Baptist, a biblical figurehead of thrift. One banner in the Jacksonville parade, for example, declared “John the Baptist went to Church in sack cloth and ashes and so will we.” John the Baptist galvanized club members, because he wore clothing made of camel’s hair, told tax-collectors to “exact no more than which is appointed to you,” advised soldiers to “be content with your wages,” and told the rich not to hoard. John specifically discouraged hoarding of clothing by exclaiming, “He that hath two coats, let him impart to him that hath none.” Nearly two thousand years later, these were the concerns of a citizenry fuming over profiteering.³⁴¹

Before long, speakers from both the pulpit and the soapbox were gaining fame as they appealed to Americans to wear overalls in order to fight two central foes of the immediate postwar middle class: capitalist profiteers and organized labor. Perhaps no other figure embodied the enthusiastic, yet self-serving, leadership of this increasingly popular movement more than Noel Mitchell, the president of the St. Petersburg, FL, overall club.

“The Sand Man” in Overalls

³⁴⁰ Boston *Globe* 4/19/1920.

³⁴¹ Luke 3:10- Luke 3:14 quoted from *The Holy Bible Containing the Old and New Testaments* (King James version) (New York: American Bible Society, 1963), 878; Tampa *Tribune* 4/10/1920.

The home of Noel Mitchell was in many ways an unusual New South city. Although only 30 miles across the bay from Tampa, St. Petersburg seemed a world apart. Lacking a major productive industry like Tampa's cigar trade, St. Petersburg resembled a backcountry town, until tourists began to choose its sunny location as a popular destination in the early twentieth century. By 1920, the approximate beginning of the great Florida Land Boom, St. Petersburg had witnessed the arrival of scores of northern tourists. In the midst of these changes, St. Petersburg was neither a backcountry town nor a large city. If one thing was certain, the city's future would center not on manufacturing, but on selling sunshine.³⁴²

Aggressive city promotion by the St. Petersburg *Times*, the St. Petersburg *Independent*, the Chamber of Commerce, and its leading citizens recruited a new, diverse, and itinerant citizenry. The arrival of tourists and winter residents added regionalism to race, gender and class, as markers of distinction, creating what Raymond Arsenault calls "distinct subcommunities." Many northern transplants felt that existing residents were quaint and uncouth. Mutual resentment and regional differences, Arsenault argues, created a "cultural tension" that "was a constant undertone in local life." Local politicians and prominent citizens had to appeal to these divergent groups, and the surest way to achieve such a task was to foster more sensational city promotion. Newcomers migrated at least in part because of this grand advertising, and long-standing residents depended on

³⁴² The city did embody the Jim Crow life that could be found in early twentieth century Tampa. African Americans lived, shopped, ate and were buried in separate locations from white residents, with violations of accepted propriety enforced by both the law and vigilante justice. Raymond Arsenault, *St. Petersburg and the Florida Dream 1888-1950* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1996), 119-209.

it economically. While St. Petersburg's subcommunities clashed, each ultimately had an interest in selling the city. Nobody sold St. Petersburg better than Noel Mitchell.³⁴³

A shrewd businessman, Mitchell drew on his eccentricity at a young age to build his entrepreneurial enterprises. Mitchell was born in Block Island, Rhode Island, and moved to Providence as a teenager to take business courses and work for a sewing machine company. By the age of eighteen, Mitchell had created the "Original Atlantic City Salt Water Taffy" company, first selling his product while on the road exploring northeastern resort towns. Mitchell's company soon took off nationally and he began to develop other enterprises. Among them were a circus "freak show," amusement parks, and numerous real estate ventures.³⁴⁴

One day, Mitchell's wife overheard heard a fellow shopper in a Block Island store praise St. Petersburg. Noel Mitchell had a longstanding affinity for Florida, dating back to his visits to market taffy, but he preferred Daytona Beach as an eventual destination for his family. The couple decided to settle the disagreement on a coin flip. Fate would have

³⁴³ Boosterism took many forms. One individual amused local residents and hoped to encourage tourism by holding man versus alligator wrestling matches both in St. Petersburg and on the road. Another prominent citizen promised to give away free newspapers "every day the sun doesn't shine on St. Petersburg." Through such actions, both individuals gained greater visibility for the city, and also for themselves. In the first decades of the twentieth century, it became clear that promoting the "sunshine city" represented perhaps the most certain way to gain prominence and power in St. Petersburg. Many of its early leaders made a living through real estate and advertised the city through creative advertising techniques, often creating spectacles. Noel Mitchell was no exception. Raymond Arsenault, *St. Petersburg and the Florida Dream 1888-1950* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1996), 120, 139, 145.

³⁴⁴ St. Petersburg *Times* 5/22/1960; Karl Grismer, *The Story of St. Petersburg: the History of Lower Pinellas Peninsula and the Sunshine City* (St. Petersburg: P.K. Smith, 1948), 300-1; Scott Taylor Hartzell, *St. Petersburg: Voices of America* (Mount Pleasant, S.C.: Arcadia, 2002), 52-3.

it that the Mitchells would move to St. Petersburg, and the city would never be the same.³⁴⁵

The individual described as “colorful, zany, a genius, an eccentric a man with a slogan or a gimmick for promotion of everything,” turned heads immediately. After he became the first man in St. Petersburg to pay \$1,000 for a lot of land, residents began referring to him as “the Crazy Yankee.” Within a few years, Mitchell bought numerous properties, including the beachfront land known as “treasure island.” He established a real estate office on Fourth Street and Central Avenue, advertising himself as “the Sand Man, the Man Who Never Sleeps.” The “Sand Man” gained even more notoriety when he came up with the idea for city park benches. The first bright orange bench (later repainted green) stood in front of his real estate office, encouraging tired city strollers to rest and peruse his advertisements for available properties. A seat on his bench was in such high demand, that crowds would converge, each person waiting for one to become vacant. In the meantime, they would “talk, bask in the sunshine, flirt a little...,” a scene that became known as “Mitchell’s prayer meeting.” Very quickly, the benches graced the entire city.³⁴⁶

Mitchell also spent many of his waking hours promoting St. Petersburg to residents elsewhere in the United States. His boosterism expanded beyond the soapbox to a wide variety of methods. Mitchell placed postcards that depicted St. Petersburg as a

³⁴⁵ Raymond Arsenault, *St. Petersburg and the Florida Dream 1888-1950* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1996), 136-40; Karl Grismer, *The Story of St. Petersburg: the History of Lower Pinellas Peninsula and the Sunshine City* (St. Petersburg: P.K. Smith, 1948), 300-1.

³⁴⁶ St. Petersburg Times 5/22/1960; Karl Grismer, *The Story of St. Petersburg: the History of Lower Pinellas Peninsula and the Sunshine City* (St. Petersburg: P.K. Smith, 1948), 300-1; Scott Taylor Hartzell, *St. Petersburg: Voices of America* (Mount Pleasant, S.C.: Arcadia, 2002), 52-3; Raymond Arsenault, *St. Petersburg and the Florida Dream 1888-1950* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1996), 136-40.

desirable destination in each of his taffy containers, dug into his own pockets to place an ad in *Saturday Evening Post* for the “sunshine city,” filmed a 1912 city celebration of George Washington’s birthday and sent copies of the movie around the county, and constructed billboards for St. Petersburg tourism throughout the east coast. Years later, Newton O’Berry, an associate of Mitchell, recalled one of his billboards on a main corner in West Haven, CT that displayed a map of Florida with St. Petersburg “as the only spot on the map.” According to O’Berry, “Miami howled about it.”³⁴⁷



Mitchell promoted his personal real estate business and St. Petersburg tarpon fishing through spectacles such as that pictured above (taken in 1908).³⁴⁸

Of course, Mitchell’s boosterism of St. Petersburg also served as a means for self-promotion. Mitchell embraced nicknames like “the crazy Yankee” and created a number of his own slogans to gain greater notoriety. On each of his green benches, Mitchell printed “Mitchell, the Sand Man. The Honest Real Estate Dealer. The Man With a

³⁴⁷ St. Petersburg *Times* 5/22/1960; Scott Taylor Hartzell, *St. Petersburg: Voices of America* (Mount Pleasant, S.C.: Arcadia, 2002), 53.

³⁴⁸ Karl Grismer. *The Story of St. Petersburg: the History of Lower Pinellas Peninsula and the Sunshine City* (St. Petersburg: P.K. Smith, 1948).

Conscience. He Never Sleeps.” On other occasions, Mitchell referred to himself as “The Singing Auctioneer,” or implied that under his leadership “a star will guide you.”

Mitchell also used anecdotal fame to heighten his local celebrity. He and his wife became the first to travel in an automobile from Tampa to St. Petersburg, a three and a half day trip that included flat tires and a forest fire, among other obstacles. In 1914, Mitchell became the world’s second commercial airline passenger. In an attempt to become the first, he agreed to pay \$175, only to be outbid by A.C. Pheil, a former mayor, who offered \$400.³⁴⁹

It seemed only natural that Mitchell would enter politics, using his flair for creative advertising to enhance his many campaigns. Mitchell began his political career in 1916 by becoming a candidate for governor in a losing effort. Shortly after, he entered the race for Sheriff, running on the curious slogan “See No Evil, Speak No Evil, Hear No Evil.” He sold thousands of toy Siamese monkeys to accompany the slogan, much to the chagrin of political opponents who felt that the catchphrase was inappropriate for law enforcement. Mitchell lost the race, but continued to attempt to appeal to the masses by casting himself as an eccentric man of the people.³⁵⁰

The strategy worked to his advantage in the mayoral election of 1920. Mitchell was able to get away with holding a number of controversial positions, because many St. Petersburg residents viewed him as a lovable maverick. It was widely believed that

³⁴⁹ St. Petersburg *Times* 5/22/1960; Raymond Arsenault, *St. Petersburg and the Florida Dream 1888-1950* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1996), 136; Scott Taylor Hartzell, *St. Petersburg: Voices of America* (Mount Pleasant, S.C.: Arcadia, 2002), 53.

³⁵⁰ Scott Taylor Hartzell, *St. Petersburg: Voices of America* (Mount Pleasant, S.C.: Arcadia, 2002), 53; St. Petersburg *Times* 5/22/1960.

Mitchell had ultimately done more to promote St. Petersburg than perhaps any other citizen. Accordingly, his uncharacteristic views in some ways added to his appeal as a “colorful, zany” and, for many, likeable, man. And, he did indeed express controversial positions. In the context of the first red scare, the Jim Crow South and, at best, mixed local opinion of organized labor, one of Mitchell’s newspaper campaign advertisements pushed for, “Free speech,” “Justice to all, white or black,” and “a living wage.” But, above all he was the “people’s candidate,” who had shown “loyalty and boosting for this city for this city for the last 17 years.” On April 6, Mitchell was pleased to learn that he had been elected mayor by a margin of nearly 17% of the vote.³⁵¹

After the election, Mitchell realized that gaining the approval of residents who were less willing to accept his controversial views would be a formidable task. The *Independent*, a paper that was partially financially backed by Mitchell, noted how those unsupportive of Mitchell made “it appear that he was a regular devil with horns and a tail and would devour the city.” Others called the election “a calamity.” But, the *Independent* reiterated why Mitchell had been elected: “He has been for many years a persistent and active booster for St. Petersburg” and “has the good of the city at heart.” Mitchell did not have to win the support of organized labor, African Americans or women, whose newly granted right to vote helped to propel him to victory. To become more popular and powerful, Mitchell needed to appeal to a segment of the middle class that was disdainful of organized labor, but willing to adopt unusual political strategies if the cause was worthy. The overall garb provided him with an opportunity to apply his talents as an

³⁵¹ St. Petersburg *Independent* 4/3/1920; St. Petersburg *Times* advertisement undated; Records of the St. Petersburg City Council, April 1920, St. Petersburg City Hall.

eccentric leader to a popular and increasingly middle class movement. As a leader of the movement, Mitchell promoted thrift and hard work even as he developed a celebrity image around promoting the consumerism of St. Petersburg tourism. Mitchell and middle class Americans did not cease to participate in consumer culture. They made these nineteenth century middle class producer values a part of their consumer identity.³⁵²

As the president of the St. Petersburg overall club, Mitchell took an active role in building the movement, even as he used it for self-promotion. In the same vein as his experiences with the automobile and the airplane before, Mitchell was never one to pass up a chance to become the face of a new social fashion. In this case, he would literally embrace a new fashion to gain favor as the local leader of what the St. Petersburg *Times* called “organized protest,” and “rebellion against the cost of living” that took “the nation by storm.”³⁵³

By the time Mitchell took charge of the St. Petersburg movement, it had already gained a clear middle class orientation. Mitchell’s own *Independent*, for example, pointedly declared, “The men who now propose to wear overalls are the salaried men and those with fixed incomes who have been caught between capital and labor and are being ground to jelly.” They “are professional and business men, clerks and newspaper men.” The *Independent* further stated its disdain for the irresponsibility of organized labor by attacking blue collar spending habits. “Union workmen,” the paper asserted, “are drawing big pay” and “not saving anything.” Similar statements arose from commentary on the

³⁵² St. Petersburg *Independent* 4/8/1920; Scott Taylor Hartzell, *St. Petersburg: Voices of America* (Mount Pleasant, S.C.: Arcadia, 2002), 53.

³⁵³ St. Petersburg *Times* 4/27/1920.

movement virtually anywhere in the United States. According to such statements, participants in the overall movement simultaneously resented working class consumer indulgence and desired the ability to do the same themselves (even if promoting the image of thrift)- to maintain the visual markers of their class positioning. The Chicago *Tribune* described overall clubs as made up of “white collar boys,” who want “to see if [they] cannot feel like a carpenter or a bricklayer or a plumber.” Similarly, the Lowell, MA *Sun* suggested that the movement represented a an uprising of “professional men” borrowing “the badge” of “hard soiling manual labor” to “demand of the powers of government that the necessities of life be placed within the financial reach” of them.³⁵⁴

Akin to elsewhere, under the leadership of Mitchell, the St. Petersburg overall movement used the church as a venue to promote the messages of production and thrift. At meetings, leaders encouraged participants to wear the garment to church and other religious functions. One account of a minister wearing overalls at the pulpit asserted, “not the least particular did the strange apparel detract from the eloquence of his tongue...while he was expounding a special passage of the Gospel according to Luke, his out-of-the-ordinary robing was in evidence-preaching a silent, yet nevertheless an effective sermon.” Whether delivered though a sermon on the thrift of John the Baptist or on the theme of greed in the story of Adam and Eve, the message of the overall movement continued to be promoted through the pulpit.³⁵⁵

³⁵⁴ St. Petersburg *Independent* 4/14/1920; Elyria, Ohio *Chronicle-Telegram* 4/24/1920; Lowell *Sun* 4/25/1920; Appleton *Post-Crescent* 4/17/1920.

³⁵⁵ St. Petersburg *Times* 4/14/1920, 5/2/1920.

Mitchell's efforts as a leader of the St. Petersburg movement surpassed those of many overall club organizers. As the mayor-elect, he took it upon himself to give every St. Petersburg resident a chance to don denim. On April 15, Mitchell announced that he would take orders for army surplus overalls for fifty cents a pair. He used City Hall to as the venue in which to secure orders and distribute the overalls, obtained from the South Carolina Army Warehouse Co. Two hundred people took him up on the offer, with more willing buyers to follow. Mitchell also set up the first major St. Petersburg overall club meeting at City Hall, which drew approximately 400 citizens. Shortly after, residents flocked to sign pledges to buy no new clothes. Also included in the standard pledge was a declaration that blamed high prices in large part on "lack of production."³⁵⁶

Following the meeting, Mitchell's *Independent* identified the culprits for high prices and explained the cultural significance of overalls. "Overalls spells work," the *Independent* declared. If true to the garb, "One doesn't loaf when one dons overalls. One produces." The paper continued by lamenting, "never was there a time when this country needed more work" and "greater production." William J. Carpenter, a local minister, was just one white collar resident that seconded this opinion. In support of the overall movement, Carpenter wrote, "we have too many [people] who never do enough real hard work." To individuals like Carpenter and the editors of the *Independent*, overalls provided the means for a clothing boycott, but also carried the important cultural significance of promoting diligent production.³⁵⁷

³⁵⁶ St. Petersburg *Times* 5/5/1920, St. Petersburg *Independent* 4/15/1920, 4/16/1920.

³⁵⁷ The St. Petersburg *Times*, the rival of the *Independent*, expressed a similar understanding of the movement, but did not lend its support, suggesting that it was merely a fad. One *Times* editorial asserted, "The overall attire will be adopted by the middle classes for a short while and then discarded." At least a

Inducing politicians to embrace the overall movement was precisely the aim of its participants. Although club members organized in response to perceived incompetence and inaction from the state, they ultimately still believed that lowering prices would require stronger governmental action. Politicians like Mitchell did not turn a blind eye. Many local, state and national statesmen seized the opportunity to gain mass appeal by embracing the movement- and yet not pursuing new sweeping government programs to reduce clothing prices. In spite of his support of the overall movement, Mitchell suffered from increasingly hostile coverage of the movement from the rival newspaper, the *St. Petersburg Times*. Ultimately, his position as the face of the St. Petersburg overall movement did not help him in his quest to gain greater appeal. Clothing prices remained high and he did little, after actually taking office, to address the problem. His pronouncements against profiteers fueled expectations that the local government could make a difference, and residents continued to send scores of letters to his office complaining of hoarding and profiteering of clothing and other commodities.³⁵⁸

Yet, from the first day of his short run as mayor, Mitchell had larger problems. At the first city council meeting he got into a fist fight with a city employee over an appointment for sanitation officer. During the scuffle, Dr. W. J. Tanner, who had been denied the position, broke Mitchell's wrist. In spite of his injury, Mitchell did not hold a

couple local clothing merchants also doubted the efficacy of the movement. One of them, Arthur Johnson, of the Johnson clothing store, noted, "I can't see that the club will have any effect on the price of clothes, for we are not able to keep up with our orders for suits." Letter to the editor *St. Petersburg Times* 4/29/1920; United States Census, Year: 1920; Census Place: *St Petersburg, Pinellas, Florida*; Roll: T625_229; Page: 4B; Enumeration District: 134; Image: 650; *St. Petersburg Independent* 4/24/1920; *St. Petersburg Times* 4/15/1920, 4/16/1920.

³⁵⁸ *St. Petersburg Times* 4/28/1920.

grudge. According to Tanner, “Next Day, Mitchell saw me across the street and hollered ‘Hi Doc, I didn’t know you had it in you.’” Facing a hostile City Council, Mitchell managed to create more trouble by authorizing the use of city property for a “tent city” for migrants who traveled to St. Petersburg to enjoy its warm winters. The visitors, described as “tin can tourists,” enjoyed free city water, lighting, garbage collection and bathrooms and were known by their tendency to cook beans over a fire as a means of daily subsistence. Mitchell’s actions led the angry City Council to pass a resolution “in favor of no tent city within corporate limits.” A “liquor party in the mayor’s office” finally paved the way for Mitchell’s political demise. Mitchell’s opponents jumped at the opportunity to amass the necessary signatures to submit a petition for a recall election. On the December 20, 1920 election, Mitchell lost in a landslide, receiving 39% of the vote, to Frank Pulver’s 60%.³⁵⁹

The remainder of Mitchell’s life was symbolic of both his glory as perhaps the city’s most recognizable man, and the humiliation of his political downfall. Still a memorable figure, Mitchell generated headlines by running for City Council in 1935. Soundly defeated, Mitchell again found himself at odds with the authorities, this time for becoming so rowdy at a beer party that “a sanity petition” had to be taken out. Mitchell, whose sanity had been confirmed, made one final push for glory by announcing his candidacy for governor in 1936. Just a month later, a police officer found him passed out on one of his very own green benches. The irony was not lost on the public. In court, the

³⁵⁹ St. Petersburg *Times* 5/22/1960; Records of the St. Petersburg City Council 6/9/1920, p.301 date unknown, 5/9/1921, 12/20/1921, St. Petersburg City Hall; Scott Taylor Hartzell, *St. Petersburg: Voices of America* (Mount Pleasant, S.C.: Arcadia, 2002), 53; Raymond Arsenault, *St. Petersburg and the Florida Dream 1888-1950* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1996), 189.

arresting officer stated, “I straightened him out three times but each time he fell over again.” Mitchell then stood before the judge and exclaimed, “I suffer from auto-intoxication and after I eat a big meal I usually relapse into slumber.” “What’s more,” Mitchell continued, “the St. Petersburg Police Department has been persecuting me for years.” Mitchell did not get another chance to rebuild his political career. Within months, his health declined and he died of pneumonia. In spite of Mitchell’s recent brush with headlines, journalist Paul Davis recalled, “many old friends did not even know of his passing.”³⁶⁰

Mitchell’s efforts embodied those of many of the prominent leaders of the overall movement. While middle class participants passionately rallied against high prices, those who rose to the forefront of the movement often basked in publicity. The movement provided yet another means for the Noel Mitchells of the country to generate headlines that would associate them with a cause of the masses.

The Overall Movement as National Popular Culture

By the third week of April, the overall movement had become a major feature of national popular culture. Virtually every newspaper in the United States chronicled the growth of the movement on almost a daily basis. Magazines, including the *Nation*, *Life*, *Literary Digest*, the *Review*, *Outlook*, the *Independent* and *Current Opinion*, offered numerous articles discussing the new use of overalls. Analysis of the movement appeared in academic journals and more indirectly in fiction. Organizations such as the Oakland

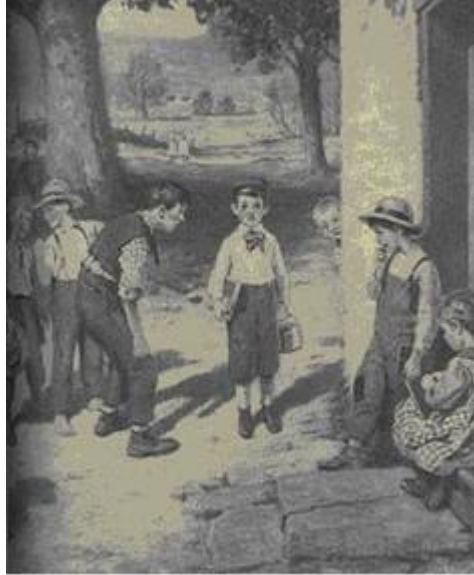
³⁶⁰ St. Petersburg *Times* 5/1/1936, 5/22/1960.

Housewives League and Norfolk Federal Employees Union passed resolutions urging members and local business and professional men to wear denim and for the state to help reduce clothing prices. In fact, the overall movement expanded beyond American popular culture. Clubs, demonstrations and press coverage surfaced in Canada, Great Britain, Argentina, and France.³⁶¹

Wearing overalls had become such popular fad that college students and even elementary and secondary school students formed clubs and donned denim to school. Overall clubs were formed at colleges ranging from Wesleyan College to the University of Texas, Austin. At Wesleyan, students punished club members who were seen to be wearing normal clothes by throwing them into a local pond. Senator Nathaniel Dial of South Carolina took special notice of their efforts and the impact of high prices on their parents. Dial declared to the Senate, "It is an encouraging thought to see the school and college boys falling so readily into line. Sometimes the young are too inexperienced and too self-centered to consider the pocketbooks of their elders; but not so now." The junior class of Passaic High School in New Jersey was one of many secondary schools to designate overalls and calico as the official clothing for prom. At Chicago's Lakeview High School, Harry Rumsfeld and Frank Pollen, both members of the Junior Chamber of Commerce, formed an overall club and graced school hallways in the clothing of labor. While some students suggested that they wear the garb to graduation, another poked fun

³⁶¹ In the case of the Norfolk Federal Employees Union, the Secretary of the Navy "authorized the sale in Norfolk and vicinity of twenty thousand suits of overalls at three dollars per suit" at the urging of the Norfolk leadership. They, in turn, wrote to other federal employee organizations to encourage them to do the same. Letter from George H. Parker to President Steward 4/19/1920, printed in *Federal Employee* 4/24/1920, uncataloged labor periodicals, Littauer Library, Harvard University; *Oakland Tribune* 4/20/1920; London (U.K.) *Times* 4/20/1920, 6/19/1920; Manitoba (Canada), *Free Press* 5/8/1920, 9/18/1920.

at the popular teens, stating “although overall blue is a beautiful color, it isn’t really becoming to all boys.”³⁶²



This illustration entitled “The Newcomer” from *Life* Magazine depicted the ridicule a elementary school student would receive for not being current with the popular fashion of early/mid 1920.³⁶³

The overall campaign in New York City showcased the popularity and spectacle of the movement. The Cheese Club, a group of actors, writers and producers, who identified as disgruntled middle class consumers, stood at the forefront of the New York City overall club. Altogether, the club enjoyed the participation of numerous theater men, the Rotary Club, students from Columbia University and Jamaica High School, and a host of other individuals. As a “strike” against the high cost of clothing, they agreed to “wear the garb of labor” on the streets of New York to publicize their grievances. And publicity they achieved. So much so that newspapers from Atlanta to Los Angeles

³⁶² Bridgeport *Telegram* 4/20/1920; Lakeview High School Collection, Box 4, Folder 1-4, Sulzer Regional Library Special Collections, Chicago Public Library; Boston *Globe* 4/25/1920; *Congressional Record*, Senate 4/19/1920.

