

Unemployed Person

You've been unemployed for two years, but no matter how hard you look you can't seem to find any jobs. You are married and have kids and you're increasingly worried about your family's well-being. Your children have outgrown their clothes and can't buy them anything new. Sometimes you skip a meal to ensure there's enough food for the children. You need immediate relief—money to clothe and feed your family—but what you'd really like is a steady job.

At first you blamed yourself for being unemployed, but over time, you realized you weren't alone. In fact, 15 million people—25 percent of the country—are unemployed right now. Many people accuse the unemployed of being lazy, but only a few years ago the unemployment rate was a mere 3 percent. How can millions of people suddenly get lazy?

When the Depression began, Herbert Hoover was president. Hoover relied on charitable and religious organizations to provide relief for the unemployed, but these private organizations were in no way prepared to meet the massive needs unleashed by the Depression.

So the unemployed began to organize. On March 6, 1930, 500,000 people in 25 cities demonstrated for government relief. Unemployed Councils began forming all over the country. The councils are kind of like a union of unemployed people. These councils work to keep people's water, gas, and electricity turned on, even when they can't pay their bills.

You joined a council to help your family and others in your community. The councils believe that unemployed people have to stick together with working people and to support each other.

You are hopeful, now that President Roosevelt has been elected. He promised a "New Deal" and you hope that means relief. But you also want more than just immediate, temporary relief. This crisis has made it clear that unemployment is a permanent part of the economic system—even in good times there are still plenty of people who can't find work. You think the government should tax employers and the wealthy to set up a permanent system of unemployment insurance and guarantee that no one goes hungry or loses their home simply because they are laid off and can't find a job.

The government also needs to help put people back to work. Since private businesses aren't providing jobs for people, you think the government should. Why not put people to work building roads, schools, hospitals, parks—construction that benefits everyone?

You're also worried because big business is pushing to suspend antitrust laws. The whole reason antitrust laws were first put in place was to prevent monopolies—when one or a few businesses have so much control over an industry that they can charge high prices for whatever they're selling. And wealthy land owners who can't make a profit selling food are asking the government to pay them not to plant on part of their land or to destroy their "excess" crops and farm animals. They think this will raise the price of food by shrinking the supply and will help their farms become profitable again. But there are millions of people like you who are going hungry every night and can't even afford the food at its current price. You sympathize with the poorer farmers who, like you, are struggling to get by. But why can't the government just buy the food from these farmers and give it to those in need? It's crazy to destroy food as millions go hungry.

If big business and wealthy farmers are able to get their way, the "New Deal" will be just like the "Old Deal"—a government that helps the rich and leaves the rest of you to rot.

Black Activist

As a Black activist, you try to promote civil rights and a better standard of living for Black people. Although the Depression has hurt everyone, it has hit the African American community the hardest. The heaviest toll has come in the South, where more than half the Black population lives. Two million Black people in the South are tenant farmers—who rent land to farm—or sharecroppers, who use others' land in exchange for part of their crop. Since 1929, cotton prices have fallen by more than 50 percent. Over two-thirds of Black cotton farmers are receiving no profits from their crop. With little or no relief, Black farmers have to grow what they can, hunt, and scavenge to stay alive.

Those who have migrated into the Southern cities are no better off. Black workers have always had to take the hardest, lowest-paid jobs in the South—street cleaning, garbage collecting, domestic service—but now even these jobs are being reserved for whites. Southern states give out the lowest unemployment benefits in the country. And to qualify for relief, cities and states in the South set harsher standards for Blacks than whites, and pay African Americans less per month than whites.

Black people living outside the South face less discrimination, but they face an equally grim employment situation. Black unemployment in the North is just as bad as in the South—50 percent or more in most cities. Black workers are first to receive wage cuts and layoff notices. Moreover, like in the Southern cities, Blacks constitute the bulk of domestic workers, whose employment depends on the prosperity of others in the community.

You do not have much confidence in President Roosevelt. The Democrats, formerly the party of slavery, are now the party of Jim Crow. Roosevelt is a Northern Democrat, but his party is dominated by racist white Southerners. During the 1932 presidential campaign, Roosevelt was silent on the rights of African Americans. Even though Hoover's economic policies were disastrous, two-thirds of African Americans voted for Hoover as the lesser evil, thinking that a vote for FDR would extend segregation.

