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# Strategic and Political Challenges to Large-Scale Federal Job Creation

Gertrude Schaffner Goldberg

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**Abstract** This article identifies and explores means of meeting political and strategic challenges to the enactment of a federal job creation program sufficiently large and well-targeted to cope with mass unemployment. The challenges include: anti-government ideology; perceived failure of the Obama stimulus; exaggerated concern over federal deficits; shortcomings of the New Deal model for job creation; limited scope and/or sponsorship of legislative initiatives; and organizing a movement on behalf of the unemployed and large-scale job creation.

**Keywords** Jobs · Job creation · Full employment · Stimulus · New Deal · Mass protest · Conyers bill

## Introduction

Mass unemployment threatens to become a permanent phenomenon in the United States. The official unemployment rate hovered around the double-digit mark for nearly 2 years. Official unemployment has dipped some in 2011. Nonetheless, in April 2011, the number of officially unemployed workers was 13.7 million, 9% of the labor force.<sup>1</sup> An additional 15.1 million workers, the hidden unemployed, either wanted full-time work but were forced to work part-time or wanted jobs but were not looking for them due to such reasons as discouragement or lack of child care or transportation. Add to this the working poor, an estimated 16.4 million persons earning less than the poverty level for a family of four for year-round, full-time work.<sup>2</sup> Thus, 45 million people were unemployed or underemployed (Table 1). Moreover, the numbers of people afflicted by unemployment multiply when the families of jobless workers are included. Nearly one in four people (including children) lived in a family in which at least one member was unemployed at some time during

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<sup>1</sup>Counted as officially unemployed are persons who have worked less than 1 hour in paid employment and who have actively looked for work in the prior 4 weeks (e.g., contacted an employer, sent out resumé) and are currently available for work.

<sup>2</sup>The figure for working poor is from 2010, the latest available.

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**Table 1** Official unemployment by population group, hidden unemployment, working poor and job vacancies, April 2011

Official Unemployment: 9.0%	
White	8.8%
African American	16.1%
Hispanic	11.8%
Asian <sup>a</sup>	6.4%
Persons with disabilities <sup>a</sup>	14.5%
Men 20 years and over	8.8%
Women 20 years and over	7.9%
Teen-agers (16–19 years)	24.9%
Black teens	41.6%
Officially Unemployed	13.7 million
Hidden Unemployment	
Working part-time because can't find a full-time	8.6 million
People who want jobs but are not looking so are not counted	6.5 million in official statistics
Total Official and Hidden Unemployment	28.8 million (18.0% of the labor force)

In addition, millions more worked full-time, year-round, yet earned less than the official poverty level for a family of four. In 2009, the latest year available, that number was 16.3 million, 16.4% of full-time, full-year workers.

In March 2011, the number of job openings was 3.1 million. Thus there were more than 4 officially unemployed persons for each available job (an underestimate when one considers the hidden unemployed as well).

<sup>a</sup> not seasonally adjusted

Sources: For official and hidden unemployment rates, U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, *The Employment Situation April 2011*, <http://www.bls.gov/news.release/pdf/empst.pdf>; for estimate of working poor, U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, *Annual Social and Economic Supplement, Work Experience in 2009*, [http://www.census.gov/hhes/www/cpstables/032010/perinc/new05\\_001.htm](http://www.census.gov/hhes/www/cpstables/032010/perinc/new05_001.htm); for job vacancies, U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, *Job Openings and Labor Turnovers*, May 11, 2011, <http://www.bls.gov/news.release/pdf/jolts.pdf>

2009 (CBO 2010). Official unemployment for African Americans, consistently the highest for any ethnic group except Native Americans, was 16.1% (April 2011).

Thus, after a multi-billion dollar federal stimulus (the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 or ARRA), the job crisis continues, and unemployment continues to take its heavy toll. In fact, in April 2011, the unemployment rate was 11% higher than in February 2009 when the stimulus was enacted (9.0% compared to 8.1%).

In searching for ways to end the current employment crisis, it is important to bear in mind that unemployment is a chronic problem, particularly for certain population groups. Indeed, in 2000, when official unemployment was 4%, the lowest in over 30 years, 13 million people or 9% of the labor force were either the official or the hidden unemployed. In that year nearly 16 million people or 16.8% of full-time, full-year workers were earning less than the official poverty level for a family of four. And there were many more persons wanting work than there were job vacancies, 3.5 officially unemployed persons for every available job. It is thus important to think in terms of approaches to the current, acute problem that would begin to address the *chronic* shortage of living-wage jobs as well.

An unemployment crisis is hardly new to the African American community. In 2000, when official unemployment was at a 40-year low, 8.2% of African Americans were officially unemployed. This was slightly higher than the unemployment rate for the total labor force in February 2009—when unemployment was considered sufficiently high for Congress to enact the \$787 billion stimulus (ARRA). It is important to note that these official unemployment statistics are of the civilian, non-institutional population. If the large number of incarcerated black men were included among the jobless, the unemployment rate of black males, aged 22 to 30 would have been nearly one-third in 2000, instead of just under one-fourth (Western 2006).

The purpose of this paper is to identify some political strategies for reducing crisis and chronic unemployment. Strategies, of course, are shaped by policy and program goals. Thus, although these are not the subject of this paper, it is important to detour briefly for the purpose of describing the policies for which these political strategies are proposed.

### **The policy goal: direct job creation by government**

The assumption here is that the only way to solve the jobs crisis is through massive federal action, specifically direct job creation by government. According to Philip Harvey (2010), this approach differs from the Keynesian strategy of increasing aggregate demand that, in turn, leads to job creation. The direct approach, as will be discussed below in relation to the ARRA, is more efficient, costing much less per job created than the indirect Keynesian method.