³⁶³ *Life* 5/6/1920.

covered the planning and results of the spectacular parade down Broadway on April 24.³⁶⁴ If New York did not originate the movement, club leaders would attempt to surpass the showmanship of other clubs.³⁶⁵

On April 24, thousands of onlookers watched a few hundred people march down Broadway in overalls. Also present were newspaper reporters, circus elephants, camels, numerous signs condemning the high cost of living, and motion picture men. The donor of the camel contemplated “adorning the whole neck of the camel with a white collar...to stiffen the backbone of the revolting ‘white collar boys’” Nils T. Granlund, “a press agent,” led the parade, “having nothing to do with the cause.” According to Harry Hershfield, a member of the Cheese Club, “Time and place had no special meaning for Grandlund, so long as he could get publicity.” Ben Atwell, another leader in the parade, guided participants in such a way so as to make sure that those filming it would get a clear shot of marchers in front of a sign for “the Capitol Theater,” with which many Cheese Club members were affiliated. As a result, some New Yorkers believed that the Cheese Club merely sought to use the movement to bring more business to Broadway. A few people even subscribed to the rumor that “a New York newspaper man...got the idea into his head and he went to some makers of overalls and got \$10,000 for an idea out of which they made millions and are still making millions.” Whether defined as success or failure, the parade turned heads. If the parade had not already seemed unusual, it ended

³⁶⁴ See, for example, *Atlanta Constitution* 4/25/1920 and *Los Angeles Times* 4/17/1920.

³⁶⁵ The *New York Times* summarized, “New York, despite its apparent intention to appear in the new costume today, at least to the extent of exhibiting a few pioneers, for once will have to admit that follows instead of leads, for in hundreds of cities yesterday bankers and workers, mayors and ministers and humbler toilers of the “white collar class” went calmly about their affairs clad in the simple contrivances of denim.” *New York Times* 4/17/1920.

with an “elephant being stranded on Broadway.” As one account stated, “Worldwide Interest Aroused Through Publicity.”³⁶⁶



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The Cheese Club latched on to the overall movement at least in part because it had become an important feature of popular culture. They saw the potential to ride the coattails of its publicity. Comprised of press agents and showmen, publicity was something that the Cheese Club knew well. The Club had commonly brought attention to itself by hosting notable guests, such as Will Rogers, Fiorello H. La Guardia and Huey

³⁶⁶ The Cheese Club continued the momentum achieved by the parade by showing up to the annual luncheon of the National Vaudeville Artists Club dressed in denim. They were “received with cheers and remained to partake of refreshments before venturing forth to face a volley of cameras.” Coming largely from the ranks of the Capitol Theater, the contingent of denimites again marched down Broadway. Fittingly, they were followed by an assortment of cameramen and newspaper reporters. Assorted Materials, scrapbook “Cheese Club,” “1920, re overall parade” MWEZ X n.c., Billy Rose Theatre Collection, New York Public Library; Cheese Club File and Harry Hershfield File, Billy Rose Theatre Collection, New York Public Library; *New York Times* 4/21/1920; *Lake Park (IA) News* 5/6/1920.

³⁶⁷ Assorted Materials, scrapbook “Cheese Club,” “1920, re overall parade” MWEZ X n.c., Billy Rose Theatre Collection, New York Public Library.

Long, and through publishing club slogans like “Never knock a brother member till he’s gone about an hour” and “we don’t give credit, where credit is dues.” One Cheese Club leader, Walter Kingsley was described as “the ablest” of publicity specialists. Another leader, Harry Hershfield, a comedian, radio personality and cartoonist, had such a talent for drawing attention to an event that he officiated as master of ceremonies for an alleged average of three hundred dinners per year. Like other leaders of the overall movement, he fashioned himself as a man of the people. As one of his friends recalled, “Five Presidents of the United States called him their friend...But it was the people who took him to their hearts.”³⁶⁸

Not only did spectators on Broadway experience the overall movement, so too did those who attended Broadway plays, operas and films. The Capitol Theatre began advertising “opera at overalls prices,” and actively sought to connect their productions and films to the popular movement. In an attempt to advertise the silent film adaptation of Rex Beache’s “The Silver Horde,” a group of women dressed in denim and posed for a photo while holding a sign stating “If you see Rex Beach’s The Silver Horde at the Capitol Theater You’ll Know How to Fight the Profiteers.” The message seemed appropriate, because the story centers on a man’s struggles to succeed in the Alaskan Salmon industry against a dishonest businessman who seeks to eliminate any competitor. In the end, love and honesty prevail over selfish and malevolent tactics. Similarly, in the film *Uncharted Channels* Timothy Webb, after being cut out of his father’s will for his extravagant lifestyle, learns the value of hard work by donning the “cheapest overalls”

³⁶⁸ Cheese Club File and Harry Hershfield File, Billy Rose Theatre Collection, New York Public Library; Walter Kingsley File, Billy Rose Theatre Collection, New York Public Library; Harry Hershfield File, Billy Rose Theatre Collection, New York Public Library.

and becoming a laborer. Webb successfully fends off an opportunistic “Bolshevik” radical labor leader, who aimed to manipulate his fellow workers, and earns the love of the female protagonist in the process. Ironically, theater and film companies used the overall, symbolic of hard work, thrift, and moral fairness, to make an extra buck.³⁶⁹



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Seeking to associate themselves with such messages, directors, actors and actresses also aimed to promote their own careers by donning denim. In Toronto, movie directors Alan Crossland and Hobart Henly wore overalls on the job to “fight the high cost of living,” drawing the attention of the press. Actors and Actresses in Hollywood received similar publicity. “Heartily in favor of the movement,” Helene Chadwick “enjoyed” wearing overalls on the Will Rogers film *Alec Lloyd, Cowpunched*, and Fox

³⁶⁹ Assorted Materials, scrapbook “Cheese Club,” “1920, re overall parade” MWEZ X n.c., Billy Rose Theatre Collection, New York Public Library; Rex Beach, *Alaskan Adventures: Three Thrilling Novels of the Far North in One Volume* (New York: A.L. Burt Co., 1909); *Motion Picture News* 6/26/1920; *Dramatic Mirror* 6/19/1920 from Robinson Locke Collection, Film Library, Lincoln Center, New York Public Library; *Moving Picture World* 7/24/1920.

³⁷⁰ Assorted Materials, scrapbook “Cheese Club,” “1920, re overall parade” MWEZ X n.c., Billy Rose Theatre Collection, New York Public Library.

star Shirley Mason purchased “raggedy” clothing for 70 cents as a solution to exorbitant prices. Conversely, Anita Stewart made headlines for wearing twenty thousand dollars worth of gowns in the production of *The Yellow Typhoon*, a surprising action in “these days of glory for denim and gingham.”³⁷¹

In the plays, films and music inspired by the movement, overalls represented a longing for an American tradition that celebrated the thrift and simplicity of the past. Dedicated to the Cheese Club, the song *Overalls and Calico* by Gus Kahn and Jean Schwartz, idealized the simplicity and thrift and childhood dress. To a moderate melody, an alto voice sings, “Styles in clothes are always changing, I suppose they always will, but the clothes we wore in childhood, somehow dear I love them still...” leading to a chorus “overalls and calico, each recalls the long ago... we miss the tattered clothes...” The chorus of Harold Frost’s *Overalls: a Fox-Trot Song* also expresses nostalgia for the simple and happier days of the past. “Still I sigh for the picture my heart recalls,” the chorus states, ‘It’s of you, eyes of Brown,’ in your blue gingham gown and me in my overalls.” The Mack Sennett comedy *Gingham Girl*, a “timely” feature playing at the height of the overall movement offers a similar message. In the film, the protagonist, a “country girl” who inherits millions of dollars, decides to embrace the values of her simple past by thwarting the advances of high-society suitors in favor of a butler.³⁷²

³⁷¹ *New Castle News* (PA) 9/22/1920; *Los Angeles Times* 4/29/1920; *New York Times* 5/2/1920.

³⁷² Gus Kahn, “Overalls and Calico,” New York: Jerome H. Remick, 1920 (sheet music), UCLA Sheet Music Consortium; Harold Frost, “Overalls: a Fox Trot Song,” Chicago: McKinley Music, 1920 (sheet music), University of Alabama Special Collections Library; Assorted Materials, scrapbook “Cheese Club,” “1920, re overall parade” MWEZ X n.c., Billy Rose Theatre Collection, New York Public Library; *Moving Picture World* 5/29/1920.

Magazine and newspaper commentary also created a “usable past” to depict the overall movement as a new front in the struggle for the “American” values of thrift and diligence- featured values of a nineteenth century middle class worldview. Edwin E. Slosson of *The Independent* wrote, “the first fight for American freedom was won when the colonists boycotted British cloth and pledged themselves to wear nothing but homespun.” Continuing the tradition of thrift, “in our Civil War again economy became fashionable... and now look at our streets...one would think that the white collar men, finding that the overall men had gotten ahead of them in salary had suddenly shifted to the better paid profession.” “But no,” Slosson asserted approvingly, “it is merely a consumers strike on a large scale.” The Newark *Evening News* more pointedly concluded, “overalls are... the symbol of honest work, service and sacrifice...putting on overalls is putting on democracy.”³⁷³

In large part, club members and supporters of the movement believed that the state should and would play a strong role in this ongoing struggle for “democracy.” Addressing a crowd at the commemoration of Paul Revere’s midnight ride, Major General Clarence Edwards announced his eagerness to discard his military uniform in favor of overalls. According to Edwards, the nation could achieve frugality and industry through both widespread participation in the overall movement and mandating a combined university education and military service for all American boys. Senator Charles Thomas of Colorado also believed that the government and the white middle class would draw on past traditions and work together for “democracy.” Speaking of the H.C.L. and the overall movement, Thomas declared to his colleagues, “I have abiding

³⁷³ *The Independent* 5/1/1920; *Literary Digest* 5/1/1920.

faith in the great middle class.” “It is that section of our people, law-abiding and God-fearing, men and women,” Thomas declared, “who believe in Anglo-Saxon institutions and the principles of Anglo-Saxon liberty.” According to Thomas, they “regard their Government as agency for security to life and limb, and who appreciate the institutions which their forefathers won through the expenditure of so much blood.” Even when upset with the inability of the government to solve the H.C.L., the middle class, Thomas asserted, would not turn to anti-statist remedies.³⁷⁴

As shown in the Jacksonville movement, part of this romanticized traditional American past was a celebration of American manhood expressed through hard work and a belief in economic fairness. Promoting the movement to the press, Judge William E. Fort, of the Birmingham, AL overall club proclaimed, “This movement is a protest of American manhood against conditions which have become a shame. It is a return to the old days when principle meant more than the almighty dollar.” Fort was by no means the only one who made a connection between the overall garb and masculinity. When scores of male residents joined the Birmingham overall club, women were turned away, prompting one women’s activist periodical to declare, “Sex discrimination is now raging in Birmingham, Alabama.”³⁷⁵

³⁷⁴ *Congressional Record*, Senate 5/19/1920; *Boston Globe* 4/19/1920.

³⁷⁵ Even an enemy of the nascent organized middle class understood the overall movement to be a call for the hard work expected of an American. At the annual meeting of the National Association of Cotton Manufacturers, one member declared that “overall clubs” sent the message: “We have got to work...as our American duty.” He went on to appropriate this message for the needs of the manufacturer by connecting the high cost of clothing to union calls for the eight-hour workday, declaring, “if we cannot do the job by working eight hours a day, we must change it to nine or ten rather than six.” Kingsport (TN) *Times* 4/27/1920; Transactions of the National Association of Cotton Manufacturers, 1919-1920, p.81-82, American Textile Museum Library; Atlanta *Constitution* 4/14/1920; *The Women Citizen* 4/24/1920.

Rather than standing pat, Birmingham women organized a Gingham club for women, representing one of many similar clubs throughout the nation. Playing on gendered assumptions of female propriety, newspapers like the *New York Times* described how the Birmingham Gingham Club organized “quietly” at home. Most overall club leaders did encourage women to participate in the movement, but the preferred avenue was the formation of a sex-segregated gingham or calico club. Speaking to male desire for female participation, a Columbia, S.C. overall club member asserted, “The Men are looking to the women in this crusade.” Again drawing on the notion of an American tradition of thrift and the particular emphasis on a gender-segregated role of women in wartime, the Columbia resident suggested, “the women of the [18]60s should get the women of the 20s together.” They should “tell them some things about the Confederate war times and how they lived and prospered.” The movement was hampered, but not crippled by the masculinization of this consumer protest; women found ways to participate, in spite of leaders ambivalence over their participation.³⁷⁶

Whether in Birmingham, Columbia or elsewhere, witnessing rising prices and the increasing presence of overall and gingham in the streets and in popular culture, many white collar workers felt both internal and external pressure to join the movement. The

³⁷⁶ This statement represents a usable past, as many Confederate women did not prosper. See, for example, Drew Gilpin Faust, *Mothers of Invention: Women of the Slaveholding South in the Civil War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996); *New York Times* 4/17/1920; Letter to the Editor 4/20/1920, *Columbia State*; Yet, the general importance and influence of the Birmingham club should not be underestimated. Already 5000 strong, the Birmingham club served as the headquarters of “the national overall club,” an attempt at creating a central body for scores of local clubs. Its organizer, Theodore Lamar, offered an ideal life narrative to appeal to participants in the overall movement. Lamar came from the white collar class- a practicing attorney- but became a machinist during World War I to help increase production. After the war, he, like others, had become fed up with high clothing prices and donned denim as a statement of protest. Judges, lawyers, the Rotary and Kiwanis clubs, and the entire City Commission, soon followed. By April 22, the National Overall Club had issued charters, letters were “pouring in” from all over the country, and the Birmingham movement received perhaps more press than any other locality, save for New York. Lowell *Sun* 4/22/1920.

frequent sight of overalls underscored to at least some middle class Americans that they had received unfair treatment as consumers. Fred Haight, a music teacher in Medford, Oregon, wrote in his diary of impact of exorbitant clothing prices on his livelihood. Like many others in the white collar class, Haight placed blame on organized labor. “No relief is in sight,” Haight exclaimed, “Clothes are going higher, partly thru underproduction and partly thru high wages, and the higher the wages the less work.” Haight continued his diatribe by lamenting, “Labor is certainly getting its rake off now and we are paying. Always the common people are paying one way or another.” Whether through wearing “more comfy” overalls or old clothes, Haight felt a duty to himself to not pay excessive prices.³⁷⁷

The Government in Overalls

Noel Mitchell represented just one of many examples of local governmental officials who seized the opportunity to gain mass appeal by joining the overall movement. Such individuals hoped that embracing the movement would represent an adequate response to persistent calls for them to use their offices to address the high cost of clothing. Of course, the scope of and manner in which public officials took control of the movement varied. Some mayors, councilmen, judges and city officials merely wore the garb and condemned the H.C.L. Others set up commissions to investigate local influences on rising clothing costs, or enacted ordinances allowing city employees to

³⁷⁷ April 29, 1920, Diary of Fred Alton Haight, Medford, Oregon, 1918 and 1920-21. Ms. 338, Southern Oregon Historical Society, Medford, Oregon. The overall movement had a significant presence in Medford. Mail carriers, numerous “high school boys” and Judge W.S. Crowell were among the participants in the local movement. *Medford Mail Tribune* 4/19/1920, 4/21/1920, 5/13/1920.

wear overalls. Ultimately, however, local, state and federal politicians passed few new laws, and little evidence exists to suggest that they made notable improvements in their attempts to enforce any existing anti-profiteering legislation. In sum, government participation was largely symbolic.³⁷⁸

Pressure from citizens, the movement's general popularity and the fact that many city workers were "salaried" employees engendered widespread local government participation in the movement. Because the HCL placed a proportionately larger burden on "salaried employees," local governments had to decide between increasing employee salaries or adopting a campaign that emphasized the role of prices on their declining standard of living. Saddled with limited budgets, local governments frequently chose the latter, and the overall movement provided them with the opportunity. For example, the records of the Common Council of San Diego on April 19, 1920, state, "city employees are compelled to expend large sums of money in maintaining themselves in uniforms while in the employ of The City of San Diego." The Council responded not by focusing on stagnant salaries, but suggesting, "the extreme high cost of living may be reduced by authorizing the employees to wear uniforms of cheaper and more serviceable quality," and passing a resolution to that effect. Even judges, as members of local or state governments, took similar approaches. In Columbia, S.C., for example, the Supreme Court changed courtroom rules so as to allow attorneys and court employees to wear overalls in litigation, helping to lessen the burden placed on them by high suit prices.

³⁷⁸ See examples: *Columbia State* 4/22/1920; *Ogden Standard-Examiner* 4/18/1920; *Oakland Tribune* 4/18/1920; *Decatur (IL) Daily Review* 4/16/1920; *Chicago Evening Post* 5/8/1920.

This led one resident to declare, “it shows that our supreme court is not out of touch with the new thought of the age.”³⁷⁹

Like the courts and city officials, state legislatures and governors also joined the movement. Beginning on April 20, Idaho Governor David William Davis and his entire cabinet showed up to work at the State House dressed in overalls. With the press looking on, they signed overall pledges and encouraged others to do the same. The Davis Administration was not alone. *Literary Digest* reported, “the State Capitols of Texas and Michigan have welcomed overalls,” listing merely two of the numerous examples of state governments endorsing the garb. Those who did not support the overall movement felt pressure to defend their actions. Gov. Thomas Bickett of North Carolina, for example, doubted the longevity of the protest. He did, however, see potential in a broader movement that would promote frugality in the purchasing of all commodities without possibly requiring people to buy new overalls to become members. Bickett summarized, “I would not hesitate to join a club that would map out a well balanced program of economy.”³⁸⁰

Hoping to appeal to their constituents, many members of both parties in the U.S. Senate and House of Representatives embraced the movement.³⁸¹ Overalls first graced

³⁷⁹ Records of the Common Council of the City of San Diego, April 19, 1920, City Clerk’s Office, San Diego; “Rules of Court” in Reports of Cases Heard and Determined By The Supreme Court of South Carolina, Vol. CXV; Letter to the Editor 4/22/1920, *Columbia State*; *Detroit Free Press* 4/21/1920.

³⁸⁰ *Ogden Standard Examiner* 4/18/1920; *Oakland Tribune* 4/18/1920; *Literary Digest* 5/1/1920; “The Overall Club” April 17, 1920, *The Public Letters and Papers of Thomas Walter Bickett, Governor of North Carolina 1917-1921* (Raleigh: Edwards & Broughton Printing Company, 1923).

³⁸¹ While politicians from both major parties stepped to the forefront of the movement, Republicans issued generally harsher criticism of the failure of the Democratic Wilson administration to lower prices. Speaking to the fact that participation in the overall movement crossed party lines, of a few of the movement’s

the House Chamber on April 17 when Rep. William Upshaw of Georgia interrupted a debate on tobacco manufacturing to read a telegram from a resident of Atlanta that had asked him to endorse the local overall club. Casting himself as a man of the people, Upshaw declared, “Naturally I could not indorse it without practicing what I preach. So I went downtown and spent \$4 for this good suit of overalls, which I am now wearing.” Upshaw continued, “Let us set a good example and help still the tempest of unrest and bring a speedy return of peace to the land we love so well.” Congress applauded and many of Upshaw’s colleagues crowded around him to admire “the time honored garb of the working man.” Roughly a dozen Congressmen immediately agreed to wear overalls and according to the *Wisconsin State Journal*, the ordeal “created such a sensation that it was almost impossible to continue the business of the house.”³⁸²



leaders mentioned in this chapter, Nathaniel Dial, William Upshaw and Noel Mitchell were Democrats, while David William Davis and William Kenyon were Republicans.

³⁸² *Congressional Record*, House, 4/17/1920; *Wisconsin State Journal* 4/18/1920.

The cartoon (on the left) from *Life* Magazine captures the use of the overall movement by politicians (in this case, making a commentary on the 1920 presidential race) as a means to gain popularity. Rep. William Upshaw and Sen. Nathaniel Dial pictured on the right posing in overalls.³⁸³

In the U.S. Senate, Sen. Nathaniel Dial of South Carolina took charge of the movement. Two or three days in advance, Dial created anticipation among the media by announcing that he would deliver an extensive message in support of overalls. As promised, on April 19 Dial stood up and addressed the Senate. He began by identifying the roots of the high cost of living: first and foremost, the indolence of striking labor; second, extravagance; and lastly, profiteering. Playing on widespread anti-radical and anti-labor fears of the first red scare, Dial gave special attention the influence of the “I.W.W. and the bolshevistic crowds” in encouraging strikes and an idle workforce. Against these threats, the people, Dial asserted, were beginning to respond with “the right spirit.” To striking laborers, Dial admonished, “Let them know that the public can also organize.”³⁸⁴

In spite of the fact that many participants in the overall movement still ultimately placed their hopes in the government to lower the cost of clothing, Dial de-emphasized government action. Of “overall clubs,” Dial declared, “I am delighted to know that the people are beginning to realize that it is not in the province of Government to set styles and prescribe what one should wear or eat.” Dial elaborated by stating “There has been too much looking to Washington and the people have been too prone to complain to and of their representatives...prosperity, like their salvation, is in their own hands.” While the

³⁸³ *Life* 6/10/1920. At least one presidential candidate (MA Gov. Calvin Coolidge) endorsed the movement by wearing overalls in public. See *Boston Globe* 5/8/1920. Oelwein *Daily Register* 5/15/1920.

³⁸⁴ *Congressional Record*, Senate 4/19/1920.

overall movement was a response to government failure to meet the public's heightened expectation that the state could solve the HCL, Dial understated the role overall club members expected the government to play in reducing prices. Nevertheless, participants did believe that their "buyers strike" could have a direct effect on prices. Dial sought to praise the middle class and lend his symbolic support without taking further legislative action or inflating expectations that the federal government would lower prices.³⁸⁵

The other congressmen and senators who joined the movement generally shared Dial's methods, but stopped short of stating precisely what the public should or should not expect from the state. This approach allowed politicians to become visible leaders of the movement, but also implied that consumers were the only force in society that could decrease prices. In essence, most governmental figures understood their role to be symbolic. By wearing overalls, encouraging production and avoiding extravagance, politicians would become role models for American citizens and cause the press to take notice. Such a strategy did not address the issue of whether Congress needed to pass new legislation. Sen. Charles Thomas, for example, called the "overall brigade" "a beginning," reiterating that normalcy would return with a decline in spendthrift habits and labor unrest. On May 19, Senator William Kenyon of Iowa similarly stated that "the need for more production is at the base of our trouble," but any reduction in clothing prices could be attributed to that fact that "people were stopping buying." "The nation," Kenyon declared, "must look to the great middle class to save it in its hour of stress."³⁸⁶

³⁸⁵ *Congressional Record*, Senate, 4/19/1920.

³⁸⁶ *Congressional Record*, Senate, 4/24/1920 and 5/19/1920.

In a tenuous position, members of the increasingly unpopular Department of Justice took credit for helping to build the overall movement, even if indirectly. In reality, overall clubs had formed in large part in response to perceived DOJ incompetence. Choosing to ignore this fact, Attorney General A. Mitchell Palmer shared his hopes that the overall movement and DOJ anti-profiteering campaigns (see chapter 3) would reinforce one another. Palmer stated, “we have had a campaign against the ‘buy now’ agitation for a long time... [the overall movement] will put the right idea in the minds of the people.” Later, in the Annual Report of the Attorney General, Palmer connected “Department of Justice Efforts”- namely the work of DOJ speakers, literature and the Women’s Committee – to “overall and gingham dress movements.” They were “all outgrowths of the general trend of public thought.” Documents from Howard Figg, Edith Strauss and the DOJ-HCL Women’s Division also linked the DOJ anti-high cost of clothing campaign to the overall/old clothes movements. One DOJ memo, for example, stated that state fair price commissioners “should press vigorously their campaigns of sane economy among men.” Some Fair Price Commissioners had already followed suit. The Georgia DOJ Fair Price Committee, for example, ordered 3000 pairs of overalls for citizens wishing to purchase them at wholesale prices.³⁸⁷

A “Fad”?

³⁸⁷ New York Times 4/24/1920; U.S. Department of Justice, *Annual Report of the Attorney General of the United States for the Year 1920* (Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1920), 182; Howard Figg to Fair Price Commissioners and United States Attorneys 8/2/1920, DOJ-HCL; Edith Strauss, summary of activity in individual states, HCL-DOJ; Ironwood (MI) *Daily Globe* 4/14/1920.

While the sight of senators, governors, mayors, and actors wearing overalls promised to expand the visibility of the movement, to many it signified its faddish nature. Americans demanded that the high cost of clothing receive serious attention and a number of people insisted that political rhetoric, publicity stunts and circus elephants did not qualify. Austin Potter, a business manager and the president of the Lima, OH Kiwanis Club, for example, exclaimed, “It’s just one more fad.” A myriad of press accounts and editorials shared Potter’s sentiment. A New York *Times* article reported, “The overall club movement has many advocates among the circus people. Mose Smith, the tattooed man, is enthusiastic for the idea, and so is Sloquot, the African bushman, and ‘zip,’ one of ‘Ringlingtown’s’ most celebrated inhabitants.” Editorials in newspapers throughout the United States carried headlines, such as “Faddism Will Fail,” “The Overalls Folly,” “Unnecessary Overalls” and “The Truth About the ‘Overall Fad.’” Arguments over the overall movement’s effectiveness and longevity served to divide prospective participants. The movement had real meaning to many of its participants as an important part of a trend of middle class consumer protest. Yet, the spectacle of the movement, and the movement’s divisions among class, gender and racial lines stymied its potential.³⁸⁸

Some called the movement a fad or spectacle, because many middle class Americans were genuinely hesitant to completely abandon formal dress. A few accused white-collar workers of wearing expensive clothing underneath the overalls “costume.”

³⁸⁸ Lima *Daily News* 4/18/1920; New York *Times* 4/18/1920; Portsmouth (NH) *Herald* 4/23/1920; Charleston (WV) *Daily Mail* 4/13/1920; Kingsport (TN) *Times* 4/16/1920; Perry (IA) *Daily Chief* 5/21/1920; Year: 1920; United States Census, Census Place: Lima Ward 2, Allen, Ohio; Roll: T625_1345; Page: 8A; Enumeration District: 27; Image: 296.

An Appleton Wisconsin paper, as just one of many examples, reported, “Don’t be startled if you observe one of the city’s prominent business or professional men hiking to the office covering up a silk shirt with a new suit of overalls.”