Now the Southern Democrats want jobs and relief distributed by racist state governments that have always prioritized the interests of whites. You are particularly worried about what the administration will do concerning the cotton and agriculture industry. There are rumors that, to bring up the prices of food and cotton, the government might pay farm owners not to plant on part of their land, and to destroy crops and farm animals. But what about those who rent the land they farm on? What if the farm owner decides that it's *your* land he wants to not plant on? That it's *your* crops he wants to destroy? Will he kick you off the land? What will prevent farm owners from cheating tenants and sharecroppers out of their fair share of payment benefits?

You've heard that the administration might suspend antitrust laws to allow businesses to get together in "trade associations" and collaborate to write codes of "fair" competition. Will those "fair" codes continue to allow employers to pay Black workers less than white workers? You've heard that wealthy Southerners are pushing for agricultural and domestic labor—the *two areas of industry where most Blacks are employed*—to be exempt from the codes.

Unfortunately, it seems likely that Roosevelt's "National Recovery Act" might be more aptly named "Negroes Ruined Again."

Trade Unionist

You are a member of the American Federation of Labor (AFL), the largest labor union in the country, representing about 3 million workers. It is crucial that the New Deal extends democracy to the workplace. As workers, you have no say on the job. The employers have all the power. But when workers come together in a labor union, they can bargain together for better wages, benefits, and working conditions.

The depression has hit working people hard. Millions of workers have been laid off. Factory employment has fallen by 64 percent, and those like you who are lucky enough to still be employed are working under increasingly bad conditions. Most factory workers work 50 hours a week and you now make a little over one-third of what you made just three years ago!

But because there are so many unemployed workers, it is easy for employers to fire workers who complain. The only way to make employers listen is to join together and form a labor union so you can negotiate collectively. If the employer doesn't listen to you, you can strike. But most workers are too scared to strike these days for fear of being fired. Knowing this, employers use the economic crisis as an excuse to slash wages and refuse to bargain with any union.

When there is a unionizing drive in a workplace, the employer does everything he can to stop it. Some employers organize "company unions" that are financed and dominated by management. Employers pressure workers to join the company union instead of the real labor union. Employers often launch a propaganda campaign to discredit the union, and hire spies to find out who the union organizers are so they can fire them.

The employers want an "open shop" where any worker can "choose" to be represented by a company union or a real labor union. This allows them to split the workforce. You the "closed shop" should become the law. The concept behind the "closed shop" is simple—majority rule. If a majority of workers in a workplace vote to be represented by a particular union, that union should represent all workers in that workplace. Company unions should be banned.

You believe it was the lack of government intervention and economic planning that caused the crisis in the first place. Businesses were allowed to become too big and powerful. They increased production by making workers work harder, and simultaneously cut wages. Before the crash, the gap between the rich and the poor was wider than it had ever been. Companies were making more and more products, but there were fewer and fewer people who could afford them.

The solution to the economic crisis is to pay workers more, and shorten the workweek to increase the number of jobs available. But hiring more workers and paying higher wages will cut into a company's profits, so they won't do it unless the government forces them to.

Senator Hugo Black has introduced a "30-hour bill" in Congress that would reduce the workweek by setting a national minimum wage and maximum hours. AFL president William Green has threatened "general strikes" if the bill doesn't pass.

Through their votes, workers gave Roosevelt a clear victory and the Democrats a majority in the House and the Senate, because they were inspired by his call for a "New Deal." In campaign speeches, Roosevelt has acknowledged "the need for a redistribution of wealth." It's time to fulfill that promise.

Corporate Executive

You are an executive with a large and prosperous corporation. In the 1920s your business was booming, but all that changed in 1929 when the stock market crashed. As more and more businesses laid off workers, fewer and fewer people could afford your products.

At first you thought it was just a normal downturn in the business cycle. You figured since you owned one of the largest companies in the industry, you could wait it out. But by 1932 it became clear this was no normal crisis. About 2,000 businesses failed every month! You were forced to lay off thousands of workers and even close a few factories.

You and other businessmen began to formulate plans to stabilize the economy. You think businesses in an industry should get together in trade associations. These associations could coordinate to ensure the industry doesn't produce more than it can sell, and agree on a price for your product that benefits all the business owners.