Even before the current jobs crisis, some progressives, believing that everyone should have the right to practice the work ethic—what Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. called “the creed of our society”—had proposed a program of government job creation to cope with chronic unemployment. Such a program, they maintained, would address what they considered to be the nation’s double deficits: in living-wage jobs and in public investment. It was hardly news that our roads needed repair, our bridges were dangerously eroding; our children needed more teachers and school aides; working parents lacked affordable child care; and our environment desperately needed protection. Relative to the size of the economy, public investment had declined sharply and was, in the middle of the first decade of the 21st century, only half its levels in the 1960s and 1970s (Miller 2007). The second deficit was the chronic lack of jobs. Government job creation could deal with these double deficits (Bell et al. 2007; Ginsburg and Goldberg 2008; Baiman et al. 2009). Similarly, during the jobs crisis, William Darity proposed a National Investment Employment Corps to provide a job guarantee for all citizens who would “perform the work necessary to maintain and expand the nation’s physical and human infrastructure” (2010, p. 179).

Since the Great Depression, the United States has depended primarily on the passive labor market policy of providing income support to the unemployed through the program of unemployment insurance.<sup>3</sup> An active labor market policy provides

<sup>3</sup> A major exception was the Comprehensive Employment and Training Act of 1978 (CETA), a response to high unemployment in the 1970s, that employed jobless workers in public services. Moreover, as historian Frank Stricker points out (personal communication, March 27, 2011), “in several periods our leaders would have said they were using tax cuts/fiscal policy to create more jobs—and that was not a passive policy in their minds.” They would have claimed their tax cuts would create jobs, he writes, even if they did not.

unemployed workers with jobs, usually after an initial period of unemployment when they claim unemployment insurance. With the active labor market policy being proposed, government hires the unemployed to perform vital work for the nation—to repair those roads and bridges, to care for the very young and the elderly and to do whatever other work on behalf of the public is needed, including making the economy more sustainable.<sup>4</sup> The need for such an active labor market program to cope with the country's double deficits became all the greater when unemployment reached crisis levels.

James Galbraith (2010, p. 24) suggests that active labor market policy be substituted for our current emphasis on passive labor market measures. The way Galbraith puts it is dangerous because it downgrades unemployment insurance: “The only choice is what kind of deficit to run—useful deficits that rebuild the country, as in the New Deal, or useless ones, with millions kept unnecessarily on unemployment insurance when they could instead be given jobs.” Rather, it seems preferable to emphasize a combination of unemployment insurance or passive labor market policy for short-term unemployment and active labor market policy for longer-term joblessness. For those who are unemployed longer, active labor market is important because they need more than money—a chance to be useful, to maintain skills and work habits and to learn new skills. With record levels of long-term employment in the Great Recession and its aftermath, active labor market policies are especially important.<sup>5</sup> Further, the jobs done by unemployed workers build the country, both its physical and social infrastructures. Idle workers mean that we are, as economist Robert Eisner put it, “literally throwing away potential output” (1992, p. 1980)—the goods and services that they could produce if they were employed. We can promote active labor market policies because they are more consonant with the work ethic and core American values without making an invidious comparison with unemployment insurance.

A number of obstacles stand in the way of an active labor market policy. First, the model, clearly reminiscent of New Deal work programs, is both promising and problematic. Further, the policy goal is squarely at odds with the strong anti-government sentiment that has been so assiduously cultivated and promulgated, especially since 1981 when neo-liberalism moved into the Oval Office with President Ronald Reagan. Also blocking the path toward a large government program is the perceived failure of the \$787 billion ARRA or “Obama Stimulus.” The angst over the federal deficit is still another obstacle. Insufficient mass protest over the continuing crisis of mass over the continuing mass unemployment and problems in building a constituency for full employment are still other challenges.

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<sup>4</sup> It should be noted that this was not conceived as a stand-alone policy that would address the many problems in our economy. Necessary, complementary policies included protection and expansion of government's ability to regulate corporations in the public interest; restoration of progressive taxation; assurance of collective bargaining rights; renegotiation of global agreements to include labor rights; reindustrialization; and environmental sustainability.

<sup>5</sup> By 2008, the proportion of the labor force unemployed for 27 weeks or more had already reached its highest since 1948, when the Bureau of Labor Statistics started keeping records of long-term unemployment, and it has continued high as public sector jobs are shed, new hires are meager and population growth accounts for new job entrants who are unable to find work (Rampell 2010; Rich 2010).

## The New Deal model: strengths and weaknesses

The active labor market policy that we propose is modeled on the temporary job creation programs of the Great Depression such as the brief but highly innovative Civil Works Administration (CWA) and the longer-lasting Works Progress Administration (WPA). These programs saved millions of the unemployed from destitution and despair and did much to improve our infrastructure and our quality of life for years to come. In encouraging adoption of our solution to the current crisis, it helps to point to this precedent of positive, decisive government action in response to an earlier crisis. In promoting this approach, the National Jobs for All Coalition, the only national organization whose principal goal is living-wage jobs for all, hands out a piece of literature (a colorful four by six card) that begins with the litany of current unemployment and then asks: “Can we do something about this Crisis?” The answer:

**YES, WE CAN! Government can create useful jobs.**

Everyone knows that our roads need repair, our bridges are eroding, our children need more teachers, parents lack affordable child care, seniors lack elder care, millions lack adequate health care, and we must green our economy. **All of these needs can and should be met by the federal government.** That’s what was done during the Great Depression of the 1930s when Franklin Roosevelt’s New Deal put millions of the unemployed to work doing useful jobs that have made a lasting contribution to our country—roads, bridges, schools, libraries, housing, parks, arts, culture and much more.