Mrs. Joseph T. Bowen and W.J. Howlad Jr. of Lake Forest, IL (metropolitan Chicago area) pictured wearing expensive clothing and ties underneath denim, demonstrating the performative nature of their actions.³⁸⁹

Some participants did merely seek to latch onto a fad, but others, like Fred Haight, the aforementioned music teacher in Medford, OR, truly struggled with such a drastic change in fashion. Haight wrote in his diary of “quarrelling between Myself and me”- in other words, a disconnect between his thoughts versus his desires. According to Haight, “If I clothe him comfortably enough he objects and cry for a new \$75 suit when overalls are more comfy. I become conscious of his existence and the power of his errors at such times, and am weak before it for a time.” Eventually, “weakness” prevailed. On June 7, Haight called himself a “fool” for paying a profiteer \$50 for a new suit, blaming his actions on his tastes, but also his profession. Haight wrote, “A music teacher is being

³⁸⁹ Chicago *Herald and Examiner* 5/3/1920.

watched constantly and judged according to his outward makeup as much as his inward.” Ultimately, by wearing overalls in his white collar profession, Haight could both help and hurt himself. Some patrons and colleagues would applaud his demonstration of thrift, whereas others would look upon him as a faddist and question his professional credibility. The tension between thrift and the desire to wear normal middle class fashions in the overall movement resembled a similar tension in the DOJ-HCL Women’s division. And even in their activism to combat rising food prices, middle class activists found that making thrift a part of their culture placed a difficult strain on middle class consumer behavior. As they promoted thrift, municipal market supporters struggled to keep the markets up to the standards of a middle class shopping experience.³⁹⁰

Further narrowing the scope and potential effectiveness of the overall movement, overall clubs made little or no effort to involve non-white consumers. Nor does any evidence suggest that non-white Americans formed their own overall clubs. Rather, available commentary on the movement from African American sources, for example, expressed cynicism toward overall clubs. Calling the movement a “fad,” the *Chicago Defender* reported, “we have not heard of any man in Harlem donning overalls.” Or as James Weldon Johnson, an editor of the African American periodical the *New York Age*, explained, “A man may depend on it, that in sticking to the coat vest and trousers of

³⁹⁰ April 23, 1920, Diary of Fred Alton Haight, Medford, Oregon, 1918 and 1920-21, Ms. 338, Southern Oregon Historical Society, Medford, Oregon; June 7, 1920, Diary of Fred Alton Haight, Medford, Oregon, 1918 and 1920-21, Ms. 338, Southern Oregon Historical Society, Medford, Oregon; For examples of reporting of middle class citizens wearing overalls with more expensive clothing, see *New York Times* 4/21/1920 (describing Williams College students attending class and church in overalls with “expensive silks and socks” underneath), *Boston Globe* 4/18/1920 (telling of a Chicago man who strolled on the sidewalk in overalls with a \$20 silk shirt showing), *Daily Kennebec Journal* of Augusta Maine 4/24/1920 (referring to an overall parade in which “men were wearing hundred-dollar suits underneath the overalls.” They became visible when it started raining), Medford (OR) *Mail Tribune* 4/26/1920, *Chicago Herald American* 5/1/1920.

ordinary cut and color he can never be wrong.” African American barbers in Kansas City even complained of the increased wear and tear on their chairs from white customers in “overalls now being worn by many men and boys to help reduce the high cost of looking like you like to look when you meet your best girl.” Soaring clothing prices did affect African American consumers, but middle class grassroots organizing failed to include cross race networking; overall clubs primarily concerned themselves with the impact of economic change on the *white* middle class. Much like in discussions of food profiteering in Los Angeles, profiteers took on many white and racialized forms, but, in the eyes of white middle class Americans, the victims looked like themselves.³⁹¹

Backlash from Labor and the “Old Clothes” Movement

As a predominantly middle class endeavourer, the overall movement suffered from a lack of working class participation. Works by labor historians chronicle how labor unions and working class consumer cooperatives used consumption as a strategy to influence both wages and prices. But, since many overall club leaders placed blame on organized labor for the high cost of clothing, the potential for inter-class coordination was limited. Many laborers did not respond kindly to frequent middle class accusations that they had extracted excessive wages in the postwar upsurge of strikes. As Samuel Gompers, President of the American Federation of Labor, exclaimed, “The appeals of wage earners for relief from profiteering, relief from the high cost of living...have been

³⁹¹ Chicago *Defender* 5/1/1920; Kansas City *Star* 5/1/1920; New York *Age* 4/17/1920.

made under conditions most aggravating... Abuse has been heaped upon them and they have been charged with every manner of social crime.”³⁹²

Perhaps most damaging to the possibility of inter-class cooperation, the overall movement mocked and criticized the working class culturally. Organized labor resented the very idea of the middle class appropriating the symbol of “hard work” from the working class. For many, it carried the assumption that white collar workers deserved to wear the garb more than plumbers, builders, coal miners, railroad workers and other members of the working class. A statement of the International Brotherhood of the Stream Shovel and Dredge Men, exclaimed, “After getting into a pair of overalls...a good test of the sincerity of the motive behind the movement would be to hand to the newly dressed a pick or shovel and see how ready the action might be to utilize these implements of everyday usefulness.” Similarly, a wage earner discussing contemporary issues with William M. Leiserson, Chairman of the Rochester Labor Adjustment Board, declared facetiously, “This overall movement is great. Let the...middle classes wear overalls now. We’ll wear the good clothes.” To many, the middle class merely wore a “costume” and “performed” hard work symbolically.³⁹³

Making matters worse, the overall movement brought hardship to the working class economically by driving up the price of overalls. Within a month of the inception of the movement, the price of overalls skyrocketed in response to increased demand from

³⁹² Metal Polishers International Union, *Our Journal*, June 1920, p. 6, uncataloged labor periodicals, Littauer Library, Harvard University; Dana Frank, *Purchasing Power: Consumer Organizing, Gender, and the Seattle Labor Movement, 1919-1929* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994); Seattle workers used consumer organizing as a method to protest wages and working conditions as much as high prices.

³⁹³ *Steam, Shovel and Dredge*, June 1920, p. 408, uncataloged labor periodicals, Littauer Library, Harvard University; William M. Leiserson, “The Meaning of Labor Representation: The Agreement in the Clothing Industry” *Annals of the Academy of Political and Social Science* 90 (July 1920): 23.

the middle class. Laborers who needed to wear overalls for their work were left to spend up to triple the normal amount. Price increases were reported heavily in the press, and local officials and the Department of Justice received complaints about “the advance in prices in overalls” charged by merchants and larger companies such as Levi-Strauss. The Department of Justice forwarded all available information on these complaints to U.S. Attorneys. Prosecutors, of course, could only work within the limitations and vagueness of the Lever Act.³⁹⁴

Organized labor fumed over the rising price of overalls engendered by middle class demand. The Marysville, CA Carpenters Union represented just one of many union locals that passed resolutions condemning the overall clubs and promising to boycott any business that endorsed the movement. Explaining their opposition, *The Labor World*, the voice of the Duluth, MN Central Labor Body stated, “Think of beating down the cost of living by wearing the blue jeans of the proletariat... The working people must wear overalls and they will have to pay more. ... it will result in a lot of injury to the workers and their families.” The Boot and Shoe Workers’ Union protested, “the artisan must pay twice as much for the overalls necessary to him because of the recent overalls hysteria.” The BSWU further claimed, “All makers of overalls must have reaped a golden harvest through the increased demand for their goods.” Radical organized labor reacted just as fervently. The socialist New York *Call* concluded, “The net result of the overalls craze is

³⁹⁴ Special Assistant to the Attorney General to Mrs. A.A. Adams 5/4/1920, U.S. Attorney, Department of Justice Records, High Cost of Living Division, National Archives II, College Park, MD.

to increase the cost of living for the workers which will certainly be followed by strikes for more wages and a middle class yowl because of the “Red specter.”³⁹⁵

Many farmers shared the complaints of the urban working class. One New England farmer called the movement “mania” and worried that it would expand to a boycott of foods that would “result in bankrupting farmers.” An Indiana farmers’ periodical exclaimed, “Overalls constitute [the] uniform” of “farmers mechanics and others,” and elaborated, “it means a real hardship to them... and gives the manufacturers of overalls an excuse for boosting the price of their product.” Making specific reference to the overall movement, E.G.S Gagnler, a farmer from Plattsburgh, NY wrote to his local newspaper, “People are attempting to lower the HCL in every way but the proper way.” While the others donned overalls, Gagnler reasoned, only the “the 16-hour a day farmer” was “producing.” The *Iowa Homestead* issued even greater criticism, asserting that the middle class in overalls had “paraded like clowns.” The *Homestead* ardently declared, “Leave the overalls for the farmer and the laboring man.”³⁹⁶

In addition to backlash from farmers and the working class, numerous white-collar workers themselves abandoned overall clubs in favor of “old clothes clubs.” Most members of old clothes clubs complained that overall clubs had increased the price of overalls, further enabling profiteering. For example, Gilbert P. Shafer, a student at the

³⁹⁵ Ironwood (MI) *Daily Globe* 5/7/1920; *The Labor World*, Duluth, MN 5/1/1920, uncataloged labor periodicals, Littauer Library, Harvard University; *The Shoe Workers’ Journal*, May 1920, uncataloged labor periodicals, Littauer Library, Harvard University; New York *Call* 4/23/1920.

³⁹⁶ *New England Farms* 4/24/1920, Connecticut State Library, Hartford, CT. *Indiana Farmer’s Guide* 5/8/1920; Letter to the editor, *Plattsburgh Sentinel* 5/11/1920; *Iowa Homestead* 5/20/1920. For another example of a negative or cynical opinion of the overall movement by a farmers’ periodical, see Malone, NY *Farmer* 4/21/1920. The quoted New England farmer wrote to *New England Farms*, the editor of which did not share his “alarm” for overall clubs and actually admired the organizing ability of the public (while remaining steadfast that farmers had suffered the most in the postwar economy).

University of Michigan, reasoned that wearing overalls only tended to cause “rise in price...[and] defeat the original purpose.” Within days, Michigan students joined many other Americans in signing “old clothes pledges” in place of promises to wear overalls. Concurrently, old clothes clubs surfaced in localities ranging from New Orleans to Cambridge, MA. The days of the “blue denim revolution” were numbered.³⁹⁷

As more and more citizens opted for old clothes clubs, many politicians followed suit. Ogden, UT Mayor Frank Francis, previously an ardent supporter of the overall movement, quickly shifted his allegiances to old clothes. Senator James Reed of Missouri took a more vehement stance. “If men and women of the United States could be persuaded ... not to go through this silly performance of wearing overalls, but to wear old clothes,” Reed declared, “there would be a surplus of dress goods and of suitings in the United States at the end of six months and the prices would go down.” With similar distaste for overall clubs, Senator Joseph Ransdell of Louisiana insinuated that the movement represented an unintentional “scheme to add further profits to the cotton mills.” Choosing not to address the growing unpopularity of the movement, Rep. William Upshaw conveniently ceased wearing the garb by claiming that the “cool weather and a cold he had contracted” forced him to find more suitable clothing.³⁹⁸

³⁹⁷ Some middle class Americans began to voice their distaste for borrowing the cultural symbol of work from the laboring class. As Carl R. Warne, a clerk from Mansfield, Ohio, declared, “I won’t wear overalls unless I get out in the shop and work. What do you take me for?” (University of Michigan *Daily* 4/21/1920, 4/22/1920, 4/25/1920, 4/27/1920, 4/28/1920; *Mansfield News* 4/18/1920; *The Tech* (Massachusetts Institute of Technology) 4/23/1920; *New York Times* 4/28/1920; United States Census, Year: 1920; Census Place: *Mansfield Ward 3, Richland, Ohio*; Roll: *T625_1430*; Page: *4B*; Enumeration District: *206*; Image: *1056*).

³⁹⁸ *Ogden Standard-Examiner* 4/28/1920; *Congressional Record*, Senate 5/6/1920 and 5/10/1920; *Boston Globe* 4/21/1920.

Even if offering a more practical solution to the high price of clothing, the emergence of old clothes clubs hindered the coordinating ability of a general middle class anti-clothing profiteering movement. Not only did the formation of old clothes clubs lack the novelty and excitement of overall clubs, but the individuals who remained in overall clubs frequently had to justify their participation.³⁹⁹ On the defensive, Orville C. Poland a Methodist minister, for example, exclaimed, “I am not a faddist,” adding “nor do I believe in wearing overalls for advertising purposes.” Facing divisions over strategy, middle class grassroots efforts at reducing the high cost of clothing began to fizzle. While the importance of exercising thrift in clothing consumption continued to hold a prominent place in popular culture, by July of 1920 few overall or old clothes clubs remained.⁴⁰⁰

Conclusion:

Disgruntled over the state’s inability to lower the cost of clothing, scores of middle Americans formed grassroots organizations to influence prices and to encourage more aggressive government action. To the organizing middle class, the high price of clothing was an issue of moral fairness. As workers enjoyed higher wages that seemingly gave them greater access to consumer culture, middle class Americans fumed over their inability to maintain a middle class lifestyle. Through overall clubs, middle class Americans imposed the nineteenth century middle class producerist values of diligence and honesty onto the consumer economy. Club members accused opportunistic

³⁹⁹ The *Review*, for example, called the movement “a novelty” and referred to the “child-like enthusiasm” of the salaried classes to fight profiteering. The *Review* 5/1/1920.

⁴⁰⁰ *Boston Globe* 4/26/1920.

merchants and middlemen, as well as a lazy and greedy striking labor force, of unfairly manipulating prices at the expense of middle class consumers. While donning a symbol of hard work, overall clubs sought to accomplish two goals. First, they hoped to influence the economy directly through a nationwide “buyers’ strike” for clothing. Second, participants in the movement sought to place additional pressure on all levels of government to achieve real results. Club members, however, seldom provided insight as to how politicians could or should reach this end.

The “blue denim revolution” ultimately fell apart for a few reasons. While numerous public figures and politicians, such as Mayor Noel Mitchell, Governor D.W. Davis or Senator Nathaniel Dial, helped to energize the movement, they had in large part latched onto the movement as a means of self-promotion. In turn, the state failed to undertake any new grand strategies to combat high clothing prices. Even though large numbers of women took part in the movement, middle class men also placed constraints on their participation by choosing a masculine symbol of protest and expressing ambivalence over their involvement. Club members also made no efforts to involve non-white consumers and saw only white Americans as victims. Equally significant, middle class demand for overalls placed an economic hardship on manual laborers, who were also mocked and criticized for indolence. This alienated and angered a large group of consumers and dissolved any potential for cross-class cooperation, thereby limiting club members’ ability to affect prices. When many individuals began to question the practicality of purchasing and wearing overalls to lower prices, club members fissured into proponents of overalls, old clothes advocates, and general anti-faddists.

The desire among the middle class to organize as consumers remained, but overall clubs would no longer provide the basis for organization. Some hoped that the growing middle class “tenants protective unions” would achieve greater success. Sometime in the summer of 1920, John R. Patterson, one of many such individuals, walked into his apartment on the North End of Chicago and removed his overalls. Stepping outside for a stroll down the streets of his Rogers Park neighborhood, he would have seen numerous signs hanging in apartment windows. They read: “rent strike.”⁴⁰¹

⁴⁰¹ Carl Roden scrapbook, Chicago Public Library Archives, Harold Washington Library Special Collections, Chicago, IL.

Chapter 5: Rent War!: Middle Class Tenant Organizing

Post-World War I Chicago took on many different meanings to its increasingly diverse citizenry. It was a center of Progressive reform, home to a tradition of graft and corruption, a location of labor unrest, a destination for immigrants from Eastern Europe and African American workers, and a city undergoing a housing crisis. In the midst of rapid industrialization, Chicago's population grew from two million in 1900 to three million in 1920. Over the course of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, scores of middle class Chicagoans pursued home ownership in the city's growing suburbs, where they purchased "family homes" in "safe" and "sanitary" communities away from many in the city's growing working class. Others remained in apartments in predominantly white collar neighborhoods, such as Rogers Park on the North Side, believing that the dream of living in a "family" home also applied to middle class renters. In the wake of World War I, as rents increased along with the price of other commodities, Chicago's middle class tenants felt increasingly vulnerable. What followed was what numerous postwar Chicagoans called "rent war."⁴⁰²

On March 18, 1920, A.E. Jessurun, treasurer of the self-proclaimed "middle class" Chicago Tenants' Protective Association, addressed a pig before an audience of

⁴⁰² Garb, who chronicles how middle class Chicagoans sought single-family home ownership in the suburbs, notes that the more well-paid segments of the working class also increasingly pursued single-family home ownership in the suburbs in turn-of-the century Chicago, a situation that resulted in division between middle and working class Chicagoans, and within the working class; Margaret Garb, *City of American Dreams: A History of Home Ownership and Housing Reform in Chicago, 1871-1919* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 1-10; Perry R. Duis, *Challenging Chicago: Coping with Everyday Life, 1837-1920* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1998), 72, 74.

500 disgruntled white collar tenants at the Gramme Stewart School. In an “apologetic” tone, Jessurun asked the “real, live, kicking, poker” for forgiveness. “I did you an injury whenever I called a landlord a ‘rent hog,’” Jessurun declared. “I take it all back. You certainly did nothing to deserve having your name transferred to the landlord.” Following a lengthy applause from the crowd, the pig “grunted forgiveness.”⁴⁰³

With each meeting, membership in the Chicago Tenants’ Protective Association had grown. White collar tenants, who had seen their rents raised along with the cost of other necessities, had become increasingly frustrated with all groups that they believed played a role in causing exorbitant rents. According to the Chicago Tenants’ Protective Association (CTPA), striking laborers and grafters in the construction industry had increased rents by inflating building costs, while landlords had capitalized on the large demand for housing by extracting additional profits. Chicago’s organizing middle class tenants demanded that the local and state governments bring these groups to justice and pressed for rent reform to curb profiteering landlords.

The Chicago Tenants’ Protective Association used a variety of methods to gain the attention of the state. The CTPA organized meetings, aired grievances in the press and sent representatives to meet with the Governor of Illinois, state legislators, the Mayor of Chicago and city councilmen. But the “rent strike” served as their primary weapon. By collectively refusing to vacate their apartments on “moving day,” organized tenants forced their landlords to sue, resulting in a “flooding” of the municipal court. The CTPA hoped that a crisis in the municipal court would force the state into action.

⁴⁰³ Chicago *Daily News* 3/19/1920.

By employing the “rent strike” strategy middle class tenants appropriated the language and tactics of organized labor. Simultaneously, many of these tenants expressed disdain for the supposed laziness and high wages of the working class. Since many white collar Chicagoans failed to view working class tenants as important victims of rent increases and also blamed labor graft for disrupting the housing market, they did not visibly cooperate with the working class in tenant organizing.⁴⁰⁴ On the contrary, CTPA leaders declared that the “white collar” or “middle class” was the class that was truly “suffering.” Similar to the “overall movement” and “home garden campaigns,” (see chapters 2 and 4) white collar tenant organizing embodied a complex relationship between the middle and working classes. While antipathetic toward organized construction workers, members of the CTPA borrowed the symbols and strategies of labor unions. The CTPA and member organizations reflected an ideological and organizational separation of the middle class from the working class, even as the lines of culture moved between them.⁴⁰⁵

Middle class tenants created a middle class consumerist space and self-consciously portrayed themselves as defenders of the public. Chicago tenants used the terms “middle class” and “the people” or “the public” interchangeably. Casting themselves as “the people” they applied their values of industriousness, honesty and thrift

⁴⁰⁴ When a tenant who did hold a blue collar profession was a member of the CTPA, he or she (and the CTPA) did not speak of his or her tenant activism in class terms.

⁴⁰⁵ United States Senate, Select Committee on Reconstruction and Production, *Reconstruction and Production: Hearings Before the Select Committee on Reconstruction and Production, United States Senate, Sixty-sixth Congress, Third Session, Pursuant to S. Res. 350 Authorizing the Appointment of a Committee to Inquire Into the General Building Situation and to Report to the Senate Before December 1, 1920, such Measures as May Be Deemed Necessary to Stimulate and Foster the Development of Construction Work in All Its Forms* (Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1921), 941-944.

self-righteously onto the local housing market. They demanded justice against profiteering landlords, building capitalists and grafting labor unions whose alleged greed opposed their interests and embodied the opposite of these values. The middle class tenant movement, along with the municipal market, home garden and overall movements, represented an aggressive attempt by middle class activists to define a consumerist politics that represented their needs and desires as a disinterested and righteous defense of the public against selfish groups. As consumers/the public, they rallied against labor and capital- with local contexts bringing more specific faces to these enemies.^{406 407}

⁴⁰⁶ In imagining themselves as members of the “middle class,” many Chicago tenants created a category of “middle class” that simultaneously had a wide rhetorical reach and specifically defined boundaries. On the one hand, members of the Chicago Tenants’ *Protective Association* posited themselves against labor, as well as profiteering landlords and grafters. However, as Patrick Joyce and Dror Wahrman have noted, the language of class often has been intertwined with a variety of unstable political and cultural meanings. Joyce suggests that by embracing the terms “working class” or “middle class,” historical actors might be intentionally or unknowingly embracing “a political or social vocabulary with ‘the nation’ and ‘the people’ at its centre,” depending on the context. Under these circumstances, the categories of working class and middle class can take on the wider meaning of “the people.” Carol E. Harrison and Dror Wahrman both emphasize the vagueness of middle class language, Harrison arguing that it is more useful to define class “in terms of its extension and reach- rather than its boundaries and exclusions.” While members of middle class tenants’ societies in Chicago often used ill-defined and wide reaching language like “the people” and stated that the middle class encompassed approximately nine tenths of Americans, they also frequently and pointedly defined the boundaries of the category. To such individuals, the middle class was antipathetic to organized labor, profiteering landlords, grafting middlemen in the building industry, and elites. Carol E. Harrison, “The Bourgeois after the Bourgeois Revolution: Recent Approaches to the Middle Class in European Cities” *Journal of Urban History*, 31 (2005), 388; Dror Wahrman, *Imagining the Middle Class: The Political Representation of Class in Britain, c. 1780-1840* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

⁴⁰⁷ Douglas Bukowski states that “For decades the city’s middle-class voters confronted an oftentimes unresponsive government. They had two alternatives to the political status quo- a move up the class ladder into the lifestyle of suburban wealth and isolation or membership in a municipal reform group.” Neither Bukowski nor any other historian mentions the CTPA as a municipal reform group (or mentions the organization at all). While the CPTA did support building graft reform, its members conceived of themselves operating more on the model of a labor union (which are not typically categorized as “municipal reform groups”). Also striking tenants either could not or chose not to move further into the suburbs. They protested to remain in their apartments. Dougals Bukowski, *Big Bill Thompson and the Politics of Image* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1998), 123.

The existing spatial demarcation of many Chicago neighborhoods by class facilitated an organized class-based response to rising rents.⁴⁰⁸ Historians have increasingly viewed neighborhoods as spaces of class-based consumer protest in early twentieth century America. Most, however, have focused exclusively on working class neighborhoods, exploring how the physical bonds between residents both in the workplace and in their neighborhoods enabled them to contest both workplace issues and consumer grievances in these settings. This body of literature, for example, features an exploration into the “female space” of coordinating important components of the 1912 Lawrence, MA strike, or the “neighborhood solidarity” among New York’s working class Jewish Women during 1917 local marketplace consumer boycotts. The rise of consumer culture primarily in the second, third and fourth decades of the twentieth century, according to one historian, simultaneously reinforced the ethnic and class identities of local working class neighborhoods and led to greater bonds between these neighborhoods. Few scholars have assessed how the rise of consumer culture in this period affected middle class urban neighborhoods consisting primarily of renters,⁴⁰⁹ or

⁴⁰⁸ It is also worth noting that Chicago’s residential areas, to a great extent, were also spatially divided by race. See: William Tuttle, *Race Riot: Chicago in the Red Summer of 1919* (New York: Atheneum, 1970) and Margaret Garb, “Drawing the ‘Color Line:’ Race and Real Estate in Early Twentieth-Century Chicago” *Journal of Urban History*, 32 (2006): 782.

⁴⁰⁹ Margaret Garb has noted how advertisements encouraging the ownership of a single-family home in a middle class suburban neighborhood encouraged many to move to the suburbs in late nineteenth and early twentieth century America. Richard Ohmann also stresses the significance of advertising and suburbanization in shaping class-codified spaces, but notes that home ownership did not necessarily signify “middle class” respectability. According to Ohmann, factors such as style of house and type of neighbors were at least as important. Above all, Ohmann argues that the massive rise in advertising that occurred in late nineteenth and early twentieth century America in large part had “professional middle class” readership in mind. It helped to dictate the style of homes, possessions within the home, and neighborhoods they chose. The professional middle class associated such things with class status and came to view their suburban neighborhoods as middle class spaces. Ohmann explores the formation of these spaces, but not how they became spaces of middle class consumer protest, when residents faced the possibility of no longer being able to afford these markers of class distinction. As such, it is useful to point out that consumer

examined these areas as spaces of consumer protest. Residents in neighborhoods, such as Rogers Park, projected their neighborhood as spaces of middle class consumer activism. Inhabitants of these neighborhoods, like Rogers Park's John R. Patterson, were determined to defend their ability to maintain a middle class standard of living in a middle class neighborhood.⁴¹⁰

The grievances of Chicago's organized tenants became part of an established and growing discursive space of middle class consumer protest that expanded beyond the

culture (including advertisements) that suggested a paragon of middle class living contained a potentially transgressive element- the possibility that ideas of middle class consumer behavior would not be sustainable (using different, more current examples, anthropologist John Fiske discusses this concept). It was in this moment that Chicago's white collar tenants most associated their neighborhoods with the terms "middle class," "white collar" or "salaried." Richard Ohmann, *Selling Culture: Magazines, Markets, and Class at the Turn of the Century* (New York: Verso, 1996), 133; Margaret Garb, *City of American Dreams: A History of Home Ownership and Housing Reform in Chicago, 1871-1919* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2005); John Fiske, *Understanding Popular Culture* (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1989). Other historians, such as David Thelen, explore how consumer culture caused white collar workers to identify with producers, giving them a pro-labor orientation during the early twentieth century. This approach does not consider how white collar renters protested in the perceived interests of their own class and seldom joined with the working class during post-World War I rent conflict. David P. Thelen, "Patterns of Consumer Consciousness in the Progressive Movement: Robert M. LaFollette, the Antitrust Persuasion, and Labor Legislation" in Ralph E. Adelman, ed., *The Quest for Social Justice* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1983). Much of recent historiography on consumer culture in the U.S. and its impact on identity formation has analyzed the ways in which Americans negotiated with or refigured mass culture (in contrast to Gramscian mass culture theory, in which consumer culture is almost entirely a controlling force for the benefit of capital). Middle class tenants largely subscribed to popular cultural ideals of living in a single-family home in a middle class neighborhood (even if not initially defined in these terms), but, significantly, turned to this ideal when they faced eviction. Thus, in this setting, consumer culture served as both a means of control for the capitalist class over the middle class, and an instrument of power for them in social conflict. Ultimately, in many respects they spoke the language dictated by advertisements and popular representations of the American home (i.e., consumer culture framed much of the discussion), but they did so in the context of landlord-tenant conflict. That white collar Americans invoked this language while appropriating the "rent strike" strategy from working class culture, suggests that negotiating with multiple strands of culture- both from the top down and the bottom up- served to reinforce their group identity as middle class consumers. For an overview of historians' refiguring of mass culture theory, see David Steigerwald, "All Hail the Republic of Choice: Consumer History as Contemporary Thought" *Journal of American History* 93:2 (Sept. 2006): 385-403.