Unfortunately, there is one problem: antitrust laws prevent businesses from getting too large. The trade associations that you are proposing violate these laws. So you and your fellow executives have been lobbying Congress and the president to suspend antitrust laws. President Hoover refused to listen to your proposals. So when Hoover ran for re-election, you supported Roosevelt. You donated large sums to his campaign, and you expect him to listen to you now.

You also want to protect your business from labor unions. A while back, your workers tried to organize a union to demand higher wages. Luckily, with the help of your management team, you were able to form your own workers' organization that helped to educate workers on why a union would be bad for everyone.

But now representatives from organized labor want the government to ban these kinds of workers' organizations as "company unions." You're not asking anyone to ban anything. You want workers to have the right to choose.

You are also concerned about a bill going through Congress that would mandate a 30-hour workweek and a minimum wage. This "one-size-fits-all" scheme would be an economic disaster. At a time when businesses are struggling to survive, it's ridiculous for the government to tell them what they must pay their workers or how long their workers should work. If you have to set minimum wages and maximum hours, you think that should be done in the trade associations you are proposing. Businesses know what's best for their industry.

Some may say that you are callous toward the plight of workers and the unemployed, but this is not true. What they don't understand is that what's good for the economy is good not just for business owners, but for workers, too. In fact, you support a massive "public works" program to put people back to work building roads, bridges, and electrical grids. Creating better infrastructure will allow you to more easily transport goods. Bringing electrical power to communities that don't have it will allow the people in those communities to buy new appliances and consumer goods they otherwise couldn't use.

You were encouraged that, in his first two weeks in office, FDR balanced the federal budget by cutting the salaries of government employees. What this country needs is a president willing to make those tough decisions to help the economy recover.

Wealthy Southern Land Owner

You own a large amount of farmland in the Southern United States. It's too big to farm by yourself, so you rent much of it to tenants and sharecroppers. Agriculture has been the industry hardest hit by the depression. Although some of your income comes from rent, most of it comes from selling cotton. Just a few years ago you were making 20 cents for every barrel of cotton you sold, and now it's only worth 5 cents!

Luckily, you're wealthy enough that you've been able to survive. And now that the Democrats are in power, you're hopeful that help for the South is coming. Democrats haven't had this much power since before the Civil War. Southerners control over half the committees and a majority of the leadership positions in Congress.

Your priority is reviving the agricultural industry. Farmers are roughly one-fourth of the nation's workforce, and agriculture is vital to the nation's economy. During his campaign, Roosevelt endorsed a plan to help raise agricultural prices by having the government pay farm owners to stop planting on part of their land and to destroy crops and farm animals. With fewer agricultural goods on the market, prices will rise, and you can begin making profits again. Some people argue that the government should buy the crops you can't sell and give them to the hungry. But that wouldn't fix the problem—there are too many agricultural goods being produced. With a large majority in both houses of Congress, you're confident the Democrats will win this for you.

But there are other proposals you're worried about. Currently there is a bill in Congress that proposes a 30-hour workweek and a national minimum wage. This would be disastrous in the South, where the standard of living is much lower than the rest of the country. There are rumors that Congress will set the minimum wage at 40 cents an hour—more than what most white workers make in the South! Even the proposal being put forth by corporate executives—that businesses in an industry get together in trade associations to set minimum wages and maximum hours—worries you. The Southern economy depends on low-paid Black workers in the agricultural and domestic industries. Any laws that don't exempt these industries will be terrible for the Southern economy—the region hardest hit by the depression.

You are also worried that trade unionists want the government to guarantee the right of workers to join a labor union. There aren't many unions in the South, and you'd like to see it stay that way.

Lastly, you recognize there are a lot of unemployed people who need relief and jobs. But it's important that the federal government take into account the different economic circumstances in different states. For example, if the government is giving an unemployed person a relief check that is more than a worker's wage in the South, what's the incentive to work? Everyone would just stop working and live off the federal government. It's best to leave it up to the states to decide how they distribute aid to the unemployed.

You feel similarly about public works projects. The South, probably more than any other region in the country, could use improvements to its infrastructure—roads, bridges, electrical grids, and so forth. But local governments, not the federal government, should decide where this money goes. The federal government should help states recover from the economic crisis, but they shouldn't try to do everything for them. What works in California or New York is not going to work in Mississippi.