However, in promoting this type of solution to mass unemployment, we need to acknowledge some shortcomings of the New Deal model and to propose improvements. The Depression-era work programs were often flawed by the prevailing racism and sexism of that day. For example, African Americans were believed to be accustomed to low wages and were required to accept lower-paying jobs than whites; they were classified as unskilled labor no matter what their skill levels (Rose 2009). Because it was administered locally, finding WPA jobs for African Americans was hard, particularly in the South, but, “despite these hurdles, WPA made a major breakthrough in providing work opportunities for blacks in the North and at least opened the door in the South” (Bernstein 1985, p. 134). Women were one-fourth of the labor force but got only one-sixth of WPA jobs, and black women were particularly poorly represented (Rose 2009). Women WPA workers were paid on average \$3 a day, compared to \$5 for men (Kessler-Harris 1982). Among deterrents to women’s employment such as lack of work experience and responsibility for child care, was the fact that there were very few “women’s jobs” in construction which was the main area of activity (Bernstein 1985, p. 154). Among the worst flaws was that wages for both sexes were very low.

Twenty-first century active labor market policies must pay living wages and be free of racism and sexism. They must pay women and people of color wages that are commensurate with their skills and employ them in proportion to their need for work. Creating jobs that improve the social infrastructures should assure more jobs for women than the Depression-era programs.

As ambitious as New Deal work programs were, they were insufficient. They employed on average between one-quarter and one-third of the unemployed (Burns and Williams 1941). According to New Deal historian William Leuchtenburg, "... by any standard ... [the WPA] was an impressive achievement, [but] it never came close to meeting Roosevelt's goal of giving jobs to all who could work" (1963, p. 130). Consequently the New Deal did not reduce unemployment below 14.6% until 1941 when it dipped slightly under 10% as a result of war production (Ginsburg 1983).

Another shortcoming of the New Deal programs is that they were temporary. Actually, Roosevelt and Harry Hopkins, the Federal Relief Administrator, did consider a permanent work program that would be available after unemployment benefits were exhausted (Perkins 1946; Altmeyer 1966). But that didn't happen. Surprisingly, income support programs, including federally-assisted public assistance, became permanent with the Social Security Act of 1935, even though Roosevelt decried what he called "the dole" and preferred to put the unemployed to work because it preserved their morale and their spirit, not only their bodies (Goldberg and Collins 2001). In the mid-1940s, Roosevelt's labor secretary France Perkins observed that "unemployment insurance stands alone in the protection of people out of work" (1946, pp. 188–189). That is where it continues to stand.

The program we propose is permanent, rising and falling in size in response to labor market conditions. In proposing direct job creation at this time it is important to conceptualize it as a program that is directed temporarily to the very large numbers of workers who currently suffer long-term unemployment and subsequently to the smaller but nonetheless substantial numbers of workers, particularly minorities of color, who are jobless in better times.

### **Anti-government ideology still reigns**

President Franklin Roosevelt took advantage of financial collapse and its severe aftermath to articulate values different from the crass materialism of the 1920s values that resemble money worship in the decades preceding the current crisis. In his first inaugural address, Roosevelt (1933) attacked these values and their adherents: "The money changers have fled from their high seats in the temple of our civilization. We may now restore that temple to the ancient truths... [to] social values more noble than mere monetary profit." Roosevelt also reminded Americans that businessmen had often profited from government largesse despite their touting of *laissez-faire* when it came to workers. This is how he attempted to set the record straight during his 1932 campaign for the presidency:

The railroads were subsidized, sometimes by grants of money, oftener by grants of land; some of the most valuable oil lands in the United States were granted to assist the financing of the railroad which pushed through the Southwest. A nascent merchant marine was assisted by grants of money, or by mail subsidies, so that our steam shipping might ply the seven seas.... For while it has been American doctrine that the government must not go into

business in competition with private enterprises, still it has been traditional particularly in Republican administrations for business urgently to ask the government to put at private disposal all kinds of government assistance. The same man who tells you that he does not want to see the government interfere in business...is the first to go to Washington and ask the government for a prohibitory tariff on his product. When things get just bad enough ...he will go with equal speed to the United States government and ask for a loan; and the Reconstruction Finance Corporation is the outcome of it (Roosevelt 1932).

New Deal deeds often fell short of lofty New Deal values, but these values were nonetheless important underpinnings of the less-than-perfect reforms that found their way into the statute books.

Even though a multi-billion dollar government bailout (the Troubled Asset Relief Program or TARP) saved the financial sector, economic elites remain ungrateful, in fact, are biting the hand that fed them. How an economic elite that was saved from ruin by government is able to obscure its dependence on government largesse is a major sleight of mind, and one that requires continual exposure.

The pro-business, anti-government camp continues as if its market-take-all policies had not brought the economy to the brink of disaster. One reason anti-government ideology still thrives and many ordinary Americans go along with further reduction of the federal government as the cure to their discontent is that government has failed to provide sufficient help to ordinary Americans, particularly in the two decades leading up to the meltdown. The Reagan motto—"government is not the solution to the problem; government is the problem"—was a self-fulfilling prophesy. If public investment relative to the size of the economy has fallen to only half of its 1960s and 1970s levels, then how much faith can the public have that the federal government can deliver a decent physical or social infrastructure? As we saw in New Orleans, to give one egregious example, a downgraded government could not be depended upon to solve problems.