⁴¹⁰ For "The rise of consumer culture primarily in the second, third and fourth decades of the twentieth century, according to one historian..." see, Elizabeth Cohen, *Making a New Deal: Industrial Workers in Chicago, 1919-1939* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990); Ardis Cameron, *Radicals of the Worst Sort: Laboring Women in Lawrence, Massachusetts, 1960-1912* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993), 117-170; Dana Frank, "Housewives, Socialists, and the Politics of Food: The 1917 New York Cost-of-Living Protests" *Feminist Studies* 11:2 (Summer 1985), 255-285.

physical boundaries of the neighborhood. By the summer of 1920, Americans had become accustomed to tracts in newspapers, magazines and other mediums that lamented the hardships of the high cost of living on the middle class. Whether through boycotts like the overall movement or through discussion on a street corner, Americans also encountered this discourse locally. As local tenants played a role in defining this national (and even international) discursive space, this discourse also reshaped and reinforced the meanings associated with the physical space of their local neighborhoods. Relating escalating rents to a wide-reaching middle class anti-HCL discourse, organizing tenants gave their neighborhoods a middle class identity. Rather than simply moving further into the suburbs, as one historian has suggested, many middle class Chicagoans fought for their rights as tenants in neighborhoods spanning from Hyde Park to Rogers Park. They did so for themselves, but in the name of the “public.”⁴¹¹

Graft and Early Twentieth Century Chicago Politics

Among the primary grievances of Chicago’s postwar middle class was the role that a building shortage played in raising rents. At the onset of the war, many companies and scores of laborers associated with the building industry redirected their efforts toward war industries, a trend that coincided with a twenty percent growth in Chicago’s population between 1910 and 1920. Demand for housing outweighed supply, and this, according to Judge Kennesaw Mountain Landis, led to a “virtual famine in housing accommodations.” (See Figure 1) Many residents believed the problem was exacerbated

⁴¹¹ Matthew Klinge notes how consumption has produced multiple new spaces and changed the nature of existing ones, and encourages historians to explore the interaction between these spaces. Matthew Klinge, “Spaces of Consumption in Environmental History” *History and Theory* 42 (Dec. 2003): 94-110.

by the idea that the building industry was crippled by unproductive workers and “diseased” with corruption. One Chicago resident, who asserted that “nine-tenths of the professional classes have received no increase [in salaries] at all that merits the 100 per cent advance in the cost of living (‘bread and rent’),” called for “the workers in essential industry” to be more diligent and “produce to the limit.” A national law journal observed that “mania” for rent-fixing occurred “in no doubt due to the desperation of the people, who found themselves threatened with extinction as to the extortionate demands of those who controlled the necessities of life,” not the least of which included “higher wage demands.”⁴¹²

Figure 1⁴¹³

Total Permits for New Buildings in Chicago (including single-family dwellings)					
1915	1916	1917	1918	1919	1920
12268	12437	5131	1853	6361	3135

Middle class residents implored members of the government to take action against striking or underproductive laborers and corrupt grafters in the building industry.⁴¹⁴

⁴¹² Chicago Association of Commerce, “Survey of the Construction Industries and Physical Development of Chicago, Twenty-first Anniversary of the Chicago Association of Commerce,” 1925, p. 12, Newberry Library, Chicago, IL; Report of the Illinois Housing and Building Commission to the Governor and General Assembly 2/11/1921, p. 13, Frank Lowden Papers, Illinois State Archives, Springfield, IL; Chicago *Herald Examiner* 5/6/1920; “Validity of Rent-Fixing Statutes” *Central Law Journal* 91 (1920), 459.

⁴¹³ Data from *Report of the Illinois Building Investigation Commission Authorized by the 52nd General Assembly* (Springfield: Illinois State Register Printers, 1923), 4; Chicago *Tribune* 3/23/1921.

⁴¹⁴ The expectation that the state should address high rents by involving itself in relationships between landlords and tenants, contractors and unions, or unions and employers, was possible because a Progressive Era trend to, as Margaret Garb states, “serve a larger public interest by intervening in market relations.” Such a sentiment applied to settlement house workers and other reformers intending to aid the poor, trust-busting advocates, and even those in favor of racial segregation. Garb notes how proponents of racial segregation in the Chicago housing market capitalized on this trend “by arguing that the state had an interest in maintaining public peace.” Much like how segregationists used this Progressive Era impulse to

Expectations of government intervention reflected a broader impulse in the Progressive Era that, as one Chicago historian has noted, “argued that government should and could serve a larger public interest by intervening in market relations.”⁴¹⁵ However, much like in the overall movement, middle class calls for intervention demanded aggressive action against labor unions – a significant divergence from Progressive Era appeals to use the state to protect organized labor and the working class. National, state and local politicians alike read complaints in the press and received many letters highlighting the impact of striking construction workers and profiteering in “building material” on the high cost of rent and housing. For example, in a letter to Illinois Governor Frank Lowden, Paul Perry, a government worker, declared “Real Estate [in Chicago] is dead” and cited “Tyrannous exactions, grafting labor officials, exorbitant wages [and] idleness” as reasons. An Illinois General Assembly commission on building in Chicago reported that “the public demands relief against the manipulations and extractions of price-fixing combinations.” In the late 1920s, economist Royal E. Montgomery reflected, “the public was coming to feel that the building trades needed a policeman.” After effectively defining the middle class as “the public,” a *Chicago Tribune* editorial pointedly declared, “The white collar job holder, the salariat, the small tradesman and professional worker...living in No Man’s Land between organized labor and capital, have for five years been suffering under the fire of opposing forces.” According to the *Tribune*, middle class citizens “have seen wealth amassed on

defend (what they perceived to be) their race interests, the same could be said of Chicago’s middle class tenants in their attempts to defend their perceived class interests. Margaret Garb, “Drawing the ‘Color Line:’ Race and Real Estate in Early Twentieth-Century Chicago” *Journal of Urban History* 32 (2006): 782.

⁴¹⁵ Margaret Garb, “Drawing the ‘Color Line:’ Race and Real Estate in Early Twentieth-Century Chicago” *Journal of Urban History* 32 (2006): 782.

one side and wages going up on the other, while the only advance which touched on them was the advance in the cost of living.”⁴¹⁶

The housing crisis occurred in the midst of a long tradition of graft and graft accusation in Chicago politics. As James Merriner notes, “Chicago’s reputation for corruption” is grounded in reality, but also, “a basis of local and even national folklore.” Under the leadership of “Big Bill Thompson,” 1910s and 20s Chicago was no exception. Mayor from 1915 to 1923 and again from 1927 to 1931, Thompson, according to biographical accounts, was a larger than life public figure- “a demagogue,” grafter and, eventually, friend of Al Capone. Thompson was accused of graft ranging from inflating funds for street widening projects to questionable payments to city building “experts.” While Thompson frequently bore the brunt of Chicago graft accusations, city councilmen and labor leaders were among the numerous other targets.⁴¹⁷

The high level of graft in early twentieth century Chicago took place in the context of a disjointed local political culture, in which, no singular interest group was able to dominate over time, according to political scientist Dick Simpson. Twentieth century Chicago politics, Simpson argues, “was characterized by corruption, ‘boodle,’

⁴¹⁶ See, for example, G.M. Hitchcock to Attorney General 1/28/1920, Records of the U.S. Department of Justice High Cost of Living Division, National Archives II, College Park, MD, Paul V. Perry to Charles Merriam 12/19/1918, Folder 11, Box 73, Charles Merriam Papers, University of Chicago Special Collections Library; *Chicago Tribune* 4/25/1920; Royal E. Montgomery, “Graft in the Building Trades” *The University Journal of Business* 4 (Oct. 1926), 327; *Report of the Illinois Building Investigation Commission Authorized by the 52nd General Assembly* (Springfield: Illinois State Register Printers, 1923), 8.

⁴¹⁷ According to historian Douglas Bukowski, Thompson frequently contradicted himself and simultaneously sought the support of the WASP middle class and organized labor. James Merriner, *Grafters and Goo Goos: Corruption and Reform in Chicago, 1833-2003* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2004), xii-xiii; Douglas Bukowski, *Big Bill Thompson and the Politics of Image* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1998); V.O. Key, “Graft in Chicago 1885-1934,” thesis draft, Folder 6, Box 7, Charles Merriam Papers, University of Chicago Special Collections.

and fragmented power.” Other scholars have demonstrated how a variety Chicago newspapers allied with different politicians and interest groups, creating an opening for self-serving publicity.⁴¹⁸ In fact, city governance was so factionalized and graft so prevalent in both the public and private sectors, that virtually any leader could appeal to the masses by condemning graft, or even investigating it. Even grafters themselves could capitalize on widespread anti-graft sentiment. In the mayoral election of 1919, Big Bill Thompson, for example, campaigned on the platform of “driv[ing] the crooks out of town.” His opponent, Charles Merriam, a genuine reform candidate, also appealed to anti-graft sentiment during the campaign. In a 1919 speech, Merriam exclaimed that he wanted to make the city no longer “owned by bosses and machines and by special privilege and by profiteers.”⁴¹⁹

By the time state, local and federal politicians tackled the issue of building graft in postwar Chicago, haranguing on the general issue of graft had become an important way in which a wide variety of public figures appealed to the citizenry. Andrew Wender Cohen, in his impressive study of early twentieth century racketeering in Chicago, argues that rising prevalence of graft accusation was a function of capitalists using the idea of labor racketeering against organized craftsmen in an attempt to usher in a modern capitalistic economy. Absent from this argument is the question of how and why this would appeal to those in the American public that were neither capitalists nor craftsmen

⁴¹⁸ See, for example, Dougals Bukowski, *Big Bill Thompson and the Politics of Image* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1998), 124-25.

⁴¹⁹ Speech 2/7/1919- Columbia Theatre, Folder 3, Box 73, Charles Merriam Papers, University of Chicago Special Collections; Dick Simpson, *Rogues, Rebels, and Rubber Stamps: The Politics of the Chicago City Council from 1863 to the Present* (Boulder, Co: Westview Press, 2001), 46, 71.

or unionized labor. While antipathetic toward profiteering capitalists, available voices from white collar Chicagoans expressed support for this anti-labor graft strategy. By protesting graft, progressive reformers, middle class tenants, and even Big Business could all speak the same language. Throughout the anti-building graft movement, the meaning of this language- who were the victims of graft and who stood to benefit most from reform- shifted over time.⁴²⁰

Destroying graft among labor unions in the building industry would perhaps most directly benefit real estate developers, and they pressed the issue by helping to make it a matter of public interest. While large real estate developers, such as Benjamin Rosenthal of Sears and Roebuck and members of the Chicago Real Estate Board, called attention to labor graft by citing the necessity of maintaining rule of law, they also cast the building shortage as the primary reason for high rents. One of many statements by the Chicago Real Estate Board explained that rental increases were caused by a lack of building, transpiring from “Unregulated associations and combinations [that] have been formed enabling enemies of society to injure the public and themselves through profiteering and restriction of production.” According to this and similar appeals, the high cost of labor represented the most prohibitive factor in new building. Since middle class Chicagoans had also called for the state to lower the cost of housing by addressing striking and grafting labor, local real estate interests framed the issue in terms of protecting “the public” or “the people.” Such statements encouraged middle class Chicagoans to join with building capitalists in an effort to suppress strikers and labor graft. As James

⁴²⁰ Andrew Wender Cohen, *The Racketeer's Progress: Chicago and the Struggle for the Modern American Economy 1900-1940* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

Merriner notes, in this period (and others) of Chicago political history, both corruption and reform were, at least in part, outgrowths of class conflict. The case of the postwar graft reform movement proved no exception. Yet, in large part, this would take shape after a series of direct battles between tenants and their alleged “profiteering” landlords.⁴²¹

“Coin Hungry” Landlords

Although it would be inaccurate to separate middle class tenants’ culprits for escalating rents, they perhaps most frequently demanded that elected officials prevent profiteering from opportunistic landlords.⁴²² Scores of tenants complained of excessive rents before the City Council, and members of the Judiciary Committee referenced frequent complaints from “many citizens” and from the “public press” concerning the

⁴²¹ Letter from Henry Holsman, H.B. Wheelock, Mark Levy, Ivan Ackley to Mayor William Thompson, Chicago Real Estate Board *Bulletin* 8/16/1919, Newberry Library, Chicago, IL; James Merriner, *Grafters and Goo Goos: Corruption and Reform in Chicago, 1833-2003* (Carbondale: University of Southern Illinois Press, 2004), xiii.

⁴²² Tenants complained of a variety of tactics that led to high rents. Some complained of landlords taking advantage of the housing crunch by selling their property to make higher profits. A new owner often either raised the rent or simply used the building for other purposes. Equally common, tenants grew frustrated over the poor maintenance or janitorial service of their apartments and apartment buildings, even with rent increases. One landlord who refused to adequately heat a tenant’s house responded to her requests by asserting “the lease...contains no warranty that the furnace is large enough to adequately heat the house in question, and no such warranty can be implied.” His tenant found this unacceptable. See, for example, Newberry Library Financial Agent to Mr. C.J. Anderson 6/6/1922, Box 22, Records of the Newberry Library Financial Agent, RG 4, Newberry Library, Chicago IL; Newberry Financial Agent to Mr R.N. Baylies 5/31/22, Box 22, Records of the Newberry Library Financial Agent, RG 4, Newberry Library, Chicago IL; Newberry Library Financial Agent to Miss J.A. Garratt 12/6/1918, Box 22, Records of the Newberry Library Financial Agent, RG 4, Newberry Library, Chicago IL; Newberry Library Financial Agent to George S. Wheaton 3/4/1919, Box 22, Records of the Newberry Library Financial Agent, RG 4, Newberry Library, Chicago IL; and Sever Severseri to Frank Lowden 1/27/1920, Series III, Folder 8, Box 37, Frank Lowden Papers, University of Chicago Special Collections Library; Transcript of Proceedings and associated documents, *W.J. Scudder v. Mrs. Chas Marsh* 9/27/1919, Records of the Circuit Court, Cook County, IL, held at the Cook County Clerk of Courts Archives, Chicago, IL; Chicago *Tribune* 9/9/1919.

“vital importance” of “extortionate rentals.” Governor Frank Lowden also received many letters from disgruntled tenants and other interested parties. One even pointedly declared “Landlordism is a curse” and called for the end of the tenancy altogether. In some cases, pressure to curb rent profiteering followed national politicians (whether from Chicago or elsewhere) to Washington. When Rep. Everette Howard hired a new secretary from Oklahoma, the secretary immediately complained that she was unable to find lodging commensurate with her salary, a common grievance of Government clerks and assistants. “If these rent hogs are to continue,” Howard proclaimed, they would have “to dig deeper into the budget and raise salaries once again.” Expressing a similar viewpoint, Rep. George Huddleston proclaimed, “No wonder we find a loud outcry going up because of the extortion that is being practiced.”⁴²³

Escalating rents were a national reality. Along with a rise in the price of coal, building materials and other related commodities, average rents in the United States increased by 11 percent from 1914 to 1919. The cost of housing in Chicago (rents included), in which 73 percent of residents were renters, increased by 14 percent. But, the greatest increases occurred in the months of 1920 and 1921, when tenant activism blossomed. From December, 1919 to December, 1921, housing costs in Chicago jumped by 62 percent. (See Figure 1) In this same period the general cost of living in Chicago, while nearly double that of 1914, actually marginally decreased. Such a trend encouraged Chicagoans to pay special attention to housing in these months. Certainly in many cases, landlords increased rent not out of personal greed, but because they too suffered from the

⁴²³ Proceedings of the City Council of the City of Chicago 8/5/1919, Newberry Library, Chicago, IL; John Lowling to Frank Lowden 1/20/1921, Folder 6, Box 39, Series III, Frank Lowden Papers, University of Chicago Special Collections Library; *Congressional Record*- House of Representatives- 8/22/1919.

HCL. A number of landlords cited the inflated heating and maintenance costs of the postwar period as reasons for raising rents. The landlord of Chicago's "Irving" apartment complex, for example, informed all residents in a form letter that "the trustees have decided, on account of the increased cost of coal and other expenses at the Irving, to raise the rents of all flats." Some tenants understood, but others dismissed these statements as excuses and registered complaints. In any case, according to many tenants, not all situations were this cut and dry.⁴²⁴

Figure 1:

Relative Housing Costs and Cost of Living (All Commodities) in Chicago (Dec. 1916 and Dec. 1914=1, respectively)

Month/Year	Dec-14	Dec-16	Dec-17	Dec-18	Jun-19	Dec-19	Jun-20	Dec-20	May-21	Sep-21	Dec-21	Mar-22
Housing Costs		1	1.007	1.019	1.073	1.126	1.342	1.527	1.77	1.786	1.827	1.828
Cost of Living (All Items)	1	1.095	1.42	1.72	1.74	2	2.14	1.933	1.784	1.75	1.72	1.65

In particular, middle class Chicagoans cited landlords' discrimination against tenants with children as a reason for protest. As Wilbert Schrecke lamented, "The few flats listed as vacant request 'no children.' Is it any wonder that many people remain childless?" According to Schrecke, "A law should be enacted to fine heavily any one barring any couple with children." As early as June, 1919 citizens registered complaints with the Chicago Police and the City Council for "discrimination by landlords against prospective tenants with children." Others complained of being evicted because of the

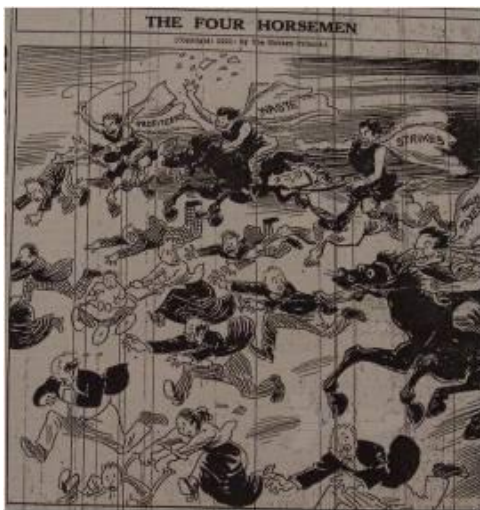
⁴²⁴ Newberry Library Financial Agent to Mrs. Elizabeth I Alvord, 3435 Ingleside Ave 2/26/1918, Box 22, Records of the Newberry Library Financial Agent, RG 4, Newberry Library, Chicago IL; United States Census, *Historical Statistics of the United States: Colonial Times to 1970, Part I, Series E* (Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1975), 40-51 and 135-166; Chicago *Tribune* 1/21/1921; Data (including chart) calculated from: U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, "The Cost of Living in the United States" *Bulletin of the Bureau of Labor Statistics* 357 (May 1924), 457.

presence of children. Since the postwar housing shortage enabled landlords to have their choice of Chicago's tenants, many had no incentive to take on the additional noise and maintenance costs that might accompany tenants with children. The Chicago media echoed the grievances of these citizens, placing an emphasis on the challenge unsympathetic landlords posed to the middle class family.⁴²⁵

Tenants' emphasis on children and the family had symbolic significance. As historian Lisa Jacobson notes, the "routineized corporate jobs and dwindling economic autonomy" of white collar workers caused them to rely on the home for "personal fulfillment." Focused on the home, middle class Americans discussed the plight of their families (with a particular emphasis on children) as a way of expressing general frustrations with the economy, society or individual circumstances. By stressing the impact of high rents on children, the statements of these tenants speak to many historians' observations that discussion of children and childhood "can tell us much about the anxieties and aspirations" of adults. In defending their perceived class interests, middle class Chicagoans frequently centered discourse on a discussion of their children's hardships.⁴²⁶

⁴²⁵ Proceedings of the City Council of the City of Chicago 6/9/1919 and 6/23/1919, Newberry Library, Chicago, IL.

⁴²⁶ Quote taken from Jacobson. Daniel Horowitz also discusses the home and children as markers and symbols of middle class values to the early twentieth century U.S. middle class. Horowitz writes, "Faced with declining birth-rates for 'proper' families, they [Ellen Richards and Martha Bruere, efficiency experts for middle class readers] worried about the conditions for raising children who would be a credit to what they perceived as middle-class values...They saw the household budget as an instrument in the battle for self-preservation that 'good families' had to wage..." Lisa Jacobson, *Raising Consumers: Children and the American Mass Market In the Early Twentieth Century* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 2, 9; Daniel Horowitz, "Frugality or Comfort: Middle-Class Styles of Life in the Early Twentieth Century" *American Quarterly* 37:2 (Summer, 1985), 241.



Cartoons in the Chicago press featured families dressed respectably (rather than in obvious penury), but looking visibly distressed over how profiteering might threaten their future, whether it involved seeking to remain in their home, rent an apartment, or buy a new home.⁴²⁷

Chicago's middle class tenants cited their ability to maintain a single-family rented home in a middle class neighborhood as a primary concern.⁴²⁸ The paragon of middle class single-family occupancy grew in the late nineteenth and early twentieth

⁴²⁷ Chicago *Daily News* 3/27/1920; Proceedings of the City Council of the City of Chicago 6/9/1919 and 6/23/1919, Newberry Library, Chicago, IL; Chicago *Evening American* 4/28/1919 (Tenant, North Side); Chicago *Tribune* 5/4/1921 (Four Horsemen); Chicago *Tribune* 4/2/1921 (Rent Hog); Southtown *Economist* 2/25/1921 (Home Hunters).

⁴²⁸ For example, in newspaper articles and editorials, as well as government sources, middle class Chicagoans and other commentators, particularly lamented the idea of tenants having to “double up” in apartments in response to high rents.

centuries with the rise of consumer culture and mass advertising in America. According to Richard Ohman, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Americans witnessed a boom in mass culture led by popular magazines with middle class readership in mind. Both these popular magazines and writers of advice manuals such as Ellen Richards, Daniel Horowitz notes in his study of consumer culture and middle class spending habits, emphasized the importance of the independence of the middle class home (preferably owned). Richards told middle class readers that an independent home would protect against “communal pleasures” that could expose middle class families to the dangers of socialism, immigrants, the working class and “primitive” communities. Margaret Garb argues that in the late nineteenth century, owner-occupied single-family homes emerged as an ideal for middle class Chicagoans, and one that they defended against perceived encroachment from the working class and, eventually, African American residents. While many white collar Chicagoans chased the dream of home ownership, the ideal of single-family occupancy also applied to renters. In the post-World War I period, it was an ideal that many middle class tenants were steadfast to defend.⁴²⁹

Already facing high rents, in at least a few cases, middle class renters resented the idea that common laborers could now afford housing in middle class neighborhoods.

⁴²⁹ See, Richard Ohman, *Selling Culture: Magazines, Markets, and Class at the Turn of the Century* (New York: Haymarket Press, 1996); Daniel Horowitz, *The Morality of Spending: Attitudes Toward the Consumer Society in America, 1875-1940* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985), 83-4; Margaret Garb, *City of American Dreams: A History of Home Ownership and Housing Reform in Chicago, 1871-1919* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2005) and William Tuttle, *Race Riot: Chicago in the Red Summer of 1919* (New York: Atheneum, 1970); On doubling up, see, for example, Chicago Tribune 12/28/1919, *Report of the Illinois Housing and Building Commission* (Springfield, IL: Illinois State Printers, 1921), 5-12. Commentators worried about the effects of overcrowding on the working class perhaps even more so.

Julian Yurman, a doctor living in a South Side apartment, wrote to a Chicago judge not only to protest escalating rents and the general ineptitude of the state, but also to complain about the nature of his new neighbors. Coinciding with an increase in rent, a street car driver, his wife and five kids moved into a “small five room flat” directly above Yurman’s apartment. Yurman called the environment “unsanitary and a danger to the neighborhood” and declared that because of all of the commotion he and his wife got “no rest.” Yurman lamented having “to work nights at the University of Chicago to pay rent.”⁴³⁰



The maps show a proportionate increase in working class settlement in this Rogers Park block, though it remained largely middle class. The data only includes “heads of households,” but it is worth noting that most heads of households shared apartments with their families and, especially in the case of working class tenants, other tenants or borders. This block was active in the CTPA/Rogers Park Tenants’ Protective Association postwar rent strikes.

⁴³⁰ Chicago *Herald Examiner* 5/6/1920; “Validity of Rent-Fixing Statutes” *Central Law Journal* 91 (1920): 459; Julian Yurmen to Harry Olsen 1/10/1919, Folder 6, Box 3, Harry Olsen Papers, Northwestern University Archives, Northwestern University Library.

