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Herman H. Hunter, Acting WPA Commissioner, Broadcasts Address on Outlook for Unemployed

The following address, "Winter Over the Unemployed," was broadcast by Herman H. Hunter, Acting Commissioner of the Work Projects Administration over the Columbia Broadcasting System network Wednesday, August 22, from 8:30 to 9:45 p.m., Eastern Standard Time, speaking from Washington, D.C.:

I will begin tonight by answering directly two letters which I have received recently. By answering them over the radio I shall serve the double purpose of replying to thousands of similar letters and of giving the public an idea of what the relief programs will be when winter comes.

The first letter is from Mr. B. A. Runyan of Wichita, Kansas. Mr. Runyan has been on the WPA for more than 13 months. He is over 40 years old. But before becoming unemployed and being forced to go on the WPA, Mr. Runyan had 14 years continuous experience in mill work in private industry. He has just been informed that while his experience and ability are good he cannot get a job. Mr. Runyan writes me and I quote: "Now Mr. Hunter we older men have been on the rolls of WPA more than the 18 months. Now when we are cut off—which will be soon—we will lose our homes and will also be without means of any sort to live on and winter coming on. Of course we might tough it through some way for 30 days, but longer than that—well it is a calamity. The industries here do not employ many workers but the WPA and local relief load is very, very heavy." Unquote. Mr. Runyan asks me what he is to do about it.

The second letter which I will answer tonight is from Richard House of Akron, Ohio, who sends me a letter from an Ohio Congressman concerning the recent WPA legislation, in which the Congressman says, I quote: "The new plan was formulated by Colonel Harrington, National Administrator of the WPA, with the approval of President Roosevelt." Unquote. Mr. House wishes me to tell him if this statement is correct.

Now let me answer the question from Mr. Runyan as to what he is going to do when he is discharged from the WPA on account of having worked for his Government for 18 months. Well, Mr. Runyan, you are one of 650,000 people whom we are firing before the end of this month because of this same provision in the Act of Congress. In the thousands of letters I have received most of them
You might of course apply for relief at your local relief office, but
as you say the relief load is very heavy, and I know that in Kansas it is very
difficult to get relief. You could accept the intent of Congress and the
promise of many business organizations and continue in search of one of those
private jobs which has been promised if the Government will quit spending money
for the unemployed.

If none of those suggestions work, then you might tighten up your belt
another notch and look forward to a tough winter.

Now I want to answer Mr. Hase's question as to whether or not this new
WPA plan was formulated by Colonel Harrington with the approval of the President.
The answer is emphatically NO. Such statements, which are being broadcast, even
in mimeographed form, are patently untrue. When the new WPA law was signed by
the President he made it plain that this was one of at least four provisions
of the Act which were bad and would cause hardships to hundreds of thousands of
American citizens. The written and published testimony of Administrator
Harrington was specifically opposed to this and many other provisions of this
Act. There is no excuse for any person attempting to fool WPA workers, or the
American people, as to the responsibility for these provisions.

The particular legislation which Mr. Runyan writes me about simply means
that every person who has worked on the WPA for eighteen months must be fired,
regardless of need. No one in his right mind would believe that this adminis-
tration approved such a provision. Similarly, no one could seriously believe
that this administration would approve the closing down of the fine Federal
Theatre project -- or the penalizing of those communities which happen to be
the hardest hit by unemployment which this Act does -- or the cutting of WPA wages
in many northern communities -- or restrictions which for no good reason make it
impossible for the WPA to build some of the most useful and needed projects.

This legislation was passed in a terrific rush, without sufficient
opportunity for discussion or debate. The proposed Relief Bill which had to be
in effect by June 30th, was not even submitted to the House of Representatives
until June 14. This legislation was submitted to Congress by the same Committee
which for weeks had been listening to testimony of investigators against the
WPA. This testimony was mainly unsubstantiated, not subject to cross examination,
and much of it was completely untrue. On the basis of this testimony a relief
bill was introduced and passed.

Some of the provisions of this new legislation under which the WPA now
operates, are designed to destroy the whole idea of a program of useful work for the unemployed, and to substitute therefor a return of relief to local administration in the form of a dole. Make no mistake about this.

A careful analysis of the reasons used in the Congressional debate for ordering the arbitrary discharge of 650,000 persons from the WPA, regardless of need, indicates that the main reason was that it was time these people began to look around for private jobs. The argument was that if anyone had worked for the WPA for so long as 18 months he automatically became a "career man" and should be fired for his own good. Factual data proving that WPA workers want private jobs and take them at every opportunity, was ignored. Certain groups in business and industry accepted this plan with enthusiasm and made substantial statements that if this really were done, and the Government would stop spending so much money for the unemployed, then private industry would have a real boom and give jobs to a lot of unemployed people.