One in three Americans is unable to find affordable housing (Urban Institute 2006). Never adequate, spending for low-income housing began to be reduced in the 1970s. Reagan slashed the low-income housing budget by 75%, even as poverty was rising (Atlas and Drier 1989), and the next Democrat in the White House did little to reverse the trend set by his Republican predecessors (Bratt 2002). Clinton, after all, declared that "the era of big government is over," adding at the same time that "we must not go back to an era of 'every man for himself.'" (1996, p. 90).

The repeal of Aid to Families with Dependent Children in 1996, under the Clinton watch, is credited with driving down the welfare rolls significantly, but even before the current recession, one million poor mothers in an average month were without work or welfare. Participation rates—the proportion of financially eligible families that are on the welfare rolls—plunged between the early 1990s and 2001, a decline that accounts for more than half of the fall in caseloads since 1996 (Parrott and Sherman 2006).

Despite these failures, government is currently doing much more for the people and the economy than it gets credit for. We need to remind the American people what it would be like without government programs such as Social Security which

has actually made it possible for many older people to *have* a retirement—instead of working until they drop (Aaron and Reischauer 1998). Unemployment Insurance is keeping millions of workers and their families from dire poverty, and the food stamp program (renamed Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program or SNAP) is staving off hunger. Since the beginning of the recession SNAP participation has increased by 14.3 million people, or 52%; in July 2010, nearly 42 million people were aided by SNAP (Center on Budget and Policy Priorities 2010).

Unemployment Insurance expenditures grew nearly five-fold (4.84) between 2007 and 2010 (U.S. Congressional Budget Office, 2010). UI benefits kept 3.3 million Americans out of poverty in 2009 (Greenstein 2010). It is important to counter anti-government propaganda by calling attention to ways in which government programs are preventing poverty and hunger as well as keeping the economy from slumping still further.

### **The Obama stimulus**

Our task is made more difficult because of the perceived failure of the Obama stimulus. Actually, federal policymakers didn't claim to be conquering double-digit unemployment but rather saving or creating jobs equal to less than a third of the number of persons officially unemployed. Without the combined effect of the bailout and the Obama stimulus, unemployment might have risen to 16% instead of about 10%, according to an estimate by former Federal Reserve Board vice-chair Alan Blinder and Mark Zandi (2010), chief economist at Moody's Analytics. Nonetheless Blinder says we're in a "jobs emergency" that requires New Deal-style hiring of workers onto public payrolls (Harwood 2010).

Those calling for government job creation should take the position that the money spent for the stimulus could have substantially reduced, even eliminated official unemployment, had the program been more efficient. A big chunk of the stimulus money went to unproductive tax cuts and little to direct job creation (Krugman 2010). Assuming that the \$787 billion stimulus would save or create its target of four million jobs, the cost per job would have been \$200,000. Yet, experts at the National Jobs for All Coalition estimate that direct job creation would have cost about \$50.00 per job (at the average weekly wage and including materials). With the direct job creation strategy \$787 billion could have created over 14 million jobs, enough to eliminate official unemployment. So yes, a federal attack on unemployment can work, but the efficient way to do it—and to clearly see its results—is by a program of *direct* job creation. A program of government job creation of this scope has never been tried before. There is no record of failure.

### **The deficit mania**

Deficit mania blocks the path of a job creation program sufficient to stem the crisis—particularly after a multi-billion dollar federal stimulus has fallen far short of the job. Proponents of this strategy must argue that more money has to be spent to cure unemployment. The dilemma is how to approach the deficit in gaining support for

the needed outlays. On the one hand, we can tacitly admit the deficit is important, economically as well as politically. In which case we need to come up with alternative revenue sources, and there is no shortage of good candidates: cutting military spending to actual defense needs, rescinding the tax cuts to the rich that brought us from a budget surplus in 2000 to mounting deficits and a stock transfer tax. For example, in 2008, a .25% tax on U.S. stock transactions on registered exchanges would have generated an estimated \$175.2 billion, one side only and double that if on both buyer and seller (Baiman et al. 2009). The Bush tax cuts and the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan accounted for over \$500 billion of the deficit in 2009 (Ruffing and Horney 2010). The tax cuts and much military spending have contributed to a deficit that is not designed to stimulate consumption and investment, nor to pay for socially useful programs nor to benefit those who need a tax break most.

There are some other alternatives for getting deficit hysteria out of the path of reform. One is to expose the hypocrisy of those who have favored tax cuts and military build-ups and then, when the deficit rises, have decried it and called for cuts in social spending. Or we could discredit the deficit as James Galbraith (2010) has done. We could deny that it is important economically and show that deficit phobia is cultivated by the banks because private borrowing means money in their pockets and public borrowing puts money in the pockets of people with no obligation to repay. According to Galbraith, governments like the US don't go bankrupt and deficits don't have to be repaid. The analogy between a family budget and a government budget is a false one and should be debunked. Private borrowers can and do default. With the U.S. government, according to Galbraith, the risk of non-payment doesn't exist. The U.S. government can spend money and pay interest simply by typing numbers into a computer.

Robert Eisner, a former president of the American Economic Association, put the deficit and the debt or accumulated federal deficits in perspective. Eisner (1995) pointed out that at the end of World War II, the ratio of the debt to the GDP was well over 100%, ushering in a period of growth and prosperity. The federal debt in 2010, the third year into the current crisis, was 94% of GDP; it was 63% in 2006, the year prior to the onset of the recession. According to Eisner, the only time when deficits are too large is when the economy is at full employment. At that point, no additional workers are available to increase production. Only then would increased spending from deficits cause inflation in wages and prices. This is hardly the present risk, and indeed, we have never, except during World War II, had full employment in the sense of providing a job for everyone who wants one.