Many middle class tenants also resented that wage earners were increasingly able to afford other objects and institutions that had heretofore signified middle class status. The inability of middle class parents to provide a single-family home for their children represented just one worry. A supposed decline in middle class marriage rates also troubled white collar workers and sympathetic journalists. According to a 1920 Providence *Journal* study of marriage rates, wage earners, whose pay had increased with the cost of living, were cornering the marriage market. Finding their quest for an affordable flat “in vain,” and suffering from the high costs associated with a respectable wedding, white collar men were less likely to enter matrimony. Middle class women stood as the symbolic victim of this trend. According to the *Journal*, “white collar daughters will pay the greater part of the toll,” as the primary victim of the “tragedy” of the HCL⁴³¹

⁴³¹ A similar study of marriage rates by class also took place in Chicago, and the study’s results were connected to housing concerns. Conducted by S.C Legner, chief Cook County marriage license clerk, the 1920 study concluded, “the number of licenses issued to members of the ‘salaried’ class is steadily decreasing, the number issued to members of the laboring class is steadily growing.” Those that did get married reportedly had trouble affording single-family flats and often had to live with parents. It is also worth noting that many complaining of the impact of the HCL on families declared the profiteering was unpatriotic. In emphasizing family, marriage and the home as middle class institutions and asserting that threats to it were un-American, this discourse somewhat equated the categories of “middle class” and “American.” Such a connection appealed to the emotions of readers who valued these institutions, while furthering the broad anti-radical discourse of the first red scare that enabled people to declare nearly anything negative as un-American. See, for example, Robert Murray, *Red Scare: A Study in National Hysteria, 1919-1920* (Westport, Ct: Greenwood Press, 1980, c1955), 164-5, which discusses how coal companies (and others) used anti-radicalism to promote open shop, and Kim E. Nielsen *Un-American Womanhood: Antiradicalism, Antifeminism, and the First Red Scare* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2001), which explores how post-World War I antifeminists connected the concepts of nationhood and the patriarchal family in the red scare context. Chicago *Tribune* 8/3/1920; Providence *Journal* 4/4/1920.



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Politicians generally responded to middle class complaints by enlarging them, further drawing on a continually growing national middle class anti-HCL discourse that featured extreme statements against laborers and profiteers. They did so in both small and massive public settings. At a City Council meeting in the summer of 1919, Alderman A.J. Fisher declared that many landlords were taking “unfair and intolerable advantage” of Chicago’s tenants. Before an audience at the Columbia Theater, Charles Merriam, a candidate for mayor, played on common practice of relating anti-profiteering to war/postwar patriotic fervor. Merriam explained that he loathed to see soldiers come home to a city run by corruption “and by profiteers, because if this is done, then the results of the war are in large measure undone.” National politicians also used exaggerated rhetoric. The Department of Justice High Cost of Living Division- Women’s Division, for example, instructed local speakers to address the high cost of all commodities (including rent) by stating “‘more pay-shorter hours’ [is] the plea of

⁴³² Providence *Journal* 4/4/1920.

workers in almost every industry...up go prices to new high levels. We fiddle and fiddle while Rome burns.”⁴³³

Alderman Robert Mulcahy was one of the most enthusiastic supporters of rent reform. In many ways, Robert Mulcahy was a stereotypical Chicago politician. A native Chicagoan, Mulcahy spent his early years operating a saloon and working as a businessman in the railroad industry. However, when injuries forced him to retire from railroad work at a young age, Mulcahy entered politics, winning election to the Illinois House of Representatives as a Democrat for three terms, in 1912, 1914 and 1916. In 1918, Mulcahy successfully ran for Alderman of Chicago’s Fifth Ward, much to the dismay of the Republican-friendly anti-graft Municipal Voters’ League.⁴³⁴

Like a few other allies of Chicago’s middle class tenants, Mulcahy was both a critic of graft and, according to some accounts, a grafter and a violent criminal. In October, 1908, Mulcahy was indicted on the charge of “assault with intent to kill,” after a May 22, 1908 alleged confrontation with policeman William P. Phillips, in which he drew a club and a revolver. The charges, however, were dropped in 1909, three years before his first House campaign. It would not be the last time Mulcahy was associated with a scandal. In August of 1918, the State Attorney’s Office subpoenaed Mulcahy and a number of other Aldermen to testify on the accusation that they had taken bribes for their votes on a subway and elevated train surface “unification” ordinance. State Attorney

⁴³³ Speech 2/7/1919- Columbia Theater, Folder 3, Box 73, Charles Merriam Papers, University of Chicago Special Collections Library; “Speech Stuff, HCL Woman’s Campaign,” Records of the U.S. Department of Justice High Cost of Living Division, National Archives II, College Park, MD.

⁴³⁴ Louis L. Emmeson ed., *Blue Book of the State of Illinois* (Danville, IL: Illinois Printing Co., 1918), 144-145.

Maclay Hoyne took particular interest in Mulcahy because he had changed his vote, first opposing the measure, then supporting it. Hoyne suggested that Mulcahy had determined that the \$3,000-\$10,000 he was allegedly originally offered was too low of an amount to buy his vote. Accused of “graft,” Mulcahy was livid. “This is an outrage as far as I’m concerned,” Mulcahy declared. “No one had spoken to me about even voting for or against the ordinance.” Similar to his previous brush with controversy, there was insufficient evidence to prove wrongdoing.⁴³⁵

Even though he had a history of allegedly placing his personal financial gain above the public interest, Mulcahy stood to benefit from condemning graft and rent profiteering, as accusations of graft and extracting excess profits had become so ubiquitous in local political culture that virtually anyone could appeal to them. Mulcahy, who established and led the City Council’s investigative committee on rents, frequently assailed rent profiteers in meetings and in the press, using labels such as “greedy” to characterize many of Chicago’s landlords. Working in conjunction with middle class tenants and other local politicians, one newspaper summarized Mulcahy’s committee’s efforts as “declaring war on rent profiteers.” Mulcahy even wrote his nemesis, State Attorney Hoyne, asking him to gather evidence against rent profiteers and conspirators in the real estate industry and send them to jail. Unsurprisingly, Mulcahy made sure that the *Chicago Tribune* was aware of his bold request. “I am convinced that there is basis for indictments,” Mulcahy wrote. “A statute on conspiracy should be applied forcibly.” Months later, when Hoyne responded by suggesting that the city could control rents by licensing apartment buildings as “apartment hotels,” Mulcahy retorted that Hoyne had not

⁴³⁵ *Chicago Tribune* 3/28/1918, 6/17/1918, 6/18/1918.

responded to his request of using conspiracy statutes against profiteers and that he had ignored the issue altogether until it was politically convenient to respond. “Now that he is running for office,” Mulcahy exclaimed, he “is handy with suggestions.” Focusing on eliminating profiteering and self-interest, Mulcahy spoke to the local context of high rents, graft, and frequent accusations of political opportunism, but also to an established postwar national anti-HCL, anti-profiteering discourse.⁴³⁶

Along with middle class citizens themselves, the local and national press, and politicians such as Mulcahy, also frequently defined middle class concerns as those of “the people.” During a discussion in the Senate of high rents for salaried government employees in Washington D.C., Senator Byron Patton Harrison exclaimed that he sought to “compel him [the landlord] to do justice toward the public.” The *Englewood Times* (Chicago, South Side) used the term “middle class” interchangeably with “the public” and “the majority” in a diatribe of strikes, high wages and profiteering. The *Times* asserted that both organized labor and real estate investors “punished” the “middle class,” and lamented that “the public generally pay for the sins of both labor and capital.” Similarly, New York *Times* journalists stated that when faced with “increased prices” and “profiteering in rents,” white collar workers make up “a formidable total” and “their influence is found to be felt.” Addressing a group of tenants that publicly identified as middle class, Mulcahy condemned the negative impact that rent profiteering had on the “great many people” in the city.⁴³⁷

⁴³⁶ Chicago *Tribune* 2/9/1920, 2/24/1920, 8/14/1920.

⁴³⁷ Proceedings of the City Council of the City of Chicago 8/12/1920, Newberry Library, Chicago, IL; *Congressional Record*- Senate 9/10/1919; *Englewood Times* (Chicago) 7/25/1919; New York *Times* 2/15/1920.

In addition to making such statements, the City Council had reacted to citizens' complaints by passing resolutions that condemned the popular culprits for high rents—striking labor, grafters and profiteering landlords— and established commissions to investigate these groups. One July 1919 City Council resolution declared that the cost of labor had “so greatly advanced,” that the city was in the midst of a “long-continued building shortage” and that “landlords and agents throughout the city are taking unfair and intolerable advantage” of these conditions. The resolution further called for the Committee on the Judiciary to investigate high rental charges and to figure out a “practical legal measure” to prevent landlords from raising rents by more than ten percent. Five days later, the City Council authorized the Superintendent of Public Service to collect data on rent profiteering, receive tenants' complaints and forward them to a special City Council committee. The Council instructed the committee to send these complaints to the Board of Review of Cook County with a request that “the property taxes of said landlords be increased proportionately with the increase in rentals demanded by them.” This strategy involved multiple levels of city bureaucracy and would only penalize profiteering landlords by making them pay a percentage of their newly found profits. Otherwise, the Judiciary Committee “found that there was nothing it could do.” To many Chicagoans, this was not enough.⁴³⁸

On August 14, 1919, middle class Chicagoans transformed their grievances into organized action, forming the Chicago Tenants' Protective Association (CTPA). At the

⁴³⁸ The Council also passed a resolution 42-1 asking Gov. Lowden to call a special session of the State Assembly to address high rents. Proceedings of the City Council of the City of Chicago 8/5/1919, Newberry Library, Chicago, IL; *Chicago Tribune* 2/4/1920; Chicago City Club *Bulletin* 8/16/1920, Regenstein Library, University of Chicago.

1021 Garrick Building, approximately 400 tenants came together to protest rent increases of as high as 600 percent. Very quickly, the movement expanded. Just three days after the formation of the CTPA, William S. Forman, a CTPA organizer, announced to the City Council, “We have hundreds of complaints every day and some of them come from the best known and most respected persons in town.” Perhaps in order to draw additional publicity to the CTPA, Forman invited the landlords to join the association under the pretext that everyone should be interested “to see that tenants get fair play.” The CTPA promised an “aggressive strategy” against landlords who had “robbed” “the people” “of \$50,000 every day through unfair transactions.” Similar to other tenant organizations, the CTPA fixed dues at 10 cents a month to help provide for the growth of the organization.⁴³⁹

“Rent Strike”

As landlords across Chicago continued to raise rents, organized middle class tenants turned to a more direct approach, announcing plans for “rent war.” In February 1920, borrowing the strategy of working class tenants before them, middle class Chicagoans declared a “rent strike” beginning May 1. Over the course of the next two months, tenants, landlords, politicians and the press anticipated potential chaos.⁴⁴⁰

⁴³⁹ For an example of how dues aided in the growth of a tenant association outside of Chicago and also created problems for citizens already struggling with the HCL, see Minutes of the Germantown (Philadelphia) Tenants’ Protective Association, Pennsylvania Historical Society, Philadelphia, PA. *Chicago Tribune* 8/13/1919, 8/15/1919, 8/18/1919, 8/29/1919.

⁴⁴⁰ Perry R. Duis notes that May 1, as “moving day,” had become “an annual ritual” in Chicago by the 1870s. Specific reference to moving day on May 1 in Chicago dates back to at least 1847; Perry R. Duis, *Challenging Chicago: Coping with Everyday Life, 1837-1920* (Urbana University of Illinois Press, 1998), 75.

The postwar period brought a shift from “rent strikes” and tenant organizing representing exclusively working class strategies to their expanded use by middle class tenants. Working class renters across the United States had used the “rent strike” since 1904, beginning with socialists on New York’s Lower East Side. During these strikes, as historians Andrew Wood and James Baer note, working class tenants “turned to the ideology and tactics of [organized] labor.” Working class renters, living side-by-side, relied on each other in tenant organizing, a fact that was mostly possible because of the spatial organization of many cities by class.⁴⁴¹

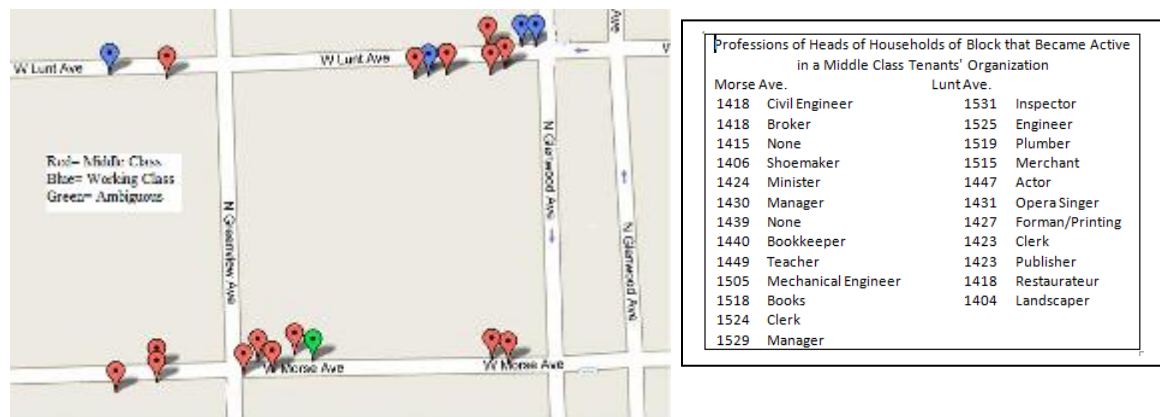
When middle class tenants faced rent increases in the postwar period, they too organized in accordance with the class-based demarcation of the city. Just as many of their working class counterparts lived side-by-side, many middle class tenants resided in predominantly white collar neighborhoods (for an example of one block that became

⁴⁴¹ For working class Americans, high rents had been a constant problem long before the onset of World War I. Perhaps the first major formalized “rent strike” in the United States occurred in 1904 on New York’s Lower East Side, when working class Jewish women networked with each other to protest 30-40 percent rent increases. Shortly afterwards, their efforts led to the establishment of a tenants’ union by male socialists. New York socialists led similar rent strikes in Manhattan and Brooklyn in 1907-08, again among working class communities. In January of 1917, Bronx landlords faced an especially formidable rent strike. In the predominantly Russian-Jewish-immigrant, “lower class” neighborhood of Crotona Park, 500-1000 tenants organized under the auspices of the Socialist Women’s Consumers League of the Bronx and refused to move out because of escalating rents. Immediately the tenants were served eviction notices and brought into court for forcible detainer cases. After the municipal court decided in favor of the landlords, tenant organizing disintegrated, only to resurface during the war. In New York, as well as in Boston and Chicago (among Jewish tenants on the West Side), the rent strike and the formation of “a union of tenants” represented a working class strategy designed to address a recurring problem. For working class tenant activism, see: Ronald Lawson and Stephen E. Barton, “Sex Roles in Social Movements: A Case Study of the Tenant Movement in New York City” *Signs* 6:2 (1980), 232-3; Joseph A. Spencer, “New York City Tenant Organizations and the Post-World War I Housing Crisis” in Ronald Lawson and Mark Naison, eds., *The Tenant Movement in New York, 1904-1984* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1986), 51-93; Andrew Wood and James A. Baer, “Strength in Numbers: Urban Rent Strikes and Political Transformation in the Americas, 1904-1925” *Journal of Urban History* 32 (2006), 867; Ronald Lawson, “The Rent Strike in New York City, 1904-1980: The Evolution of a Social Movement Strategy” *Journal of Urban History* 10: 3 (1984): 235-258; Galveston (TX) *Daily News* 12/28/1907; New York *Times* 1/4/1908; Boston *Daily Globe* 2/2/1908 and 2/4/1908; *Outlook* 1/18/1908.

active in middle class tenant activism, see Figure 1; for other examples, see appendix 5).

White collar tenants would not feel alone in expressing their grievances.

Figure 1 (year: 1910)⁴⁴²



The transition to middle class usage of the “rent strike” occurred not only because of the reality of increasing rents and stagnant salaries for residents in spatially-organized middle class neighborhoods, but also because of an accompanying rising and accepted discourse of middle class consumer protest surrounding other commodities, such as food,

⁴⁴² Spatially mapping residence patterns by class presents the problem of how to define, in many ways, a culturally constructed concept, empirically. Unfortunately, it would be nearly impossible to determine the class identification of individuals in (enough) specific households, thus mapping by profession (the best demographic data available) is the best option. This dissertation does not argue that class can be defined by profession. Data on professions is used in this instance (and a few others) only because it is locatable (and it is worth noting that white collar families did often exhibit similar cultural behavior (e.g., patterns of consumption)). For a discussion on the drawbacks of defining class by profession, see Burton Bledstein and Robert Johnston eds., *The Middling Sorts: Explorations in the History of the American Middle Class* (New York: Routledge, 2001); United States, Bureau of the Census, *Fourteenth Census of the United States, 1920*, Washington, D.C.: National Archives and Records Administration, 1920, Census Place: Chicago Ward 25, Cook (Chicago), Illinois; Roll: T625_341; Enumeration District: 1399. Map constructed from 1910 U.S. Census data using “google maps;” Population growth statistics calculated from Department of Commerce Bureau of Foreign and Domestic Commerce, *Statistical Abstract of the United States 1922* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1923), 29.

clothing, and entertainment. It provided a working vocabulary on which tenants could draw to help define their grievances. As such, it helped to define their tenant activism and their neighborhoods as “middle class.”⁴⁴³

“We should get as much as we can,” shouted George W. Torpe, President of the Lake View Property Owners and Improvement Association before fellow landlords at a February 27, 1920 public meeting. According to a press account, other landlords at the meeting encouraged each other to “shove it to the tenants,” and when tenant-friendly Alderman Robert Mulcahy failed to show up for an invitation to speak, landlords reportedly called him “a coward.” J.E. Prendergast, secretary of the Association, exclaimed, “Ald. Mulcahy’s brave enough when he’s in the city hall under police protection, but he’s afraid to come out at our meeting and argue with us.” Gaining wind of the landlords’ sentiments only emboldened tenants seeking to organize the May 1 rent strike. “We have organized a strike,” CTPA officer H.S. Standish declared, “and we intend to see who is running this city- the public or the landlords.” By “the public” Standish likely had the white collar class in mind. At the next meeting, Standish’s CTPA discussed for the first time the idea of establishing a “white collar league” that would

⁴⁴³Appearing in magazines and newspapers around the nation were articles letters to the editor and even popular poetry that related the problem of escalating rents and price increases of other commodities to important “middle class” customs and institutions, such as courtship norms, marriage, fashion and family life. As one poem published in the *Chicago Tribune* stated: “...I wanted to take my best girl to a dance; The moths had fed full on my only dress pants; So I went out and purchased a pair; Well, labor is costly and woolen’s expensive; T was thus that the tailor began his offensive; And his price made me shiver and stare; It sounded forever Terpalchore’s knell; Another poor victim of the H.C. of L.; I’d like to get married and set up a flat; But only the wealthy can contemplate that; On account of the rent profiteers; No family can live on just kisses and honey; And even the sweet stuff costs oodles of money; With food prices highest in years; Just take it from me, I’m unhappy as hell! And all on account of the H.C.L.” *Chicago Tribune* 9/20/1919 and 2/28/1920.

more broadly represent the interests of “professional men and office workers.” But, for the time being, May 1st was the task at hand.⁴⁴⁴

On May 1, Chicagoans witnessed what participants and the media called “rent war.” Many striking tenants placed “rent war” or “unfair” signs in their windows as they refused to move from their homes. Among the many scenes in Chicago flats was a fight between tenant Rose Mistrella and a new tenant who sought to move in before she had agreed to leave. During the fight, the new tenant managed to give Mistrella “many bruises, pull out sections of her hair and break her glasses.” While most tenants did not experience that kind of violence, they did prepare for a different kind of battle- in the municipal court. Acting collectively, individual tenants hoped to force landlords to sue for forcible detainers. The CTPA envisioned that by collectively stretching the capacity of the municipal court, tenants would force the local and state governments to enact landlord-tenant reform.⁴⁴⁵

The child of a striking tenant[s] pictured on the right posing for the *Chicago Daily Journal*. The sign illustrates the intention of the CTPA to force landlords to take tenants to court. The Chicago media often reinforced the sentiments and rhetoric of tenants and aided CTPA organizing by providing publicity.



⁴⁴⁴ *Chicago Tribune* 2/28/1920, 3/1/1920; The 1920 U.S. Census lists H.S. Standish’s occupation as “lawyer,” a white collar profession. United States, Bureau of the Census, Fourteenth Census of the United States, 1920. Washington, D.C.: National Archives and Records Administration, 1920. Census Place: Cook (Chicago), Illinois; Roll: T625_321, pg. 134.

⁴⁴⁵ *Chicago Tribune* 5/2/1920; *Chicago Daily Journal* 4/29/1921 (picture of child with sign).

Even from the early planning stages of the May 1st rent strike, striking tenants aimed to convince local and state governments to develop more aggressive strategies to prevent rent increases. In spite of the often radical origins of early twentieth century rent strikes, even these working class tenants largely did not use rent strikes as an anti-statist strategy. Andrew Wood and James A. Baer argue of early twentieth century working class rent strikes, “collective action on the part of tenants required not only ample resources ‘from below’ but also an opening for such protest afforded ‘from above.’” When middle class Chicagoans adopted this working class strategy in 1920, they also relied on the potential to be legitimized “from above,” and politicians, did, indeed, give the CTPA reason for optimism. Led by Robert Mulcahy, many members of the City Council investigated high rents and publicly advocated penalties for rent profiteers. Aldermen and former judges attended CTPA meetings, and Board of Education officials even offered schools as meeting places for tenant organizations. With an opening “from above” a letter to the editor of the *Chicago Tribune* summed up tenants’ goals. “Take [cases] to court,” the writer advocated. “Should the decision be against the tenant, file an appeal, give bond, and let the [rent] hog wait for his year’s rent until the decision is handed down...The Illinois legislature convenes in 1921 and it is hoped that a bill may be passed...If the poor white collar slaves will only stand together it can be done in Illinois.”⁴⁴⁶

⁴⁴⁶ Andrew Wood and James A. Baer, “Strength in Numbers: Urban Rent Strikes and Political Transformation in the Americas, 1904-1925” *Journal of Urban History* 32 (2006): 862; *Chicago Tribune* 8/4/1920. One tenant expressed frustration with aldermen attending meetings purely for political gain, rather than having tenants’ grievances at heart. *Chicago Tribune* 3/10/1920, 2/2/1921.

Months before May 1, the Council had begun arbitrating landlord-tenant disputes, working with “a committee of experts” from the Chicago Real Estate Board, an organization that certainly represented landlords more than tenants. Such a strategy mirrored the actions of other city councils across the United States and conformed with the preferences of officials in the U.S. Bureau of Industrial Housing and Transportation, who believed that “rent-profiteering committees” or “‘landlord and tenant adjustment committees,’ will be of permanent value in settling grievances between landlords and tenants by conciliation without the expense and delay of court proceedings” After May 1 landlord-tenant arbitration skyrocketed. With scores of cases on the municipal court docket, the City Council became more directly involved. Determining that “the City of Chicago has not the power” to control rent, they exerted increased pressure on the State Government to “compel landlords...to desist from charging exorbitant and unfair rental.” On May 3, the Council passed a resolution to that effect, adding that the states of Maryland and New York had enacted legislation that enabled Baltimore and New York City, respectively, to regulate rents.⁴⁴⁷

Chicago’s real estate interests were not indifferent to the situation. They were alarmed by the growing tenant organization, and publicity that portrayed landlords as profiteers. As a result, the Chicago Real Estate Board tried to minimize further tenant organizing by individualizing landlord-tenant conflict. They continued to work with the City Council in landlord-tenant arbitration, using their own arbitrators, who presumably

⁴⁴⁷ Proceedings of the City Council of the City of Chicago 5/3/1920, Newberry Library, Chicago, IL; Gov. B. Clarkson, Director of the Council and of the Field Divisions, Washington D.C. to the several State Councils of Defense 1/9/1919, Box 36, Series III, Frank Lowden Papers, University of Chicago Special Collections.

would be more friendly to landlords' interests. Such a strategy not only worked against collective action by tenants, but also sought to prevent tenants from flooding the courts. Without these weapons, tenants would have minimal power to induce reform from the government.⁴⁴⁸

Generally, members of the Chicago Real Estate Board shifted blame for high rents almost entirely on supposedly greedy or striking workers in the building industry, their employers, and grafting middlemen. Members also cited the disruption of the wartime economy, but noted that after the signing of the armistice, "construction costs were constantly increasing and maintenance and repairs were correspondingly excessive." The problem, according to the official organ of the Chicago Real Estate Board, was "the attitude of contractors and employers [and]...laboring men." Playing to the popular fears of the first red scare, the Board warned of "radical elements in the labor movement" and complained of a lazy working class, stating, "until labor realizes that anything less than a man's maximum production in exchange for an agreed wage is not just to the employers and is decidedly unjust to the entire public...he need expect no great sympathy for his wage demands." As these strikes "paralyz[ed] the building and construction work of this community," "unregulated associations and combinations" exacerbated the situation- serving to "injure the public." This "restriction on production"

⁴⁴⁸ The Chicago Real Estate Board did not openly state that it favored landlords. Rather, it claimed to be an unbiased arbitrator. As one report of the Renting Division stated, the Committee "has succeeded in arbitrating a number of complicated cases with satisfaction to both owners and tenants, thereby averting a great deal of trouble and bitter feeling." Report of the Renting Division, April 7, 1920, Chicago Real Estate Board *Bulletin*, Newberry Library, Chicago, IL.

led to an undersupply of lodging, leading to increases in rents commensurate with ongoing demand for housing.⁴⁴⁹

Chicago Real Estate Board members did periodically complain of “the unreasonable demands of tenants,” but had to avoid lashing out against them publicly. Vilifying tenants would potentially compromise the idea that they could be unbiased arbitrators in middle class tenant-landlord disputes. In fact, the Board made great efforts to cast themselves as protectors of the interests of “the public.” For example, Adolph Kramer, the President of the Renting Division of the Board, told a reporter for the *Chicago Tribune*, “The courts are being cluttered up with rent cases. There are many cases where both tenant and landlord are wrong. There is no reason why these difficulties cannot be settled out of court.” Yet, in speech/discussion between members of the Board, Gerhardt F. Meyne claimed that a 1920 comparison of property values to rents in “a middle class neighborhood” yielded no evidence of profiteering; in fact, Meyne maintained, landlords were charging too little. Publicly, the Board seemingly sought to depict themselves as evenhanded before middle class tenants. Privately, the Board gave little legitimacy to middle class concerns and blamed the press for a “campaign” to sensationalize the scope and nature of rent profiteering. Above all, Chicago’s real estate interests sought to prevent the government from involving itself in the real estate market in any manner that would limit their profits.⁴⁵⁰

⁴⁴⁹ “Rents an Investment Building” Chicago Real Estate Board *Bulletin* 6/1919; “Two Issues Which Must Be Settled,” Chicago Real Estate Board *Bulletin* 8/19/1919, Newberry Library, Chicago, IL; Henry Holsman, H.B. Wheelock, Mark Levy, Ivan Ackley to Mayor William Hale Thompson 8/13/1919 printed in Chicago Real Estate Board *Bulletin* 8/19/1919, Newberry Library, Chicago, IL.

