

Module 04: The End of Optimism? The Great Depression in Europe

Evidence 10: Bob Edwards's "Hunger Marches and Hyde Park," 1934

A

Introduction

The account below by former member of Parliament Bob Edwards describes the hunger marches that occurred in England in the early 1930s, as the unemployed began to organize in order to press their demands for relief. As the account suggests, many thousands of people were involved in the protests, which illustrates the extent of the Depression's impact on society.

Question to Consider

- What does the response that the demonstrators provoked — from the police and from onlookers — suggest about how unemployment and the unemployed were perceived as symbols and victims of the Depression in Europe?

Document

Other Hunger Marches started from Glasgow and Edinburgh and were swollen all the way down Britain by contingents from other towns. When they reached London 2000 of them were met by tens of thousands of supporters and 160,000 strong they marched to Hyde Park, where the crowd grew to hundreds of thousands. Lord Trenchard, then Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police, mobilised 60,000 London and provincial police and 20,000 special constables against the marchers and their supporters. The leave of regiments of the Guards was stopped and they were held in readiness for action.

At Hyde Park in a scuffle a policeman's helmet was knocked off, batons were drawn, mounted police charged and many people were injured. Three times within a week hundreds of thousands of London workers massed on the streets in support of the Marchers and each time fierce clashes occurred with the police. There was a baton charge when marchers assembled in Trafalgar Square and a number of men tried to mount a red flag on the Cenotaph. A million-signature petition demanding the abolition of the means test never reached the House of Commons; it was confiscated by

the police. The March frightened the Government and some small changes were made in the administration of the Means Test.

The unemployed marched again and demonstrated in Hyde Park. The Daily Herald reported: "Thousands of people had assembled in Hyde Park to see them arrive. Nobody jeered. Nobody challenged them. Nobody laughed. Because they brought with them an atmosphere of tragedy, for which the day with its grey skies and its drizzly rain, seemed made. Many of them were thin and haggard. And, when the march ended and the rain ceased they threw off their packs and rested on the wet grass munching the sandwiches sympathisers had given them. They tried to see their Members of Parliament at the House of Commons, but the police had been given instructions to turn away anyone who looked as though he were unemployed and to admit only the better dressed. Only after protests from Labour Members were the unemployed admitted to the palace of Westminster." They came from Jarrow, South Wales, Scotland, Northeast England, Northumberland, Durham, Yorkshire, Nottinghamshire, Derbyshire, Coventry, Lowestoft, and elsewhere and rallied in Hyde Park in an icy downpour. Clement Attlee voiced their demand "Work or maintenance" - a cry that had first been voiced by James Keir Hardie forty years before. The Hunger Marchers paraded their dignity, gave the country a reminder which fashioned new ways and helped to ensure the end of Toryism and awakened Britain to Socialist Ideas.

Source:

Bob Edwards, M.P., "Hunger Marches and Hyde Park,"
<http://www.speakerscorner.net>.