Another way to attack deficit phobia is to assert that a major cause of the shortfall is unemployment itself—that it both reduces income and tax revenues and costs the government in increased expenditures for benefits such as unemployment compensation and food stamps. The Great Recession was responsible for 61% of the deficit in 2009, and every million jobs created reduce the deficit by \$54 billion (Our Fiscal Security 2010).

Perhaps the best strategy for countering the deficit obstacle is a combination of approaches: downgrading the economic consequences of the deficit, identifying the sources of the shortfall and promoting alternative sources of revenues to finance economic recovery and a program of living-wage jobs for all.

## The need for mass protest

Moderate Democrats like Franklin D. Roosevelt, John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson do not embrace social reform until there is substantial organized protest in its favor. The same is true of Barack Obama. Compared to the Great Depression and the 1960s, the Great Recession has been largely without compelling pressure for progressive change. This is perhaps understandable when the differences between the Great Depression and the Great Recession are noted. To begin with, unemployment was much higher in the 1930s—between 20% and 25% in 1933,<sup>6</sup> compared to the current high mark of 10.1%.

Another factor is the existence of the welfare state, the foundation of which was established in 1935 by the Roosevelt Administration. Between the 1929 stock market crash and 1933, when FDR became president, there were no federal social welfare programs, either in the form of public assistance or work relief. Private charity was totally unequal to the challenge of a Great Depression, and local public relief was limited and running out because the states and cities were broke and unable to borrow, even for the relief of the unemployed.<sup>7</sup> Historian Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. painted the grim picture:

And so, through the winter of 1931–32, the third winter of the depression, relief resources, public and private, dwindled toward the vanishing point. In few cities was there any longer pretense of meeting minimum budgetary standards. Little money was available for shoes or clothing, for medical or dental care, for gas or electricity. In New York City, entire families were getting an average of \$2.39 a week for relief. In Toledo, the municipal commissary could allow only 2.14 cents per meal per person per day. In vast rural areas, there was no relief coverage at all (1957, p. 174).

Recalling that “the funds of many states and localities were exhausted,” that “the debt limit of many states had been reached,” and that “public welfare officers had reached the end of their rope,” the New Deal Secretary of Labor Frances Perkins concluded that “the federal government and its taxing power were all one could think of” (1946, p. 182). The federal government did break precedent by providing relief to the unemployed in 1933, but only after 3 years of suffering. Our welfare states is considered a laggard and has, moreover, diminished in recent years (Goldberg, and Rosenthal 2002; Goldberg 2010), but there was no lag between the recent meltdown and the expansion of benefits discussed earlier in regard to anti-government ideology. In addition to what was noted in pointing to the expansion of food stamps and the duration of unemployment benefits is the fact that Unemployment Insurance was increased by \$25 a week for all beneficiaries, and,

<sup>6</sup> The research of Stanley Lebergott (1957) points to 25.2% as the unemployment rate in 1935. Robert Coen (1973), who proposed an adjustment in the size of the labor force and unemployment rates in the 1920s and 1930s based on labor force measurement concepts in the post-war period, puts the figure at 19.8%, still nearly twice the 10.1% high mark so far, in October 2009.

<sup>7</sup> An exception was New York State, where Governor Franklin Roosevelt mounted a program that turned out to be a rehearsal for New Deal relief programs. It was financed first by emergency funds from the State Legislature and later by a \$30 million bond issue approved by voters by a margin of four to one (Lundberg 1932).

in 2009, the first \$2,400 of benefits were exempted from federal taxation (Congressional Budget Office 2010).

Even though suffering is less widespread than in the early years of the Great Depression, it is still severe. Less than half of the unemployed are covered by unemployment insurance (Congressional Budget Office 2010), and their coverage, though extended, will not last forever. Benefits replace less than half of a worker's earnings on average, and the official poverty rate of families with an unemployed member is nearly 20%, as counted by our very low poverty standard of \$22,000 a year for a family of four (*ibid.*).

For these reasons, the unemployed may, in time, become more discontented. Resentment, moreover, may be stirred by a new Congress, elected in November 2010, that is likely to be less generous to the unemployed than its predecessor. The discontent of the unemployed, underemployed and working poor could, of course, be channeled into anti-government movements like that of the Tea Party. This could well happen unless some of the strategies to counter anti-government ideology are employed effectively by the labor movement, existing organizations concerned with the availability of work and living wages and groups advocating on behalf of disadvantaged minorities or the poor and working classes, generally. Bursting onto the scene in Fall 2011, Occupy Wall Street may be an effective voice for progressive government.

### **The role of legislation**

Pending legislation can be a potent stimulus to widespread organization if it measures up to the problem and is viable. So far none does, and the question arises whether such legislation should be supported.

Modest job creation bills have been introduced by a number of federal legislators. For example Representative Rosa DeLauro (D-CT) with 70 cosponsors and Senator John Kerry (D-MA) with 10 co-sponsors have introduced similar bills that would finance infrastructure development (H.R. 402, the National Infrastructure Development Bank Act of 2011 and S. 65, the Senate BUILD Act). The Civilian Conservation Corps Act (H.R. 494) that would employ jobless or underemployed U.S. citizens in improvement projects related to parks and natural resources has been introduced Representative Marcy Kaptur (D-OH) with 19 co-sponsors.