⁴⁵⁰ Similarly, a public resolution from the Chicago meeting of the National Federation of Construction Industries stated, “Neither rent regulation nor governmental construction promises relief to the people of the United States.” In April of 1920, the Chicago Real Estate Board did jointly arbitrate cases with the

The limited evidence of the outcomes of City Council and Real Estate Board arbitrations suggests that many did result in minimizing rent increases for individual tenants. Edith Rockwood, of the Chicago Women's City Club, noted, "In certain [cases] the tenants were convinced that the increase was reasonable, and in others the landlords were persuaded to reduce their demands." But even in cases that most benefited an individual tenant, arbitrators sought to serve a greater purpose: to forestall legislation that would either fix rents or give tenants more rights. While publicly stating "Let the board take a public stand against profiteering," Real Estate Board President L.M. Smith mentioned the Board's true motive for arbitration. "This will take the wind out of the sails of the thousands of tenants who plan to go to Springfield and get rent legislation."⁴⁵¹

As rents continued to rise, an aggressive approach from the government was precisely what many organizing tenants demanded.⁴⁵² In fact, many members of the CTPA joined the organization only in anticipation of future rent increases, as well as in

Chicago Tenants Protective Association, but I have not located any evidence that suggests that joint arbitration continued. One might suspect that members of the Tenants' Association worked with the Board to prevent those that did seek arbitration from having to present their cases before biased arbitrators. Chicago *Tribune* 4/8/1920 and 5/6/1920; Bartholomew O'Toole to the Presidents and Members of the Chicago Real Estate Board, 12/18/1920, Chicago Real Estate Board *Bulletin* Dec1920/Jan1921, Newberry Library, Chicago, IL; "Address Delivered Before The Chicago Real Estate Board's Weekly Luncheon, Thursday Noon, February 26th, 1920, by Gerhardt F. Meyne, President of the Chicago Carpenter Contractors' Association. President Adolph F. Kramer Presiding" Chicago Real Estate Board *Bulletin* 3/12/1920; Chicago Real Estate Board *Bulletin* 9/25/1919, Newberry Library, Chicago, IL; J. Clarkson to Frank Lowden 4/13/1920 and "Resolution Adopted at the First Annual Meeting of the National Federation of Construction Industries, Chicago, IL, March 25, 1920," Box 38, Series III, Frank Lowden Papers, University of Chicago Special Collections.

⁴⁵¹ Each of Rockwood's examples summarized the outcomes of arbitration over rent values that would be in a typically middle class rent range. Edith Rockwood, "Rent Profiteers," Women's City Club *Bulletin* March 1920, Folder 12, Box 2, Records of the Chicago Women's City Club, University of Illinois-Chicago Special Collections; Chicago *Tribune* 2/3/1921.

⁴⁵² Across Chicago, the cost of housing rose by 21 percent between December 1919 and June 1920. Data calculated from: U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, "The Cost of Living in the United States" *Bulletin of the Bureau of Labor Statistics* 357 (May 1924): 457.

sympathy for defiant neighbors. Lacking changes in the local housing economy or rent reform to curb rent profiteering, middle class tenant activism stood to only increase.

The Rogers Park Tenants Protective Association and Rent War in Court

Embodying this continued activism was the Rogers Park affiliate of the CTPA. Situated on Chicago's far North Side, Rogers Park consisted of a number of smaller neighborhoods. Most of the postwar tenant activity occurred in the Morse/Lunt Avenue area. While these blocks had long been residential, the early twentieth century brought many new two story apartment buildings and stores to Pratt Boulevard, Touhy, Sheridan, and a number of side streets. The 1910 census lists residents with predominantly middle class professions,⁴⁵³ and local sources emphasize Morse/Lunt (and often Rogers Park in general) as a family-oriented neighborhood, whose residents desired single-family housing.⁴⁵⁴ One resident, who lived "at 6928 N. Lakewood, near Morse Avenue" next to "an apartment house at Morse and Lakewood" described Rogers Park as "a very simple, family-oriented neighborhood" and remembered "Morse Avenue as being a tree-lined, quiet street." Drawing on a national middle class anti-profiteering discourse and responding to local rent increases, residents of Rogers Park in the postwar period transformed their image of Rogers Park as a family-oriented neighborhood into a public

⁴⁵³ See, for example, United States, Bureau of the Census, *Fourteenth Census of the United States, 1920*, Washington, D.C.: National Archives and Records Administration, 1900, Census Place: Cook (Chicago), Illinois; Roll: T623_276, pg. 126, which lists a grocery clerk, journalist, salesman, physician, school teacher, minister, musician, bank clerk, stenographer, three clerks, real estate agent, grocery dealer, and book keeper.

⁴⁵⁴ Interview with Walter Prigge, March 1926, quoted in Neal Samoors, Michael William and Mary Jo Doyle, *Neighborhoods within Neighborhoods: Twentieth Century Life on Chicago's Far North Side* (Chicago: Rogers Park/West Ridge Historical Society, 2002), 173.

middle class neighborhood identity. During moving season, Rogers Park was anything but a “quiet” neighborhood.⁴⁵⁵

John R. Patterson, the president of the Rogers Park Tenants Protective Association (RPTPA), served as a somewhat ideal representative of middle class consumer discontent. A lover of books since reading rags-to-riches Horatio Alger novels as a child, Patterson worked at the Chicago Public Library as the manager of the binding division, a white collar position. Rather than simply being known as a binder, he preferred to be thought of as “doctor to 1,750,000 books.” Although Patterson made a comfortable living, his salary, and those of many of his colleagues, had increased very little in the previous 5-7 years. In keeping with the identity of the area, Patterson was a family man, living with his wife and two daughters at his 2437 Lunt Ave. apartment. Patterson spent his free time studying history, and reading and lecturing to children.⁴⁵⁶

A veteran of the overall movement, Patterson’s grievances were not limited to housing. Just as the overall movement had often spoken to consumer discontent beyond high clothing prices, Patterson’s tenant activism served as a platform for organizing middle citizens against all types of profiteering. Unlike the overall movement, which

⁴⁵⁵ Neal Samoors, Michael William and Mary Jo Doyle, *Neighborhoods within Neighborhoods: Twentieth Century Life on Chicago’s Far North Side* (Chicago: Rogers Park/West Ridge Historical Society, 2002), 62; Interview with Sr. Ann Ida Gannon, college administrator, quoted in Neal Samoors, Michael William and Mary Jo Doyle, *Neighborhoods within Neighborhoods: Twentieth Century Life on Chicago’s Far North Side* (Chicago: Rogers Park/West Ridge Historical Society, 2002), 71.

⁴⁵⁶ “names and salaries of employees, April 26, 1916,” Committee on Administration, Chicago Public Library Archives, Harold Washington Library Special Collections, Chicago, IL; “names and salaries of employees, April 4, 1913,” Committee on Administration, Chicago Public Library Archives, Harold Washington Library Special Collections, Chicago, IL; “names and salaries of employees, April 2, 1914,” Committee on Administration, Chicago Public Library Archives, Harold Washington Library Special Collections, Chicago, IL; Carl Roden Scrapbook, Harold Washington Library Special Collections, Chicago, IL; Letter from Patterson to Roden, 12/24/1934, Chicago Public Library Archives, Harold Washington Library Special Collections, Chicago, IL; Chicago *Tribune* 5/29/1909, 2/26/1916, 10/16/1932, 3/1920/1936, 9/5/1939.

depended on organization across a wider range of space, tenant activism relied on neighborhood and often block-level organization. While some tenants such as Patterson had already identified individually as members of the middle class through previous anti-profiteering movements (albeit very recently), they had not always done so alongside of their neighbors. Led by Patterson, Rogers Park, and particularly Morse/Lunt blocks, transformed from a neighborhood with middle class residents to a politically conscious *middle class neighborhood*.

Patterson and the RPTPA often issued the most extreme anti-landlord statements among Chicago tenant organizations, and made the most pointed appeals to the state for rent reform. In September of 1920, for example, the RPTPA told the *Chicago Tribune* that candidates for Illinois House and Senate seats would be required to “declare themselves on the rent situation” in a series of special meetings. Perhaps seeking to gain favor among Chicago’s middle class or for fear of an RPTPA smear campaign, Senator James Barbour, William Pontow (a candidate for Senate), Reps. Ralph E. Church, Robert E. Wilson, and Emil A.W. Johnson spoke at the meetings. On another occasion, Patterson declared, “Let us forge a legal weapon that will control during this emergency the money changers, extortioners and profiteers,” and implored Gov. Lowden to set rent reform in motion. Perhaps most daunting to some politicians was Patterson’s threat that “we’ll throw 100,000 votes against those who have not a clear record on the rent question.”⁴⁵⁷

⁴⁵⁷ Barbour actually ended up opposing rent reform, much to the disappointment of the RPTPA; *Chicago Tribune* 9/25/1920, 3/9/1921.



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John R. Patterson pictured (left) in denim, refusing to wear white collars until prices declined; on the right, Patterson photographed reading to children.

Claiming to simultaneously represent “the public” and “the middle class,” members of the RPTPA paid special attention to the impact of high rents on middle class family life. To many in the RPTPA, rent profiteering was not simply an attack on their pocketbooks; it represented an attack on the family. At a March, 1920, meeting, for example, William Forkell declared, “If it [rent profiteering] keeps on, the children as well as the wives and husbands, will be deprived of many necessities in order to pay the rent.” Summarizing the beliefs of his fellow tenants in the self-identifying “middle class” RPTPA, John R. Patterson declared, “They feel that they are fighting for the preservation of the home, for a wholesome community, in which to bring up their children, and they are living up nobly to the well-known reputation of the female species.”⁴⁵⁹

Unsurprisingly, the RPTPA sponsored many of its neighborhood tenants in courtroom battles. Whether featuring Rogers Park tenants or those residing elsewhere in

⁴⁵⁸ Carl Roden scrapbook, Chicago Public Library Archives, Harold Washington Library Special Collections, Chicago, IL.

⁴⁵⁹ Chicago *Tribune* 3/9/1920; San Antonio *Evening News* 6/9/1920.

Chicago, the flood of landlord-tenant cases heard before the Chicago Municipal Court featured many of the same themes discussed in tenant meetings, City Council meetings and in the press- namely high rents and struggles of tenants to maintain a respectable family life. For example, one tenant complained to Judge Heap that his landlord had not only evicted him, but also his wife and his two-week old baby. Heap instructed the family to move after a ten day stay. In another case, Judge Heap granted a tenant permission to temporarily remain in her flat after she came home one day to find her children sitting on the doorstep. Her landlord had kicked them out and locked the door. Heap, while respecting her landlord's right to raise rent, found this behavior to be extreme.⁴⁶⁰

Because the municipal court lacked the authority to control rent increases, tenants only achieved, at best, mixed results in court.⁴⁶¹ In a best case scenario, tenants were given an extra sixty days to move or, in cases of poor building maintenance by flat owners, they received financial restitution. For the most part, tenants had to confine their legal defense to whether or not they had been given sufficient notice that a lease would not be renewed after stating that they refused to pay increased rent. Faced with limited options, tenants frequently attempted to create legal technicalities that would allow them to remain under the old terms of a lease. In one case, a tenant fought a forcible detainer on the logic that the landlord had sent her a notice that her lease "expires April 30, 1920 and will not be renewed," when the written lease had specified May 1, 1920 as the end of the lease. The tenant claimed that the landlord had violated a clause that stated, "either party had the right to terminate the lease on said last mentioned day." According to the

⁴⁶⁰ Chicago *Herald Examiner* 5/2/1920; Chicago *Evening Post* 5/3/1920.

⁴⁶¹ No Illinois law gave the court the power to decide what level of rent would be exorbitant.

tenant, because the landlord's specific language differed by one day, the notice of termination was null and void, thus requiring her to renew the old lease. Neither the municipal court nor the appellate court agreed- the majority opinion stating, "the notice sufficiently indicated an intention to terminate." The words, "'expires April 30, 1920,' and 'will not be renewed,' could convey no other meaning except that the lessor wished to terminate the lease on that date." In another case, a married couple justified refusing to move out because they claimed that they had given the thirty days notice required to renew their old lease- something that their landlord professed to have never happened. Since it was the tenants' word against the landlord's, the municipal court decided in favor of the landlord. However, because the court had erroneously disallowed the wife from testifying "as to a conversation she had with the plaintiff [landlord]," in which he allegedly acknowledged "receipt of the notice," an appellate court reversed the decision. If anything was clear from the rent court cases of 1920, legislation that would empower tenants and provide them with more options in the courtroom would be necessary. As the *Chicago Herald Examiner* concluded, Chicago's tenants "storming the corridors of the city hall courtrooms," "were fighting a losing battle."⁴⁶²

Of course, organized tenants knew that their legal options were limited before participating in rent strikes. While some tenants marginally improved their situations in court, they all certainly succeeded in flooding the courts and generating publicity in the

⁴⁶² Mrs. Edith Byrne, Appellee, V. Mrs. J.A. McCarthy, Gen. No. 26,520, Decisions of the Appellate Courts of Illinois, Chicago-First District- May, 1921, University of Chicago Law Library; Charles M. Case, Appellee, v. Joseph E. Fagin, Appellant, Gen No. 26,623, Decisions of the Appellate Courts of Illinois, Chicago-First District- July, 1921, University of Chicago Law Library; *Chicago Herald Examiner* 5/11/1920.

Chicago area press. Chief Bailiff Dennis J Egan noted, “More suits have been filed than ever before.” The question was: would politicians respond?⁴⁶³

Action from the State: The Kessenger Rent Bill

While continuing to plan for further landlord-tenant confrontation, the RPTPA and CTPA focused on maintaining pressure on government officials throughout late 1920 and early 1921. After a failed attempt by the CTPA and members of the City Council to include provisions for tenants’ rights in the 1920 Illinois Constitutional Convention, tenants shifted their attention to the Illinois House and Senate, which were set to convene in the early months of 1921. Already having the support of the City Council for new state landlord-tenant legislation, the CTPA also invited state legislators to attend their meetings and sought their public endorsement. Many senators and representatives responded favorably, even as CTPA rhetoric intensified. By November of 1920, those landlords who had not been known as “hogs” to the CTPA were “cockroaches” according to a statement of RPTPA president John R. Patterson to the *Chicago Tribune*.

In this context of sustained tenant mobilization with more defined goals, the Chicago Building Commission (of the State Legislature) released their findings on the Chicago housing crisis. Its February, 1921, report to Governor Lowden, affirmed CTPA accusations that rental agreements had been “unjust, unreasonable and oppressive both as to the amount of rental and as to other conditions...imposed upon tenants” and that “threat of eviction has served as a club for the landlord.” As a result, it recommended the enactment of legislation mandating that landlords give tenants sixty days notice before

⁴⁶³ Chicago *Herald Examiner* 5/4/1920.

terminating a lease and that tenants be granted longer “stays” in cases of forcible detainer. However, the Building Commission identified lack of construction as the primary reason for escalating rents. According to the Commission, “although emergency measures may accomplish something to relieve the present situation, permanent relief can be obtained only by building houses.” Thus, the Commission’s primary recommendation was “the creation of a joint legislative committee with full power to investigate combinations and restrictive agreements.” Many tenants agreed with this goal, but placed as much, if not more, importance on the “emergency” measures that would more immediately and directly affect landlord-tenant relations. Just a few days after Lowden received the report, the Illinois Senate launched the Illinois Building Investigation Commission, led by Senator John Dailey (to be discussed later in this chapter). To tenants, this only addressed some of their concerns.⁴⁶⁴

A proposed “Kessenger Bill” aimed to assuage tenants’ primary concern of reforming Illinois landlord-tenant law. Introduced at the beginning of the 1921 session and sponsored by Senator Harold Kessenger, who had also served on the Building Commission, the bill contained two main provisions. First, it provided tenants with the right to trial by jury, even if they had waived that right in a lease. Secondly, it empowered municipal court judges to grant a stay of up to six months before executing a forcible detainer. During the stay, tenants would be liable for rent at the same rate charged one month before the expiration of the lease, thus denying landlords the ability to force

⁴⁶⁴ Report of the Illinois Housing and Building Commission to the Governor and General Assembly 2/11/1921, p. 13, Frank Lowden Papers, Illinois State Archives, Springfield, IL; *Report of the Illinois Building Investigation Commission Authorized by the 52nd General Assembly* (Springfield: Illinois State Register Printers), 1923.

tenants to pay higher rents for as long as six months. With the support of the governor, the Kessinger Bill stood a significant chance at becoming law.⁴⁶⁵

Members of the CTPA were generally satisfied with the Kessinger Bill. One CTPA official called the bill “essential to the welfare of tenants at this critical time.” Others wrote letters to Illinois legislators urging them to support the bill. CTPA members also corresponded with opponents of rent reform, such as Sen. James J. Barbour. Inundated with CTPA letters, Barbour responded, “I cannot, of course reconcile the divergent views of my constituents, but strive to do my duty as I see it.” A.E. Jessurun, Secretary of the CTPA, used Barbour’s intractability as an opportunity to promote rent reform in the press. To a *Chicago Tribune* reporter, Jessurun exclaimed, “Senator Barbour seems to forget that he is in the senate by grace of the views of his constituents, and ought to carry out their bidding.” The *Chicago Evening Post* concluded that the prospect of the Kessinger Bill left tenants “sitting pretty.”⁴⁶⁶

To create a sense of urgency that would help to ensure the passage of the bill, leaders of the CTPA coordinated another rent strike. The May 1, 1921 rent strike promised to be every bit as dramatic and contentious as that of the past year. In an attempt to forestall or at least minimize the chaos and conflict of another rent strike, legislators promised to vote before May 1. However, when a number of representatives failed to show up for the vote on April 27, the provision calling for six month stays had to

⁴⁶⁵ Former Governor Frank Lowden was also a supporter of tenants’ rights. In fact, he allegedly went as far as calling the landlord-tenant system “evil” (whether in reference to farmers or urban tenants). John Lowling to Frank O. Lowden 1/20/1921, Box 39, Series III, Frank Lowden Papers, University of Chicago Special Collections.

⁴⁶⁶ *Chicago Daily News* 4/30/1921; *Chicago Tribune* 5/1/1921; *Chicago Evening Post* 5/4/1921.

be postponed until after “moving day.” The legislature did pass the jury waiver measures and Governor Len Small added his signature, leading the *Chicago Daily Journal* to proclaim, “the powerful lobby formed by the landlords of Chicago surrendered to the tenants in the fight over these measures.” The landlords, however, “have not given up hope,” the *Daily Journal* warned, and “intend to carry on this fight.” Tenants were reportedly equally ready for a conflict. C.S. MacCubbin, a member of the CTPA, told reporters “We are determined to oppose in every possible way the increases demanded.” In anticipation of May Day tenant activism, the city positioned extra police outside of many apartment buildings, and municipal court judges held an emergency meeting “for the handling of the great number of eviction suits expected to follow the ‘strike’ threatened for May 1 by 20,000 tenants.”⁴⁶⁷

Those anticipating a dramatic May Day would not be disappointed. Signs with the words “rent hog,” “rent war” or “unfair” graced the windows of apartments all across Chicago. The local news media reported “numerous fights” between landlords and tenants. C. D. Behan, scoffing at a 110 percent rent increase, purportedly waited in front of his apartment with a “Babe Ruth ball bat” “for those who wished to evict him.” In Lake View, after his tenant refused to pay a \$35 rent increase, landlord Emil Welky removed the back door of the apartment in hopes that it would force him to vacate. On 4518 Sheridan Rd, Dr. L.C. H. E. Zeigler barricaded his door with numerous chains and a piano, and “armed himself with a revolver and a supply of roman candles.” This followed a “continuous fight with [window] placards,” in which Zeigler and his landlord had denounced one another over a two month period. Zeigler wanted the entire community to

⁴⁶⁷ *Chicago Daily Journal* 4/27/1921 and 4/26/1921.

know that he would not accept a 60 percent increase in his rent for the upcoming year. As previously mentioned, his neighbors applauded his actions (see introduction).⁴⁶⁸

With the courtroom dockets once again filled with forcible detainer cases and the legislature set to vote, no less than the fate of the CTPA strategy stood in the balance. “We are pinning our hopes on the passage of the Kessinger Bill,” John R. Patterson declared. The CTPA held rallies for the passage of the “anti rent hog bill” at the Le Moyne and Swift Schools and sent its officers to Springfield to lobby the Legislature. Ald. Robert Mulcahy and John R. Patterson were part of the delegation. CTPA officers and allies were not alone in Springfield. After declaring its opposition to the bill, the Chicago Real Estate Board sent a contingent of members to lobby the legislature, as well. While tenants remained “on strike,” one CTPA official advised “sit tight, stick together and we will defeat the rent hog yet.” Patterson echoed this statement and added, “We have the assurances of all the leaders in the legislature that the bills will go through Tuesday...the tenants who strike now will be the ones to profit.” Again urging members to write their representatives in support of the bills, Patterson also declared that any Chicago politician who opposed the bill would be committing “political suicide.”⁴⁶⁹

⁴⁶⁸ According to a Chicago Municipal Court report, “owing to the housing shortage and rent increases,” a jump in “forcible entry” cases after May “deserves special mention.” “Fifteenth Annual Report of The Municipal Court of Chicago for the Year December 6 to December 4 Inclusive,” p. 9, Municipal Reference Collection, Harold Washington Library, Chicago Public Library; Records of Howard F. Bishop vs. Emil Welky, Superior Court of Cook County, 1921 (S365369), Cook County Clerk of Courts Archives, Richard Daley Center- Archives Rm. 1113, Chicago, IL; Chicago *Journal of Commerce* 5/2/1920; Chicago *Daily News* 5/2/1921; Chicago *Daily Journal* 4/25/1921; The 1920 U.S. Census lists Behan’s profession as “Lawyer.” United States, Bureau of the Census, *Fourteenth Census of the United States, 1920*, Washington, D.C.: National Archives and Records Administration, 1920. Census Place: Cook (Chicago), Illinois; Roll: T625_321, pg. 134.

⁴⁶⁹ Chicago *Evening Post* 5/2/1921; Chicago *Daily Journal* 4/25/1921, 4/29/1921 and 4/30/31; Chicago *Tribune* 3/17/1921; Chicago *Real Estate*, March 1921, Chicago Historical Society Library.

On May 3, 1921, John R. Patterson and two other CTPA officials presented Gov. Small with a gold pen that they had jointly purchased. The collectively-owned pen represented the group effort required to achieve their goals. It embodied the realization of tenants that their fates could be tied together. With cameras flashing, Small accepted the pen and signed the six month stay bill. The “tenants rejoice[d].” Immediately, CTPA officers announced that they would stage a “tenants’ festival” on May 12 in celebration of their victory. At the “Jubilee” tenants would enjoy music, dancing and a carnival- “We intend to make the carnival the biggest event ever known in the history of Chicago tenants”- declared one CTPA official. With a sigh of relief, Patterson stated “[the] new laws will protect us from profiteers.”⁴⁷⁰

Undoubtedly, Ald. Robert Mulcahy was also pleased. However, in spite of successfully becoming a major public opponent of profiteering and an advocate of rent reform, his tendency to be involved in controversy eventually caught up with him. Up for reelection in 1923, Mulcahy suffered from his alliance with Big Bill Thompson, a figurehead and symbol of Chicago graft. Across the board, the 1923 Chicago aldermanic elections were depicted as a “drubbing” of Thompsonism and his image of graft. To make matters worse, just weeks before the election Mulcahy got in a fist fight with one of his opponents. It began when Aldermanic candidate William J. Gormley insulted Mulcahy as he passed him in the hall of the election board offices. Mulcahy responded with a right-handed punch that narrowly missed Gormley’s jaw. Gormley’s first punch connected with Mulcahy’s ear, drawing blood. Mulcahy gained his composure and attempted a kick, but lost balance on his artificial leg. “Onlookers” quickly stopped the

⁴⁷⁰ Chicago *Evening Post* 5/3/1921 and 5/4/1921; Chicago *Daily Journal* 5/4/1921.

fight. Mulcahy was humiliated. Adding to his misfortune was the fact that he would soon be under indictment for purchasing \$170,000 worth of liquor, in violation of the Volsted Act.⁴⁷¹ Unsurprisingly, Mulcahy finished a disappointing fourth in the Twelfth Ward election. The tenants' victory was not enough to extend his political career.⁴⁷²

Within days of the enactment of rent reform, striking tenants began to see relief. Isaac Sharashaw was just one of the tenants to reap the "first fruits of the tenants' victory at Springfield." Told to leave his flat on May 1, Sharashaw testified that his wife was sick and he did not want her to undertake "the strain of moving." Judge Rooney granted a stay of sixty days without any increase in rent. Others achieved similar victories. Howard Bishop, the Lake View tenant who had remained in his apartment even after his landlord removed the back door, received a temporary stay and then had the case dismissed. He argued that Welky (his landlord) had initially given him an option to renew the lease at the original rate, that he had neglected to decorate the home and that there was "a great house and apartment shortage" that caused a situation in which "thousands of persons are unable to rent an apartment or a house for their respective families." But perhaps more telling of the tenant victory, was the "sudden drop" in the number of eviction suits filed by landlords, who did not want to fight a losing battle. Those that did file forcible detainer cases faced delays from the new system of jury trials. After a tumultuous two months, Dr. L.C.H.E. Zeigler moved his piano from the door and put down his revolver. Not only had he threatened his allegedly profiteering landlord, but on moving day he had

⁴⁷¹ Mulcahy eventually beat this charge.