Well, by the end of this month the WPA will have fired 650,000 people in two months and will have reduced its employment since March by over 1,200,000. In addition, the Congress has further accepted the challenge of business and refused to pass the so-called lending bill through which 500,000 new jobs would have been created. Congress has accepted the challenge in a real big way.

It is true that there has been a real improvement in private employment. In fact since 1933 there has been an increase in private employment of 7½ million.

And it is also true that the whole outlook for business and industrial production is good. Idle cash is available in banks for tremendous credit expansion. It looks like there is a splendid chance for private employment to pick up sharply and for business to take up the slack. In fact the request to Congress for WPA funds for this year was based on the very expectation that business and industry would employ a far greater number of people.

But lo and behold, there is now some discord and confusion among the ranks of those who wish to cut the work program and Government spending. I want to note a few instances.

A well known Cleveland economist who is often critical of the Administration, and particularly of its spending policy, nevertheless says on August 15th, quote: "While business activity is making good progress the defeat of the lending bill by Congress is disquieting." Unquote. This same economist makes the following remarkable statement, quote: "Possibly private capital will now be given such renewed confidence that it will promptly increase its investments in risk taking enterprise, but there do not seem to be convincing reasons why it
should." Unquote.

The Alexander Hamilton Institute states on August 7th, that, while the industrial production index is showing a tendency to expand, anticipated progressive decline in purchasing power points to a sharp recession. In simple terms they mean that while business and production are by all reports on the up-grade it is not going to mean much if money is taken out of the pockets of over a million additional people who will lose their jobs.

The National Association of Manufacturers, which has pounded away harder than any other group against the WPA and other Administration measures for progressive labor legislation, was very enthusiastic about defeating the lending bill and reducing the WPA, because, they said, by doing this it will give industry renewed confidence to expand and to employ more people.

All right -- the WPA is reduced by one-third and Congress defeated the lending bill. The WPA will pay wages to one million fewer people and by spring other public employment will be way down. But now that this is accomplished, the President of the National Association of Manufacturers came out the other day with a statement that business cannot assume the responsibility for recovery until other New Deal innovations have been abandoned. The National Association of Manufacturers, or at least a small clique which runs this organization, will not be content by merely hanging a heavy winter over the heads of the unemployed, but they want in specific and no uncertain terms the abandonment of other social gains made through the Labor Relations Act -- and for that matter all New Deal social legislation.

I do not believe for a minute that American business as a whole supports any such attack on labor or the unemployed.

I believe that the American people as a whole, including the vast majority of business men, approve of the Government's work program as an aid to the unemployed and as an aid to business. The Chairman of the American Retail Federation, in summarizing the conclusions of the recent meeting of that organization recognized the responsibility of government to provide security for individuals both on humanitarian and economic grounds and recommended the support of government efforts to maintain and raise the general standard of living of the population. Representatives of over 8,000 American communities have emphatically testified to the value of WPA.

In fact they have so definitely testified to the value of the WPA that Mr. Howard Coonley, President of the National Association of Manufacturers, has naively asked that business men quit asking for local projects and quit praising them.
Such action is against the political plan of the Manufacturers Association to sabotage New Deal social legislation.

This Administration wants, more than anything else, for private enterprise to succeed and profit. It wants business to be good. We believe that the best and most American thing that can happen is for all the unemployed to get jobs in private industry. I do not, however, feel that is in quite a fair exchange to ask the unemployed to take all the risks at the same time that private industry and idle money refuse to take any. It seems to me that the American way of preserving Democracy is to continue to provide decent and useful jobs on public projects for needy unemployed people until such time as private jobs are actually available for them.

An orderly and gradual reduction in WPA employment had already been planned by the Administration. This was to be done with some relation to improvement in business and private employment. Over 100,000 persons do leave the WPA each month to take private jobs. But no such brutal requirement, that 650,000 people at one crack were to be fired simply because they happened to have worked for 18 months, was ever planned or approved by this Administration.

This Relief Act and the defeat of the lending bill was due to a coalition in Congress accompanied by pressure from a small but well organized group in industry. It may be that they are right. The hard fact, nevertheless is that a real gamble is being taken.

There is a big three handed game being played at the moment. Business and industry sit in the game with the greatest cash reserve and credit expansion possibilities in the history of the country. Congress sits in the game with legislative power over the lives of millions of unemployed. Business checked the bet to Congress. Congress accepted the check and passed it on to the unemployed. The unemployed put one million blue chips in the pot. Each blue chip represents a WPA worker, plus his family, who has been fired since May. These one million blue chips represent everything that those people have. It represents their "confidence" and that is the biggest risk of all. With all the talk that's going on about confidence and risk it seems to me that it is now up to one of the other players to either put up and call the bet or lay down his hand.

We hope the bet will be called. All domestic conditions are favorable for a real forward move in Business. Government, the public, taxpayers, the unemployed, eagerly await those new jobs - so that winter will not see anyone in America hungry or cold.