Those of us in organizations that are promoting major jobs creation legislation like the National Jobs for All Coalition ([www.njfac](http://www.njfac.org)) and the Chicago Political Economy ([www.cpeonline.org](http://www.cpeonline.org)) have supported such incremental approaches and at the same time pointed out the need for the big ticket. This approach has some advantages—if enacted, even these modest measures could help some people. Supporting these measures, moreover, might win allies in the pursuit of more extensive measures. On the other hand, there is a risk that small programs could bring more discouragement and the view that government programs don't work. Perhaps it makes sense to continue to support such bills but take the opportunity to make the case for more significant job creation and warn that these programs can help a little but not nearly enough.

More ambitious legislation, the Humphrey-Hawkins 21st Century Full Employment & Training Act, introduced by Representative John Conyers (D-MI). would create millions of new jobs for the unemployed in construction, infrastructure repairs, sustainability, education, health care, and neighborhood renovation through a partnership between the Department of Labor, state, and local governments, non-profit community organizations, and small businesses. The Act would provide federal funding for local community-based job creation and training initiatives until full employment is reached in the United States and would be financed by a tax on stock transfers. Some language of the bill is consistent with “full employment”; other provisions specify a target unemployment rate far short of that goal. The Emergency Jobs to Restore the American Dream Act (H.R. 2914), introduced by Representative Jan Schakowsky (D-IL). would create 2.2 million jobs to meet critical needs and strengthen communities. President Obama’s American Jobs Act, introduced by Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid, would invest in infrastructure, prevent teachers’ layoffs and provide opportunities for veterans; it would create 1.9 million jobs, reducing unemployment by about 1 percentage point.

More ambitious job creation legislation could give a reality to proposals that might otherwise seem utopian and unrealistic, and supporting such proposals could be part of ongoing efforts to educate the public about the problem of unemployment and ways to solve it. Legislation that is ambitious and supportable can spur all kinds of action—such as petitions, campaigns to increase the number of co-sponsors and hearings in different parts of the country.

Whether a bill gives a sense of reality to a policy goal, however, depends upon who is sponsoring it and whether there are numerous and well-respected co-sponsors. If a bill calls for a much more ambitious policy than is currently contemplated and is without numerous and respected legislators committed to its passage, then it may not be an asset. Representative Conyers, Chairman of the House Judiciary Committee when his Party was in power and a champion of single-pay universal health care in the Congress, is well-respected. Whether the bill, to be re-introduced in fall 2011, will have a large co-sponsorship remains to be seen. Advocates, of course, can, through mobilizing legislators’ constituents, increase the number and quality of sponsors. Unlike the small-scale bills, more ambitious legislation can be inspiring, worth supporting and worth rallying around, but it needs to attract impressive and committed sponsorship.

### **A movement on behalf of large-scale job creation**

*Conscience and direct beneficiaries* Social movements need two types of participants: those who benefit directly and those who are moved by conscience (Edwards and McCarthy 2003). Direct beneficiaries of job creation—workers unemployed during a downturn—may see their plight as temporary, particularly if their time without work is short. However, with millions of workers suffering long-term employment in the Great Recession and its aftermath, this is less likely.

One recent survey revealed the trauma of joblessness (Luo and Thee-Brenan 2009). Such findings can spur empathy for the unemployed and motivate conscience constituents. The unemployed who suffer these effects, particularly those who are

without work for a long time, will not easily forget what unemployment has meant to them and their families. When they regain their place in the labor market, they will be potential conscience constituents.

If beneficiaries of a movement to conquer unemployment can be broadened to include the insecure, the underemployed and the underpaid—and it is important to emphasize that decades of loose labor markets have depressed wages—the constituency of direct beneficiaries for substantial job creation or full employment could be expanded. The pool of direct beneficiary constituents could be enlarged still further by making the public more aware of the well-documented costs of unemployment to society: the increases in mental illness, physical illness, family violence and crime. Further, there are the expenditures for Unemployment Insurance and other income support to jobless workers and their families. Still another, as mentioned previously, is the loss to the economy of the goods and services that unemployed workers could have produced. Conquering unemployment and low wages, moreover, is a step toward reducing the inordinate economic inequality that, arguably, has contributed substantially to economic dysfunction and economic meltdown (MacEwan 2009; Goldberg 2012).

Unemployed workers, the most direct beneficiaries of job creation, are hard to organize. First, as political scientist Francis Fox Piven points out (2011), when workers lose their jobs, they are dispersed, no longer at a single site like a workplace that facilitates communication and organization. The internet may be a way of gathering them and of reducing this obstacle for those unemployed workers who are computer savvy.

An even more important deterrent to organization and protest among unemployed workers is self-blame, shame and the likelihood that they won't see themselves as entitled to what should be a human right (and what was declared as such in the 1940s by the United Nations' Universal Declaration of Human Rights and Franklin Roosevelt's Economic Bill of Rights). Public attitudes contribute to this self-blame. An unemployed woman looking for work for 2 years wrote to the National Jobs for All Coalition: "I'm so frustrated being treated as though I DID SOMETHING WRONG" (personal communication, February 2011).

As Piven writes, the unemployed "have to go from being hurt and ashamed to being angry and indignant" (2011, p. 8). In his study of the Unemployed Councils of the early 1930s, Stephen Valocchi refers to "a transformation from personal troubles to public grievances" that was "forged through ideology and direct action" on the part of the leaders of Unemployed Councils, many of them members of the Communist Party (1993, pp. 456–457). One unemployed organizer and Party member described the change in consciousness that took place—from workers blaming themselves for losing their jobs to their engaging in increasingly organized forms of protest (Healey and Isserman 1991, p. 4, cited in Valocchi 1993, p. 457).