⁴⁷² *Chicago Tribune* 2/10/1923, 2/17/1923, 2/28/1923, 4/11/1923, 12/2/1923.

fired a shot at the new tenant. With the option of a jury trial and the prospect of a six month stay, Zeigler travelled to City Hall to claim his rights.⁴⁷³

Six month stays and the right to trial by jury represented important victories for Chicago tenants, but these measures would potentially only temporarily alleviate them from rent increases. After six months, many of Chicago's tenants would have to pay higher rent elsewhere- at least until the housing market offered lower rents. All seemed to agree that more building was necessary to bring the supply of housing up to demand. Doing so would require addressing the "greed" of striking workers in the construction industry and delving into the "corrupt" and "grafting" world of Chicago's construction middlemen and labor organizers.

Building Graft and Reform

Nearly one year after publicly apologizing to a pig for associating the animal with profiteering landlords, A.E. Jessurun sat quietly in an Illinois Senate chamber. Seated at the front of the room were some of the CTPA's best allies in the State Senate- Harold Kessinger and John Dailey. In addition to organized tenants like Jessurun, the audience featured a collection of Chicago's real estate developers. They all waited as a man wiped tears from his face. "They broke me," the man uttered. "I've been hounded by the unions until my health broke down."⁴⁷⁴

⁴⁷³ Records of Howard F. Bishop vs. Emil Welky, Superior Court of Cook County, 1921 (S365369), Cook County Clerk of Courts Archives, Richard Daley Center- Archives Rm. 1113, Chicago, IL; *Chicago Daily Journal* 5/5/1921, 5/7/1921 and 5/9/1921; *Chicago Evening Post* 5/6/1921 and 5/7/1921.

⁴⁷⁴ *Chicago Tribune* 3/27/1931.

The man was a former Chicago builder testifying before the Senate Building Investigation Commission, which was assembled to root out graft in the Chicago Building Industry. Sen. John Dailey, Chairman of the Commission, summarized the feeling in the room. “It was heart rending to see this stalwart, gray haired man, who has spent a lifetime in Chicago, weep like a child.” However, while sympathetic, the Commission was less concerned about the witness’s professional downfall. Rather, the senators focused on his testimony because the conditions he and other witnesses described- illegitimate strikes, “dirty money,” “shakedowns”- led to increases in rent throughout Chicago. “This thing would not be so serious,” Sen. Kessinger declared, “were it not for the housing situation and high rents.” In fact, two increases in rent had “prompted” the witness to testify. The witness came before the Commission as a middle class tenant, rather than a beleaguered former builder.⁴⁷⁵

Meeting from March until June of 1921, the Dailey Commission exposed shocking forms of graft in the building trades. The Commission aimed to “investigate combinations and agreements...which result in maintaining or raising the cost of construction dwelling houses.” Since the Commission called witnesses to testify on illegitimate strikes and graft in areas ranging from janitorial service to terra cotta work, examining the particulars of each alleged “combination” would require lengthy description and analysis. The Commission’s investigation into the brick construction trade provides a compelling and relatively representative example of their findings.⁴⁷⁶

⁴⁷⁵ *Chicago Tribune* 3/27/1931.

⁴⁷⁶ *Report of the Illinois Building Investigation Commission Authorized by the 52nd General Assembly* (Springfield: Illinois State Register Printers, 1923), 1.

In 1910, competition in the brick manufacturing industry drove prices down to a meager \$4.50 per thousand. The report of the Illinois Building Investigation Commission recalled, “the brick manufacturers of the Chicago district were fighting and quarrelling among themselves...nobody was making any money”- that is, until B.C. Penfield came up with an ingenious plan. Penfield purchased a setting machine that was designed to lower the cost of setting brick. This machine allowed manufacturers to claim that they were minimizing the cost of labor, and saving the consumer money. In fact, it gave them a means by which to set standard prices, thereby eliminating competition, ultimately precipitating higher prices for consumers. The plan worked as follows: Penfield leased the machine to a number of brick manufacturing companies. These companies then bought out others in the market and proceeded to organize as the Common Brick Manufacturers Association, with its stated goal of placing the brick industry “on a sound financial business and economic operating basis.” This process had reduced the number of Chicago area brick companies from 30 to 11 or 12. Through the leasing arrangement, the remaining companies were able to establish a quota of brick output, thus controlling prices. If a manufacturer exceeded a quota, it paid a fine to the Common Brick Manufacturers Association. If one fell short, it received financial compensation. This arrangement resulted in an increase in the price of brick per thousand from \$4.50 in 1912 to \$12 in 1919. Additional labor demands allegedly raised the price to \$16 per thousand.⁴⁷⁷

⁴⁷⁷ *Report of the Illinois Building Investigation Commission Authorized by the 52nd General Assembly* (Springfield: Illinois State Register Printers, 1923), 22-23.

The Chicago brick manufacturing “cooperative competition” agreement was not unique. Other forms of graft reported by the Dailey Commission ranged from labor unions calling strikes if contractors obtained parts from outside of Chicago to simple cases of bribery. The Commission concluded, “Numerous cunningly devised schemes have been used to restrain trade and fix prices.”⁴⁷⁸

The Commission received an enormous amount of press in the local news media. In its coverage of May 5, 1921 testimony, *Chicago Daily News* referred to the “extortion and bribery” of “crooked business agents” for labor unions. The *Evening Post* displayed bold titles such as “prices forced up” while the *Tribune* and the *Chicago Journal of Commerce*, carried sensational headlines: “Invalid Braves Death To Bare Building Graft” and “Senate Investigation Has Field Day Uncovering Building Crookedness,” respectively. Reporting on the progress of the Commission, the Chicago City Club *Bulletin* decried “the sources of corruption and extortion in the building industry of Chicago.” The *Chicago Herald Examiner* declared that building grafters “were chiefly to blame for high rents” and that “the public [was] thoroughly aroused by the menacing situation.” The *Evening Post* similarly argued that “unions will not find public sympathy.” Fittingly, the report of the Commission noted, “public sentiment soon crystallized behind the inquiry, which, with each succeeding revelation, began to travel almost on its own momentum.” It comes as no surprise that the Commission thanked the major local newspapers individually for their assistance in their final report.⁴⁷⁹

⁴⁷⁸ *Report of the Illinois Building Investigation Commission Authorized by the 52nd General Assembly* (Springfield: Illinois State Register Printers, 1923), 10.

⁴⁷⁹ The *Chicago Journal of Commerce* also blamed labor graft and the fear of strikes directly for high rents, claiming “the building industry is in the grasp of unscrupulous labor leaders who have halted construction

Throughout the investigation, the Commission reinforced the idea that graft and labor unrest precipitated high rents. Following a builder's testimony, Sen. Harold Kessinger reiterated that "rents will not come down until buildings go up" and "building will not go up until prices come down." In a speech before the Chicago City Club, Sen Dailey suggested that union graft and mortgage bond corruption were at least as responsible for high rents as profiteering landlords. The "first step" toward ameliorating the situation, according to a City Club summary of his speech, was "to put the criminals in the penitentiary; and the next, for every group in the industry to 'clean house.'" By exposing and sensationalizing the impact of graft on high rents, the press, the Dailey Commission and other public figures sympathetic to its aims, helped to reify grafters and, more broadly, labor unions, as villains to middle class Chicagoans.⁴⁸⁰

Even before the publication of the Dailey Report, the Commission had worked with federal and state attorneys to build cases against grafters. By June of 1922, state attorneys had achieved 36 convictions related to Chicago labor graft. And by the time of the publication of the Commission's findings, "there are awaiting trial in the State courts 218 defendants, and in the Federal courts 297 corporation and individual defendants, charged with crimes affecting the building industry." Many of the defendants- both in organized labor and wholesale or jobbing firms- were brought up on charges similar to those facing a conglomeration of Chicago plumbing suppliers. The Federal Government

work by reason of their avarice and greed...meanwhile the public must suffer." *Chicago Daily News* 5/6/1921; *Chicago Evening Post* 5/10/1921 and 4/29/1921; *Chicago Tribune* 5/1/1921; *Chicago Journal of Commerce* 5/7/1921; *Chicago City Club Bulletin* 10/10/1921, Regenstein Library, University of Chicago; *Chicago Herald Examiner* 4/26/1921; *Report of the Illinois Building Investigation Commission Authorized by the 52nd General Assembly* (Springfield: Illinois State Register Printers, 1923), 3, 161.

⁴⁸⁰ *Chicago Tribune* 5/1/1921; *Chicago City Club Bulletin* 10/10/1921, Regenstein Library, University of Chicago.

charged the defendants of “having agreed upon, concertedly fixed and maintained uniform and non-competitive prices...much higher than the prices which, but for unlawful combination, would have prevailed in said trade and commerce.” Not just in the case of plumbing suppliers, judges and juries returned many guilty verdicts (or received guilty pleas). The success and publicity of the Commission were considered by one account “the greatest over-all expose of its time.”⁴⁸¹

In addition to prosecuting grafters, many state and local politicians supported a compromise between many Chicago building trades unions, contractors and employers on disputed wage scales that had led to a general building trades strike. All parties agreed to have Judge Kenneshaw Mountain Landis determine wage scales in what would be called the “Landis Award.” With a previous agreement expiring, employers had demanded a 20 percent wage reduction for skilled workers and 30 percent from unskilled labor. Facing negative publicity, fueled by accounts of the Dailey Commission testimony, building trades unions decided that it would be in their best interests to agree to have the seemingly fair-minded Landis make the ultimate decision. Landis, who had recently taken the post of Commissioner of Major League Baseball, had previously received notoriety for deciding against Standard Oil. Additionally to the liking of organized labor, Landis had only rarely issued labor injunctions. Corporate interests and many politicians

⁴⁸¹ *Report of the Illinois Building Investigation Commission Authorized by the 52nd General Assembly* (Springfield: Illinois State Register Printers, 1923), 4; Chad Wallin, *The Builders' Story: An Interpretive Record of the Builders' Association of Chicago, inc., An Organization Co-existent With the Chicago Chapter of the Associated General Contractors of America* (Chicago: Builders' Association of Chicago, 1966), p.42 and 43, Newberry Library, Chicago, IL; *Report of the Illinois Building Investigation Commission Authorized by the 52nd General Assembly* (Springfield: Illinois State Register Printers, 1923), 4; Records of United States v. James B. Clow & Sons et.al. in the District Court of the United States of America for the Northern District of Illinois, Eastern Division, March 1921, National Archives Great Lakes Region, Chicago, IL.

hoped that setting wage scales for each type of worker in every trade would lessen the opportunity for graft.

Landis, however, did not confine his decision to wage scales. In addition to lowering wages for virtually all trades (in many cases Landis established a greater reduction than employers or contractors had asked), Landis re-wrote work rules by declaring open shop in the Chicago building trades. According to contemporary economist Royal E. Montgomery, Landis had been influenced by the publicity of the Dailey Commission. Landis's own words support Montgomery's conclusion. In his decision, Landis referenced the "loss of public faith" in the building industry and the impact of the "attitude of the public" in exacerbating economic depression. By all accounts, organized labor was furious with the result. While Landis granted a rehearing and lessened some of the wage cuts, labor certainly did not come out on top. Refusing to accept open shop, the Carpenters Union left the agreement. Many workers also boycotted Major League Baseball, a move that received "considerable publicity." The public responded by turning "out to see the Cubs [so intently] that ten thousand had to be turned away."⁴⁸²

⁴⁸² Royal E. Montgomery wrote, "without a doubt Judge Landis' insistence upon the right to go into working rules as a prerequisite to setting the new wage scales was partly a result of the state of the public mind regarding the building situation at that time. The 'disclosures' of the Dailey Commission were being widely heralded, and there was much and often rather loose discussion about what might be done on behalf of 'party of the third party.'" Landis, himself, also mentioned the exposure of graft, price-fixing and corruption in his decision. It is also worth noting that discord between builders and labor reached extreme levels. After the Landis award, a series of bombings occurred that resulted in destruction of buildings, deaths and arrests of labor leaders. The year 1921 was not a winning season for the Cubs. Thus, team success likely would not explain any unusual turnout. Andrew Wender Cohen, *The Racketeer's Progress: Chicago and the Struggle for the Modern American Economy 1900-1940* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 245-254; Chad Wallin, *The Builders' Story: An Interpretive Record of the Builders' Association of Chicago, Inc., An Organization Co-existent with the Chicago Chapter of the Associated General Contractors of America* (Chicago: Builders' Association of Chicago, 1966), 47; Royal E. Montgomery, "The Landis Arbitration and Award" *The University Journal of Business* 4:3 (Jul 1926): 263, 269, 273, 289; James Merriner, *Grafters and Goo Goos: Corruption and Reform in Chicago, 1833-*

The Landis Award provided a prime opportunity for Chicago businessmen to appeal to middle class residents who had become displeased over the supposedly exorbitant demands of organized labor. Realizing that unions would fight the implementation of the Award, a group of Chicago businessmen working in the real estate industry and associated with the Chicago Association of Commerce formed an organization claiming to represent the citizens of Chicago. In reality, the organization was comprised of 176 manufactures, merchants and bankers. Aptly named “The Citizens’ Committee To Enforce The Landis Award” the Committee sought to “protect against strikes, graft, sabotage and boycotting of materials.”⁴⁸³

In the press and in its literature, the Committee used language that portrayed it as the “people’s” committee, guarding the interests of the consuming public. One booklet written under the auspices of the Committee, “The Giant, We the People and the Landis Decision,” perhaps serves as a most glaring example of the Committee’s use of language that played to middle class readership. Using phrases such as “We the People” and “the Public,” the booklet outlined how “the Snake of Selfishness and Greed,” organized labor, sought to poison the public. It stated, “The free-lunchers and grafters tear apart Giant We-

2003 (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2004), 106; See also Sidney Fine, *Without the Blare of Trumpets: Walter Drew, the National Erectors’ Association, and the Open Shop Movement, 1903-57* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995), 216-19.

⁴⁸³ Not only did many real estate developers use the context of high rents to press for open shop in pursuance of their own economic advantage, it was also used as a justification for opposing real estate tax increases- a form of logic to which at least some politicians were receptive. See, for example, W. Emerson to Russell Tyson 3/15/1920, Folder 20, Box 1, Aldis Family Papers, University of Illinois-Chicago Special Collections; and Rep. James Mann to Russell Tyson 3/15/1920, Folder 20, Box 1, Aldis Family Papers, University of Illinois-Chicago Special Collections; Chicago Association of Commerce, *Survey of the Construction Industries and Physical Development of Chicago, Twenty-first Anniversary of the Chicago Association of Commerce* (Chicago: Chicago Association of Commerce, 1925); Andrew Wender Cohen, *The Racketeer’s Progress: Chicago and the Struggle for the Modern American Economy 1900-1940* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 248.

The-People and throw him into the ditch.” Of the impact of labor on “the public” the booklet elaborated, “The union rules got so snake-ridden in Chicago that one-fifth to one-forth of all the millions paid for building was wasted by these overcharges!... So it was that Giant We-The-People rose in his wrath.... But Judge Landis said...get the Snake!” The booklet also reiterated how building strikes and graft led to increased rents, noting “the high cost is added on to rent.” Using phrases such as “the public” and “the people” and referring to these groups as victims in anti-labor graft, anti-union and anti-profiteering tirades, the booklet’s words closely resembled the manner in which middle class Chicago tenants referred to themselves. While it is impossible to determine how much the Committee’s efforts influenced organized middle class Chicagoans, its use of language surely would have resonated.⁴⁸⁴

Whether or not successful, the Citizens’ Committee to Enforce the Landis Award represented yet another effort on the part of large businessmen to turn the issue of the postwar high cost of living issue on its head- against labor and away from the anti-capital sentiments of the middle class. In the same tradition of William Wood, who attempted to win the hearts and minds of middle class consumers by crusading against organized labor for its role in causing high clothing prices (shifting attention away from his own profits, see Chapter 3), members of the Citizens’ Committee sought to maximize their profits by stifling labor organization, maintaining low wages, and, if possible, gaining an ally in

⁴⁸⁴ Andrew Wender Cohen also notes that “By presenting [the] open shop drive as a war against corruption, collusion, and inefficiency, executives cast themselves as representative of the public interest.” Andrew Wender Cohen, *The Racketeer’s Progress: Chicago and the Struggle for the Modern American Economy 1900-1940* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 245; Henry K. Holsman and Ralph Parlette, *Giant We-The-People and Judge Landis’ Award* (Chicago: Parlette-Padget Company, 1922), 6, 11, 22, 28, University of Illinois Library.

middle class Chicagoans. Facing an increasingly agitated middle class “public,” postwar businessmen exploited the issue of the HCL in ways that played a significant, even if potentially small, role in explaining why organized labor fell into “the lean years” during the early 1920s.⁴⁸⁵

Significantly, the Citizens’ Committee did more than just use language to “enforce” the Landis Award. The Committee arranged for building contractors to make bids on jobs in Chicago when competition seemed lacking, monitored and exposed individuals and groups that did not abide by the award to its members and other sympathizers, and wrote companies with impending construction projects to encourage them to only engage in business with firms and unions that worked under Landis Award terms. It also brought new workers to Chicago to replace strikers, operated a training school and employed 700 guards to “protect” worksites. The Committee claimed success. In a July 1922 letter to a benefactor, one member of the Committee wrote, “Since the Committee began functioning, there have been no strikes, no delays in construction, no restrictions as to where material should be bought, and no graft.” Similarly, a published report of the Chicago Association of Commerce concluded that because of the Landis Award and the Committee’s efforts, “Today building is going forward at an unprecedented rate without interruption or embarrassment.” The Citizens’ Committee

⁴⁸⁵ For an overview of many historians’ periodization of the 1920s as the lean years for organized labor, see Melvyn Dubofsky and Foster R. Dulles, *Labor in America: A History* (Wheeling: Harlan Davidson, 2004).

continued these tactics until it began to fissure in 1929, three years after the official expiration of the Award.⁴⁸⁶

Conclusion:

Facing stagnant salaries and a building shortage that precipitated high rents, white collar Chicagoans drew on an accepted and growing national discourse of middle class consumer protest, and organized to pressure the state to enact landlord-tenant reform. During 1920-21, CTPA members undertook “rent strikes” and aired grievances to politicians and the press, both of which reinforced and heightened already extreme anti-landlord, anti-graft and anti-labor rhetoric, and helped to define some Chicago neighborhoods as politically conscious middle class spaces. Significantly, like participants in the home garden, municipal market and overall movements, middle class renters simultaneously claimed to be neutral defenders of the public. They cast consumers as the “people” and shaped their needs to those of the middle class.

Appropriating the “rent strike” strategy from the working class had served the CTPA

⁴⁸⁶ After an unfriendly decision by the Illinois Supreme Court that curtailed many of its practices, the Committee fell apart. The Landis Award Employers’ Association took its place, but it controlled far fewer construction projects. Julius Rosenwald to “Mr. Stern” 6/19/1928, Folder 8, Box 10, Julius Rosenwald Papers, University of Chicago Special Collections; Julius Rosenwald to Atkins 7/27/1922, Folder 8, Box 10, Julius Rosenwald Papers, University of Chicago Special Collections; Thomas Donnelly to Julius Rosenwald 6/11/1927, Folder 8, Box 10, Julius Rosenwald Papers, University of Chicago Special Collections; Julius Rosenwald to Louis Eckstein 1/5/1927, Folder 8, Box 10, Julius Rosenwald Papers, University of Chicago Special Collections; Julius Rosenwald to Thomas Donnelly 12/14/1925, Folder 8, Box 10, Julius Rosenwald Papers, University of Chicago Special Collections; Julius Rosenwald to T.E. Donnelly 12/17/1926, Folder 8, Box 10, Julius Rosenwald Papers, University of Chicago Special Collections; Newberry Library Financial Agent to Mr. F.W. Armstrong, Citizens Committee to Enforce the Landis Award, 12/14/1921, Box 22, Records of the Newberry Library Financial Agent, RG 4, Newberry Library, Chicago IL; Chicago Association of Commerce, *Survey of the Construction Industries and Physical Development of Chicago, Twenty-first Anniversary of the Chicago Association of Commerce* (Chicago: Chicago Association of Commerce, 1925); Sidney Fine, *Without the Blare of Trumpets: Walter Drew, the National Erectors’ Association, and the Open Shop Movement, 1903-57* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995), 216-19.

well. By employing this tactic CTPA leaders induced landlord-tenant reform from the Illinois State Government. As the housing crisis waned and prices of most commodities stabilized, middle class consumer organizing faded.⁴⁸⁷ However, throughout the 1920s, aided by the publicity of the Dailey Commission and acting through the Citizens Committee to Enforce the Landis Award, organized capital continued to appeal to the anti-labor sentiment so prevalent among white collar tenants in the immediate postwar period.

⁴⁸⁷ Governmental control over rents would materialize (at the federal level) during World War II, discussed in Wendy Plotkin, "Rent Control in Chicago, 1947-1949, People, Politics and Controversy: The Deliberation of the Chicago Advisory Board and the Testimony of the June, 1949 Public Hearings," History 452 Research Seminar Sept. 1989-May, 1990, Professor Richard Fried, obtained from author.

Epilogue: Toward a “Middle Class Union”

Even before the Dailey Commission returned its findings, Chicago tenants attempted to broaden their organization. The CTPA was a tenants’ organization, but many of its members had also donned overalls and scorned high clothing prices; many had condemned food profiteers and the striking workers that had failed to produce or allowed food to spoil. These same tenants protested that prices had outstripped their salaries. In the midst of building graft investigation and tenant activism, some Chicago tenants sought to build on their recent success by forming a more permanent organization that would continue to protect them in the face of future exploitation by capitalist profiteers and organized labor: “The Middle Class Union” (MCU). The idea was not specific to Chicago. Throughout the United States, consumers that had formed overall clubs, tenants’ unions or simply protested the HCL, attempted to form “middle class unions.” To many middle class consumers, it represented the culmination of their activism.

These consumers looked not just to their own past and current organizing, but also to the growing British Middle Class Union, for inspiration. The idea of a “middle class union” originated in Great Britain in March of 1919 to enable the “middle classes to act collectively...to protect themselves...against the inflated prices of the necessities of life.” MCU organizers asserted that membership would protect “the consumer whose necessities are exploited both by Labour and Capital.” The British movement sought to use its own power, as well as the state to “protect” against the supposed excesses of

capital and labor.⁴⁸⁸ Their goals mirrored those of many American overall club members, municipal market proponents, home gardeners, tenant activists and DOJ-HCL organizers. In fact, middle class union leaders sponsored the overall movement in England. Reports in the press that inflated the Union's membership must have brought excitement to many middle class Americans. Representing perhaps the largest exaggeration, a *Washington Post* article mentioned a membership of 35 million. Aided by frequent publicity, the British Middle Class Union consciously employed the organizing tactics of labor by organizing a "union." Far from sympathetic to the gains of labor unions, the MCU not only marshaled its consumer power, it also used its members as volunteer strikebreakers. Gaining consciousness as middle class consumers, the Middle Class Union aimed to attack organized labor- the very group that had given them the strategic basis for organizing.⁴⁸⁹

Unsurprisingly, the CTPA stood at the forefront of white collar Chicago's attempt to form a U.S. Middle Class Union. After the passage of the Kessinger landlord-tenant reform bill, John R. Patterson and a number of other CTPA members hoped to translate the "jubilation" over their success into a move to convert the CTPA into a middle class union. CTPA leader J.B. Strauss summarized the aims: "To organize the great unorganized middle class so as to protect it from many small but well organized divisions that will take advantage." Among its stated goals was "to undertake the extermination of

⁴⁸⁸ The British movement was blatantly anti-labor. The British Middle Class Union Manifesto, for example, stated, "[the middle classes] are in danger of being ground to powder between the upper and nether millstones of Capital and Labor." It also stated, "Organised labour is aggressive and insistent...[it] obtains great concession, of which the Middle Class must be the victims." *London Times* 5/10/1919.

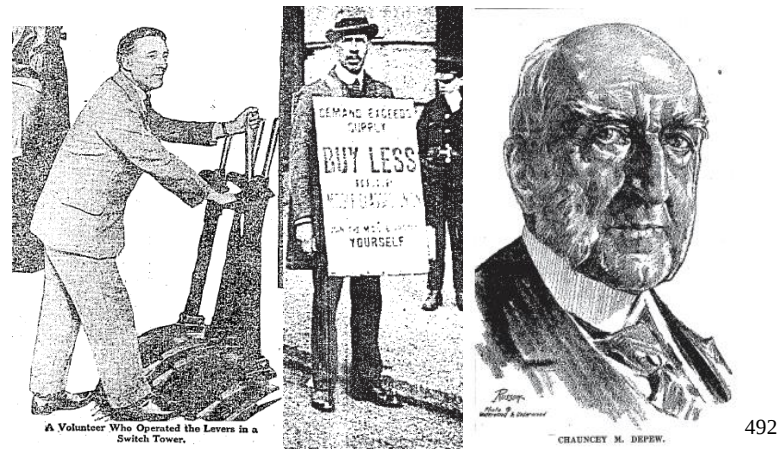
⁴⁸⁹ *London Times* 3/7/1919, 5/10/1919; *Washington Post* 2/29/1920; *Atlanta Constitution* 5/8/1920.

all profiteering” and “to break down the unlawful building combinations now restricting the construction of homes and apartments.”⁴⁹⁰ MCU organizers claimed to be acting valiantly in the public interest against selfish parties.