New Dealers later contributed to public respect for the unemployed. Harry Hopkins, the social worker who administered both direct relief and government work programs, put it this way: "...the unemployed are a cross-section of the workers, the finest people in the land" (Kurzman 1974, p. 85). An enduring New Deal program, Unemployment Insurance was an admission that unemployment could be involuntary and hence a rejection of the age-old belief that the unemployed are work shirkers, responsible for their joblessness.

Though less well positioned than Hopkins, one of President Franklin Roosevelt's closest associates, current advocates for job creation need to promote a similar view toward unemployed men and women. A project that could contribute to the consciousness raising that is vital to a social movement as well as to public support for active and passive labor market policies is one that would vividly recount the experiences of the unemployed. This would focus on their previous work histories, how they lost their jobs, what they've done to find work, how unemployment affects them and their families. In videotaped interviews unemployed workers, particularly those unlikely to be unemployed except during a severe recession, would tell their stories. The stories could be distributed through a wide variety of media— internet, TV and radio, perhaps even commercially as a documentary film, as well as made available to political, religious, community betterment and other groups and organizations. Stories that evoke fellow feeling or empathy with the unemployed can be more compelling than unemployment data, however large the count of the jobless.

Another critical deterrent to organization of unemployed workers is that they have few resources. According to careful analyses of the substantial literature on the Unemployed Councils of the early 1930s, external financial and organizational resources, particularly of the Communist Party, were important to the moderate successes of this social movement of poor people (Valocchi 1990, 1993).<sup>8</sup>

Even less likely participants in a social movement were the welfare mothers, poor women, largely African American, who joined the Welfare Rights Movement. The movement of poor women was organized in the late 1960s, here too aided by outside resources—from the civil rights movement, federal anti-poverty programs and nongovernmental organizations, including religious groups (West 1981; Goldberg and Collins 2001).

*Resources for movement building*<sup>9</sup> What are the likely resources for organizing today's unemployed? A new social movement on behalf of the unemployed could be sponsored by existing organizations that champion workers' rights or those of minorities and the poor, or it could be led by new organizations that arise in response to this crisis. During the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s, new organizations such as the Southern Christian Leadership Conference and the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee took the lead, eclipsing for a time the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People that had long led the fight for racial justice. During the Great Depression, new organizations of the unemployed and the elderly as well as the recently founded Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) led the charge. The following discussion includes both. It calls attention to

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<sup>8</sup> Also providing resources to unemployed workers were the Socialist Party and socialist A.J. Muste's Conference for Progressive Labor Action. Indeed competition among these groups is thought to have been a spur to action (Prago 1976, cited by Valocchi 1990). The Communist Party, though providing organizational resources was something of a two-edged sword, for its rigid ideology tended to frighten the average worker (Valocchi 1993). Valocchi's review of the evidence and emphasis on the critical role of outside resources in this movement of the unemployed leads him to take issue with the influential analysis of "poor people's movements" by Frances Fox Piven and Richard A. Cloward (1979) that emphasized spontaneous actions on the part of participants.

<sup>9</sup> Logan Martinez, Outreach Coordinator for the National Jobs for All Coalition supplied material for this section of the article.

existing organizations, some concerned with unemployment and job creation prior to the recession and other existing organizations that have become more concerned with these problems as a result of the crisis. Also discussed are new organizations that have arisen in response to mass unemployment.

The existing organization that comes readily to mind is the labor movement. Although its power is diminished, it has more resources than any other existing potential champion of the unemployed. With the attack on the public employee unions, the labor movement itself is under siege and is likely to use most of its resources to protect the rights of its members who are beleaguered employees of state governments. Labor has also made the extension of unemployment benefits a part of its agenda, but active labor market policy, though a stated goal, may be a lower priority.

A visit to the AFL-CIO website early in 2011 took one first to a stand-alone call to action: “Join People across America who are rising up to support workers in Wisconsin, Ohio, Indiana and other states fighting for middle-class jobs” (AFL-CIO 2011c). Continuing onto the next page one finds a section, “Jobless Workers Tell Their Stories” (AFL-CIO 2011a). The stories are mainly about how utterly dependent jobless workers are on unemployment benefits. There is also the AFL-CIO Jobs Agenda (AFL-CIO 2011b) that includes putting people to work on the infrastructure and in vital services, but this call for active labor market initiatives is less prominent than either the defense of public employees or the extension of unemployment benefits, that is, passive labor market policy. The AFL-CIO joined the NAACP and other national organizations in sponsoring the One Nation Marching Together for jobs, health care and justice in October 2010, but the rally hasn't sparked a movement. Large-scale protests against right-wing assaults on public service unions may signify a turning of the tide, but one that could nonetheless leave millions of unemployed workers adrift—unless the labor movement becomes more ecumenical and uses its resources on behalf of the entire working class rather than solely to protect its members.

Initially encouraging was the formation, early in 2010, of a Union of Unemployed Workers by the International Association of Machinists and Aerospace Workers (IAM). It is a new organization but with potential backing from existing organizations with substantial resources. Called Ur Union of the Unemployed or UCubed for short, the program intended to function as “an online community, with small groups of unemployed activists in a single zip code forming ‘cubes’ and ultimately becoming a linked network with considerable political and economic influence” (IAM 2010). The project was endorsed by an impressive list of major trade unions that agreed to partner with the Machinists in promoting the concept of a union of the unemployed (Kelber 2010).

The UCubed website “talks the talk”: “With nearly one out of five Americans out of work, there is enormous potential for the rebirth of a union/unemployed workers coalition similar to the one that forced Franklin Roosevelt to enact far reaching New Deal reforms – the first major federal reforms that benefited working people, rather than business interests” (UCubed 2011). Largely a web-based organization so far and suited to the computer savvy, UCubed may be moving toward on-the-ground organizations in locations where there are large enough networks to initiate conventional movement-type activity.

Initially a candidate for a national grass roots movement is another organization forged in the crisis: the 99ers Union, a loose network of 15–20 groups in the country that mainly advocates extending unemployment benefits but also endorses job creation. Ninety-nine refers to the number of weeks at which unemployment benefits run out. The group is coordinated by co-founder, Gregg Rosen, an unemployed executive who lost his business in the crash and has used his background in marketing to organize this network (personal communication, March 11, 2011). The term union is used in the general sense of a group coming together for a common cause. There is some indication that the 99ers has gained the ear of politicians and is considered a voice for the unemployed. Its leader, Gregg Rosen joined Representatives Barbara Lee (D-CA), Bobby Scott (D-VA) and Dr. Heidi Shierholz of the Economic Policy Institute (EPI) at a press conference in February 2011 to introduce The Emergency Unemployment Compensation Expansion Act (H.R. 589) to extend emergency benefits to long-term unemployed workers.

Becoming more concerned with job creation since the recession-induced doubling of unemployment, Jobs with Justice (JwJ) is broadening its approach of “engage[ing] workers and allies in campaigns to win justice in workplaces and in communities where working families live”(Jobs with Justice, undated). JwJ has operations in more than 40 cities in 25 states and has built coalitions, largely around local issues, with labor, religious, student and community organizations. From its inception in 1987, JwJ has had its eye on a larger campaign for economic and social justice that would be reached through “long-term multi-issue coalition building, grassroots base-building and organizing militant action.” During the recession, however, JwJ has been more inclined to coalesce with organizations that are currently engaged in broad social reform such as government job creation and full employment.

Also becoming more interested in large-scale job creation is Demos, a multi-issue national organization that “combines research, policy development, and advocacy to influence public debates and catalyze change” (Demos, undated). One of the goals of Demos has been “a more equitable economy with widely shared prosperity and opportunity,” but before the near doubling of unemployment Demos was not responsive to the urging of full employment proponents either to call attention to unemployment or to support job creation as a route to “a more equitable economy.” Recently, however, Demos commissioned economist and long-time full employment advocate Philip Harvey to write a policy proposal for direct government job creation that would return the economy to 4.5% unemployment. Harvey's paper is prominently displayed on the Demos website. According to Harvey, Demos plans to advocate actively on behalf of public job creation (personal communication, March 18, 2011).

A number of other organizations are potential participants in a job creation movement. Although women’s unemployment rates are still lower than men’s, unemployment is becoming a women’s issue. Heavy job losses in public sector unemployment disproportionately affect women. While women lost nearly three out of every 10 jobs shed during the recession, they filled fewer than one in 10 jobs in the recovery (National Women’s Law Center 2011). This is one reason why several chapters of the National Organization for Women have taken part in recent actions

on behalf of job creation. The Poor People's Economic Human Rights Campaign (PPEHRC 2011) evolved from an organization focused on welfare rights to one that advocates a broad range of human rights, including rights to housing, health care and living-wage jobs. Although PPEHRC tends to advocate more for other rights, it has endorsed job-related actions, and its members have participated in local and national events on behalf of the unemployed.

Organizations that were promoting full employment and large-scale job creation prior to the recession are contributing to movement-building through public education, conferences and demonstrations. The National Jobs for All Coalition (NJFAC) maintains a website with up-to-date information and analysis of unemployment and related issues as well as policy proposals ([www.njfac.org](http://www.njfac.org)). NJFAC took the lead in organizing a National Conference to Create Living-Wage Jobs, Meet Human Needs and Sustain the Environment, held in November 2009 and co-sponsored by a wide range of labor, religious, academic, social welfare and poor people's organizations ([www.jobscampaign.org](http://www.jobscampaign.org)) NJFAC organizes First Friday demonstrations (held on the days when the Department of Labor announces the unemployment rate for the previous month) that are intended to call attention to mass joblessness and the need for direct job creation by government. The list of endorsers of these actions is growing and currently includes labor, religious and unemployed workers' organizations as well as those advocating women's and minority rights.

The Chicago Political Economy Group (CPEG, undated) also analyzes and proposes solutions to unemployment, co-sponsored the November 2009 Conference to Create Living-Wage Jobs in New York City and works with other organizations in the Chicago area to call attention to the problem and its proposals for direct job creation ([www.pegonline.org](http://www.pegonline.org)). Both CPEG and NJFAC served as consultants to the staff of Representative John Conyers, attempting to bring his job creation bill closer in line with their stated goals of full employment. Some other organizations that are primarily concerned with unemployment are Mon Valley Unemployed Committee (Pittsburgh), the Philadelphia Unemployment Project and the Miami Valley Full Employment Council (Dayton OH).

Apparently arising spontaneously, a nascent social movement, Occupy Wall Street (OWS), has caught the imagination of the public and is spreading across the land. Once again, a new organization may be eclipsing existing ones that had been long concerned with issues OWS is raising but without attracting mass support. OWS is taking aim at economic inequality and speaking for "the 99%." Will it focus on the cruel inequality of unemployment, chronic as well as crisis? Although OWS has not solidified its demands—and, since so many issues are being raised and bringing out their advocates, it may be premature or counterproductive to do so as well as at odds with the anarchist tendencies of some of the protesters (Hoffman, 2011); However, job creation along the lines of the New Deal is certainly being considered (Harkinson, 2011; Walsh, 2011). Advocates of large-scale job creation are joining the protests. It is too early to know whether Occupy Wall Street will become a new mass movement and whether it will choose to press for—and perhaps achieve—the dream of decent, living-wage jobs for all.

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