Similar to public discussion over the specific issues of high rents, clothing prices and food prices, politicians and the press reinforced middle class union rhetoric. In a June 1921 speech, for example, former Illinois Governor Frank Lowden discussed profiteering by capital and labor. “For a time it was feared that the public was helpless against this condition,” Lowden declared. “And then occurred what was popularly called the “Buyers’ Strike.” Lowden concluded, “It was thus shown that what is vaguely called the public after all is more powerful than either an organization of employees or employers in any industry or a combination of both.” In speaking of the power of the “buyers’ strike,” a term used to describe lack of middle class spending for any commodity (including the clothing boycotts of the overall movement and rent strikes), Lowden reminded his audience of the potential power of an organized middle class.⁴⁹¹

⁴⁹⁰ *Chicago Tribune* 4/6/1921.

⁴⁹¹ Speech, June 1, 1921, p.5, Folder 7, Box 8, Series 5, Frank Lowden Papers, University of Chicago Special Collections.



Pictured on the left is a participant in a U.S. trend toward a “middle class union,” serving as a scab in a railway strike that middle class Americans believed to be damaging to consumers. Pictured in the middle is a man holding a sign in a Middle Class Union parade in London. Former Sen. Chauncey Depew, a proponent of an American middle class union, is pictured on the right.

To middle class Americans, a “middle class union” (MCU) represented far more than a solution to the immediate problem of the high cost of living. It gave them the potential of having a permanent organization to impose the nineteenth century middle class producerist values of industriousness and thrift onto the consumer economy. Middle class Americans would thus be able to build on the power they expressed in overall clubs, tenants unions, home garden clubs, and through municipal market campaigns and, to some extent, the DOJ-HCL Women’s Division. As consumers they could police the fairness of the economy to ensure that the working and elite classes abided by their own self-righteous values of hard work and thrift. With this power, middle class unionists believed that their ability to afford a middle class lifestyle would seldom be compromised.

⁴⁹² *Outlook* 11/3/1920; *New York Times* 4/25/1920; *Sandusky Register* 5/2/1920.

MCU organizers cast their own values as the universal values of the broader citizenry. The New York State Middle Class Union proclaimed to secure “fair play for all classes” “against aggression of whatever nature,” even as their specific goals were anti-labor and anti-capital. Both the press and the middle class union members referred to members and MCU aims by using broad terms such as “the people” or “the public.” Receiving extensive press coverage for travelling the country in an attempt to charter branches of a national MCU, former Senator Chauncey Depew called for “a square deal for the general public.” Many press accounts applauded his initiative. New York City featured both “Public’s Union” and the “People’s League.” Defined as “middle class unions,” these organizations, according to the *Christian Science Monitor*, were “composed of members of the intermediate classes which bear the brunt of the struggles between Capital and Labor.” Joseph Wolf, a leader of the “Middle Class Union of New York State” referred to the organization as “a body of people,” and exclaimed, “its immense power is latent.” Gerald E. Forse, another MCU organizer, exclaimed, “it will prove that the people as a whole are greater than even the most powerful and thoroughly organized.”⁴⁹³

Middle class unionists attempted to coordinate the local and discursive spaces of post-World War I middle class consumer activism. Individuals ranging from Chauncey Depew to the editors of the *Chicago Tribune* referenced the success of local and commodity-specific activism and fueled a national discursive space of middle class consumer activism. One New York MCU leader reiterated that “the public has too long

⁴⁹³ Portsmouth (OH) *Daily Times* 6/20/1920; *Christian Science Monitor* 4/24/1920; *Chicago Tribune* 2/8/1920, 5/15/1920; *Washington Post* 2/29/1920.

been made the plaything of powerful class interests” and stated, “We hope to co-ordinate all useful existing groups, leagues and associations of citizens which have already been formed to assist the public cause, and we invite such bodies to join hands with us in fighting greed and oppression.” Even though middle class consumers often already took part in multiple forms of activism, MCU proponents beamed at the idea of a nationally-coordinated organization with local chapters. As Depew exclaimed, a national organization would ensure that the public would be treated “fairly, squarely, rightly, justly and righteously.”⁴⁹⁴

Unfortunately for organizers, what constituted a middle class union was unclear.⁴⁹⁵ For example, of a middle class New Jersey Tenants’ Association, the *Chicago Tribune* stated, “Not long ago the increase of rents in New Jersey forced the organization of what may be considered the first middle class union. The tenants’ association there

⁴⁹⁴ New York Times 4/16/1920, 4/25/1920; Ogden, UT *Standard-Examiner* 5/9/1920.

⁴⁹⁵ This was the case in part because there was no clear hierarchy under which local chapters of the middle class union could affiliate. This narrative only adds to many historians’ observation that the middle class can be both an elusive group and an elusive term, and simultaneously serve as an important basis for identification and organization. Of nineteenth century political and social identities including “working” and “middle class,” Patrick Joyce argues, “In narratives [through which identity was conferred] everyone speaks in the name of ‘the people,’ yet the people are nowhere to be found outside the imagining of the people. This imagined people takes on a colossal force as the source of all sorts of claims for authority and legitimacy.” A post-structuralist, Joyce emphasizes the importance of the imagined middle class and de-emphasizes its material existence. Many historians have noted the “elusive” nature of the term “middle class.” Burton Bledstein, for example, writes, “At a minimum, many scholars agree that the middle class for the last three centuries has been elusive to investigation and slippery to define.” Through an analysis of how the realty profession in early twentieth century America attached itself to differing middle class notions of gender and professionalism that were “in flux,” Jeffery M. Hornstein suggests that the “imprecision and amorphousness” of the term middle class, “inheres the political and cultural power of the category.” See also: Maris A. Vinovskis, “Stalking the Elusive Middle Class in Nineteenth-Century America. A Review Article” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 33:3 (Jul 1991): 582-587. Burton Bledstein and Robert Johnston eds., *The Middling Sorts: Explorations in the History of the American Middle Class* (New York Routledge, 2001), 1. Patrick Joyce, *Democratic Subjects: The Self and the Social in Nineteenth-Century England* (Cambridge, 1990), 19, 163; Jeffery M. Hornstein, “The Rise of the Realtor: Professionalism, Gender, and Middle-Class Identity, 1908-1950” in Burton Bledstein and Robert Johnston eds., *The Middling Sorts: Explorations in the History of the American Middle Class* (New York Routledge, 2001), 233; New York Times 4/15/1920.

called a strike which brought landlords to their knees.” There is no evidence that the CTPA and these New Jersey tenants ever communicated, though some communication did occur between the CTPA and a New York middle class union. The national magazine, *The Survey*, even suggested that groups of college students offering to serve as strike-breakers in a railroad strike were commonly thought of as a middle class union. The magazine also indicated that organizing teachers were part of a trend toward forming a middle class union. Yet, the AFT and NEA organized at the workplace (rather than through consumption), and the AFT was affiliated with American Federation of Labor, a defined enemy of many middle class consumers. Middle class Americans wrote Chauncey Depew, requesting to be appointed presidents of local MCU chapters, but no existing evidence suggests that this correspondence continued over time.⁴⁹⁶

Perhaps more so than communication problems and the ambiguity of the MCU, broader economic trends and social changes quashed the hopes of middle class union organizers. Many Chicago tenants were at least partially satisfied by rent reform, lessening their outrage over the postwar political economy. More importantly, by 1923 the economic depression had faded. Middle class concerns over the cost of living concerns persisted into the mid-late 1920s, but only in scattered, disorganized forms. Throughout the 1920s prices for necessities and other commodities remained relatively

⁴⁹⁶ See, Marjorie Murphy, *Blackboard Unions: The AFT and the NEA, 1900-1980* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990). Murphy also describes the contradiction of teachers, as white collar workers, undertaking the working-class practice of unionizing. But in the case of NEA and AFT members, the desire to unionize originated in part from the fact that many teachers and their parents had previously been part of the working class- “it was a step away from the blue-collar world of their fathers.” Murphy asks: “were teachers looking back to a system of social justice of their fathers and wending their way into white-collar work with trade union values, or were they grasping to the values of their new social status, embracing middle-class ideals of respectability?” According to Murphy, “teachers responded to both calls- often in contradictory ways...” *Ibid.*, 5; *The Survey* 5/15/1920; *Chicago Tribune* 4/25/1920 and 7/13/1921; *New York Times* 4/5/1920.

constant.⁴⁹⁷ Perhaps most of all, organized labor, a major culprit for their economic woes, had left the immediate postwar period badly damaged by failed strikes and open shop drives, such as the one conducted by the Citizen's Committee to Enforce the Landis Award. There was often little remaining power in the labor movement to fight. Middle class consumer activism faded along with price decreases and the declining power of the labor movement.⁴⁹⁸

Before these developments derailed their efforts, middle class unionists had aimed to continue the strategy of state-centered voluntarism employed in the other post-World War I middle class organizing campaigns. As Middle Class Union proponents pressed for stronger legislation to protect consumers and to limit the excesses of labor organizations, they also were willing to help facilitate these goals not just through buyers' strikes, but also by participating in federal wage arbitration conferences and by serving as temporary scabs in labor strikes.⁴⁹⁹ As one New York labor leader noted of a railroad strike, middle class union members were organizing "to scab the railroads, against the teamsters and everywhere there is a strike." Even though their goals differed from most progressives, members of the middle class continued Progressive Era organizing tactics by calling for

⁴⁹⁷ See, "No. 346-Cost of Living in the United States: Index Numbers," in United States Department of Commerce, Bureau of Foreign and Domestic Commerce, *Statistical Abstract of the United States 1929* (Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1929).

⁴⁹⁸ According to Lizabeth Cohen, a subtle form of organizing was taking place beneath the surface. Workers in Chicago, who had been divided in the strikes of 1919, participated in a common consumer culture and welfare capitalism that led them to have more in common with each other by the 1930s. According to Cohen, during the New Deal Era, which saw the advent of federally-sanctioned collective bargaining, workers became "effective as national political participants." Lizabeth Cohen, *Making a New Deal: Industrial Workers in Chicago, 1919-1939* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 5.

⁴⁹⁹ The founding member of the New York Middle Class Union suggested that the federal government should use MCU members to help arbitrate disputes between labor and capital at official conferences. Appleton, WI *Post-Crescent* 2/20/1920.

reform and simultaneously providing the state with the necessary organizational muscle to accomplish it. Whether through the DOJ-HCL, city council home garden committees, or as part of fair price committees, middle class Americans were committed to state-centered voluntarism.⁵⁰⁰

Through the MCU and the other organizations discussed in this dissertation, an increasing number of middle class Americans looked to the state to directly immerse itself into the economy beyond its previous efforts. They pressed for laws that would limit the power of landlords, and rallied for federal, state and local governmental stimulation of building, and the creation of “a service bureau for the renting public.” They also advocated the expansion of state and local market departments, state and locally funded gardens, and a substantial growth in the power of the Department of Justice to police labor organizations and both large corporations and the corner grocer. These endeavourers necessitated a growth in federal bureaucracy, only partially dependent on middle class voluntarism. Middle class Americans continued to believe in privatism and individualism, which made voluntarism so appealing, but a wider range of them became more and more comfortable with a transparently activist state.⁵⁰¹

Middle class state-centered organizing in the immediate postwar period represents an important step toward the middle class activism of the New Deal era. During the 1930s, in the midst of economic depression, a myriad of middle class-led organizations became leaders of what was termed “the consumer movement.” Existing and newly-formed groups ranging from the League of Women Shoppers to the Consumers’ National

⁵⁰⁰ *New York Times* 5/13/1920.

⁵⁰¹ *Chicago Tribune* 4/7/1921.

Federation, advocated a number of government policies to address a struggling economy. Putting the “high cost of living on trial,” the Consumers’ National Federation in 1937 pressured the government for rent control, greater action against monopolies, and federal housing programs. The organization also lobbied President Roosevelt and Congress for “a central consumer agency,” or “bureau” to promote the needs of consumers in the Federal administration. These calls came even after the Federal Government created an unprecedented number of agencies, programs and laws to intervene into a struggling economy. The National Recovery Administration, one of a multitude of such New Deal agencies, featured a Consumer Advisory Board. Comprised of consumer activists, the Board ensured that federal maximum prices were not set too high and that consumers enjoyed quality standards and proper product labeling to help them achieve the utmost value in their purchases.⁵⁰²

Middle class Americans in the post-World War I period played a central role in defining the consumer’s interest as representative of the public interest, an increasingly prevailing concept over the course of the ensuing decades. During the Great Depression, the interests middle class Americans articulated in their consumer activism, in many ways, legitimately came closer to reflecting those of the masses. Middle class consumers often selectively spent their money in politically conscious ways, choosing to support companies that offered fair prices, but also paid reasonable wages to blue-collar workers. In contrast to the post-World War I period, middle class Americans frequently worked

⁵⁰² Lizabeth Cohen, *A Consumers’ Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America* (New York: Random House, 2003), 28-31; Meg Jacobs, *Pocketbook Politics: Economic Citizenship in Twentieth-Century America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 156; *New York Times* 2/17/1938, 2/25/1938.

with the working class in their consumer activism. Both classes faced massive levels of unemployment, and middle class Americans believed that giving all consumers purchasing power would provide the best chance at bringing the entire country out of the Depression. Yet, even as many white collar workers promoted higher working class wages, middle class consumers considered themselves to be synonymous with the “people.” As a representative of the “consumer” at a 1938 management conference, William Allen White, a renowned Kansas newspaper editor, called consumers the “public,” and bluntly declared, “this is a middle class country.”⁵⁰³

After World War II, middle class Americans continued to represent their consumer interests as those of the nation, this time less accurately. In the post-World War II period, citizens lived in what Lizabeth Cohen calls the “Consumers’ Republic,” marked by a belief that unconditionally “satisfying material wants actually served the national interest.” Above all, middle class Americans in the Consumers’ Republic, sought to protect *their* own ability to partake in mass consumerism. They sought suburban homes in middle class neighborhoods, furnished with the latest consumer goods and featuring quality local school systems. Even as their goals changed from those of Depression Era “citizen consumers,” who made selective politically-conscious purchases, to those of the indiscriminate “purchaser as citizens” of the Consumers’ Republic, middle class Americans proclaimed to consume as representatives of the people at large.⁵⁰⁴

⁵⁰³ Chicago *Tribune* 9/21/1938.

⁵⁰⁴ Lizabeth Cohen, *A Consumers’ Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America* (New York: Random House, 2003), 8-9.

Even if they lacked a permanent organization, such as a “middle class union,” the influence of post-World War I middle class consumer activism was deeply felt in the following decades. Overall club members, rent strikers, municipal market proponents, DOJ-HCL activists and home gardeners helped to carry Progressive Era state-centered voluntarism toward the New Deal era. They portrayed themselves as representing “the consumer,” and crystallized the notion that the consumers’ interest represented the public interest. Far from politically neutral, middle class Americans continued to impose their own set of “universal” values onto the consumer economy.

As a result, the middle class maintained a tenuous relationship with the working class. Their “universal” values shifted in accordance with their perceived position compared to the working class. During the Great Depression, when middle class Americans saw the working class as equal sufferers, they worked alongside of many working class Americans to advance a “purchasing power” solution to jumpstart the economy. In this context, creating jobs with adequate wages would best promote industriousness among the working class. Yet, the tension between high wages and high prices- so prevalent during the immediate postwar period- was latent. During the post-World War I period, many middle class Americans defended their pocketbooks by arguing that high wages represented working class excess, indolence and luxury. In the Consumers’ Republic of the post-World War II period, high wages again threatened middle class Americans’ ability to engage in the polity as a “purchaser as citizen.” During this period, protecting their own self-interests, middle class Americans again self-righteously imposed on the working class the value of industriousness, which they had carried from a nineteenth century middle class worldview. As one professor declared, to

prevent price increases, laborers would have to learn to “work harder.”⁵⁰⁵ Similar to the post-World War I period, these calls for industriousness were enlarged by companies seeking to minimize labor costs. As middle class Americans privileged the quest for cheaper goods over working class wage concerns, alliances between working class Americans and middle class consumers fell apart.⁵⁰⁶

While the middle class producerist value of industriousness remained an important part of middle class consumer identity, thrift fell to the distant background. It was less incompatible with the blatant excesses of the Consumers’ Republic. As William H. White, editor of *Fortune* magazine noted in 1957, “thrift is now un-American.”⁵⁰⁷ While their values shifted in conjunction with their changing priorities and alliances over the course of the twentieth century, middle class Americans continued to impose them onto the consumer economy as “universal” standards of fairness.

⁵⁰⁵ New York Times 1/13/1947.

⁵⁰⁶ See Meg Jacobs, *Pocketbook Politics: Economic Citizenship in Twentieth-Century America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 250-61.

⁵⁰⁷ Quote taken from Lizabeth Cohen, *A Consumers’ Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America* (New York: Random House, 2003), 121.

Appendices:

Appendix 1:

Middle class income change calculated from statistics listed below. Middle class income averaged from Jeffery Williamson and Peter Lindert, *American Inequality: A Macroeconomic History* (New York: Academic Press, 1980) p.305-10. While the data is not fully inclusive and includes some arguably working class professions, it confirms the general point that middle class income remained stagnant or decreased during the war, even if a high variance is placed on the final statistic of a 26 percent decrease.

	Middle Class Income					
urban skilled	public school teachers	Methodist minister	associate prof	skilled building		Year
1.96	1.638	4.428	4.867	1.97		1912
1.96	1.573		4.552	1.97		1913
1.989	1.576	4.147	4.586	1.99		1914
1.989	1.539		4.441	1.99		1915
1.989	1.47	3.743	4.05	1.99		1916
1.876			3.387	1.91		1917
1.764	0.906	2.114	2.362	1.83		1918
1.722			2.128	1.8		1919

		Prop. Change from 1912 (m.c.i.)			
urban skilled	public school teachers	Methodist minister	associate prof	skilled building	Middle Class Income (proportionate change from 1912)
1	1	1	1	1	1
1	0.96		0.935	1	0.97375
1.015	0.962	0.937	0.942	1.01	0.9732
1.015	0.916		0.912	1.01	0.96325
1.015	0.875	0.845	0.832	1.01	0.9154
0.957			0.696	0.969	0.874
0.9	0.539	0.477	0.48	0.923	0.6638
0.87			0.437	0.913	0.74

Appendix 2:

Sources: Middle class income averaged from Jeffery Williamson and Peter Lindert, *American Inequality: A Macroeconomic History* (New York: Academic Press, 1980) p.305-10. "Relative Retail Prices of Specified Articles of Food," in Department of Commerce, Bureau of Foreign and Domestic Commerce, *Statistical Abstract of the United States 1921* (Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1922), 631.

Middle Class Income (proportionate change from 1912)	Retail Food Prices (proportionate change)	Year
1	1	1912
0.97375	1.02	1913
0.9732	1.04	1914
0.96325	1.03	1915
0.9154	1.16	1916
0.874	1.49	1917
0.6638	1.71	1918
0.74	1.9	1919

Appendix 3:

The following compares samples of advertised prices of various items of women's apparel from three department stores from mid-1919 to mid-1920. Two stores were located in Ft. Wayne, Indiana and one in Bridgeport, Connecticut. Means for each advertised item at each store were taken for mid-1919 and compared with the same statistic for 1920. The percentage differences for each comparison of means were then averaged per store, generating an overall average percentage difference in price per store. Lastly, the overall average percentage differences in price per store were averaged to produce an overall estimate of price changes from mid-1919 to mid 1920. Naturally this approach suffers from inconsistent sample sizes and potentially imprecise description of items (rendering it difficult to determine which items were exactly the same). Choosing only items with the most precise descriptions mitigated this problem. Also, what was advertised might have differed from other trends in prices for each store. Yet, advertisements would have impacted consumers' perceptions. Thus, even if advertised prices did not mirror actual prices, perception of price changes in large part dictated public approval or discontent with economic trends and whether the DOJ was successful in bringing down women's clothing costs.

Ft. Wayne- Grand Leader Store							
	spring women's suits			spring taffeta silk dresses		Famous Make corsets	
1919	14.88			9.88		1.98	
	24.5			19.5		1.98	
	15			9.88			
	14.88			10			
1919 average	17.315			12.315		1.98	
1920	31.5			14.75		2.98	
	23.75					2.44	

	29.5						
	18						
1920 average	25.6875			14.75		2.71	
change	1.4835			1.198		1.37	
average percent increase from mid-1919 to mid-1920=				1.3505			

Bedell, Bridgeport, Connecticut					
	Georgette Blouse	Hats (not winter)			
1919	3	3.96			
		8.75			
		5			
		6.75			
		7.5			
		5			
		8.75			
average 1919	3	6.53			
1920	5.98	4.5			
		8.75			
average 1920	5.98	6.625			
average percent increase from mid-1919 to mid-1920=				1.5	

Boston Store, Ft. Wayne, Indiana				
	Lace Corset Cover	Silk Fiber Hose	Ladies Union Suits (non athletic, various styles)	Cotton Hose
1919	0.25	0.59	1	0.15
	0.49	0.45	0.49	0.23
			0.59	
			0.69	
			0.89	
average 1919	0.37	0.52	0.732	0.19
1920	0.89	0.89	0.89	0.15
			0.79	0.25
			0.49	
			0.59	
			0.79	

			1.39	
average 1920	0.89	0.89	0.823333333	0.2
change	2.4	1.712	1.248	1.053
average increase from mid-1919 to mid-1920=			1.60325	
Overall average increase for the three stores			1.485	

Data taken from March-October advertisements for both 1919 and 1920 in the Bridgeport *Telegram* and the Fort Wayne *Journal-Gazette*.

Appendix 4:

	Middle Class Income					
urban skilled	public school teachers	Methodist minister	associate prof	skilled building		Year
1.96	1.638	4.428	4.867	1.97		1912
1.96	1.573		4.552	1.97		1913
1.989	1.576	4.147	4.586	1.99		1914
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1.989	1.47	3.743	4.05	1.99		1916
1.876			3.387	1.91		1917
1.764	0.906	2.114	2.362	1.83		1918
1.722			2.128	1.8		1919

		prop. Change from 1912 (m.c.i.)			
urban skilled	public school teachers	Methodist minister	associate prof	skilled building	Middle Class Income (proportionate change from 1912)
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1.015	0.916		0.912	1.01	0.96325
1.015	0.875	0.845	0.832	1.01	0.9154
0.957			0.696	0.969	0.874
0.9	0.539	0.477	0.48	0.923	0.6638
0.87			0.437	0.913	0.74

		Union Wages	
Cloth & Clothing Prices (proportionate change from 1912)		Building Trades Union	Union Manufacturing (by hour)
0.972		0.544	0.416
1		0.557	0.43
0.977		0.567	0.438
0.983		0.569	0.439

1.27		0.587	0.464
1.75		0.624	0.499
2.28		0.684	0.602
2.52		0.78	0.706

prop. Change from 1912		
Building Trades Union	Union Manufacutring (by hour)	Organized Labor Wages (proportionate change from 1912)
1	1	1
1.03	1.03	1.03
1.04	1.05	1.045
1.05	1.05	1.05
1.08	1.12	1.1
1.15	1.2	1.175
1.26	1.45	1.355
1.43	1.7	1.565

Sources: Union wage data taken from U.S. Census, Historical Statistics of the United States Colonial Times to Present. Middle class income averaged from Jeffery Williamson and Peter Lindert, *American Inequality: A Macroeconomic History* (New York: Academic Press, 1980) 305-10. Clothing prices taken from U.S. Dept of Commerce, *Statistical Abstract of the United States 1928* (Washington D.C.: GPO, 1928), 318.

Appendix 5:

Class makeup (by profession) of two North Side neighborhoods with residents participating in rent strikes:

Street	4536	accountant
Hazel		
	4644	druggist
Wilson	904	mechanic
	905	agent
	911	steamfitter
	917	sales
	917	teacher
	921	sales
	921	salesman
	925	stenography
	950	lawyer
Windsor	910	insurance
	914	agent
	916	salesman
	920	clerk
	926	salesmen
	934	auditor
	948	store keeper



Sheridan	4446	bank
	4452	mail clerk
	4456	janitor
	4500	surgeon
	4502	bank manager
	4508	merchant
	4518	doctor
	4518	manager
	4520	superintendent
	4522	cashier
	4536	manager
	4538	auditor
	4550	manager
	4570	manufacturer
Sunnyside	1012	book keeper
	1012	salesman
	1028	manager
Broadway	4459	cashier
	4459	salesman
	4544	doctor
	4544	restaurant manager



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Galveston (TX) Daily News
Hartford Courant
Helena Independent
Indianapolis Star
Industrial News Survey
Iowa Homestead

Ironwood (Michigan) *Daily Globe*
 Jacksonville *Metropolis*
 Janesville, WI *Gazette*
 Kansas City *Star*
 Kingsport (TN) *Times*
 La Crosse (WI) *Tribune and Leader-Press*
 Lake Park (IA) *News*
 Lethbridge *Daily Herald* (Alberta, Canada)
 Lima *Daily News*
 London (U.K.) *Times*
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 Los Angeles *Times*
 Lowell *Sun*
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 Manitoba (Canada), *Free Press*
 Mansfield *News*
 Medford (OR) *Mail Tribune*
 Modesto *Evening News*
 Mountain *Democrat*
 New Castle *News* (PA)
 New England *Farms*
 New York *Age*
 New York *Call*
 New York *Times*
 Oakland *Tribune*
 Oelwein *Daily Register*
 Ogden (Utah) *Standard-Examiner*
 Oneonta *Daily Star*
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 Perry (IA) *Daily Chief*
 Pinnacle *News*
 Piqua *Daily Call*
 Plattsburgh *Sentinel*
 Portsmouth (NH) *Herald*
 Portsmouth (Ohio) *Daily Times*
 Providence *Evening Bulletin*
 Providence *Journal*
Record Journal of Douglas County (Colorado)
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