Interview with Emil Luchterhand
By Kubit Luchterhand

I. Okay, you’re on the air.

R. I was born on a farm in Wisconsin. My parents were hard working farmers. Neither one of them ever finished the eighth grade. They were very concerned about education for their own children and offered all of us the chance to go to school as long as we would want to. I started at the University of Wisconsin when I was fifteen. We had at that time no advisors or anything. And I just drifted into a course in chemical engineering because in high school I’d been pretty good at chemistry.

I. What year was that?

R. I started there in ’24. I missed one year because I was sick. I graduated in ’29. My folks were admirers of La Follette, that’s old Bob La Follette. I absorbed some political understanding from that. When I was at the University, through some other students, I was asked to join the Liberal Club and I joined that. I believe at the time I was in the last year as a senior in the course of chemical engineering. We used to kid ourselves at the sessions we’d have among students that maybe what the world needed was more social engineers than chemical engineers. And we talked in terms of the need for unemployment insurance and a few things like that without ever being very serious about organizing for anything like that.

I went to Chicago and worked for United Chromium. They were a
company that had patents on the process of chromium plating. And they had a number of other companies that were licensees that paid them royalties for the use of their inventories and I serviced them. But after I was with them for some little time, they were involved in a patent dispute with International Nickel, I believe it was. They lost and that ended any monopoly control over the process of chromium plating. I found myself out of a job.

I. When was that?

R. That was in the early '30's. In fact at that time I took part in the first labor activity that I ever took part in. There was an unemployment demonstration called for February 26, 1930, if I remember right. It was called under the slogan of "Work or Wages," meaning pay us wages in lieu of this work. Now it wasn't a clear call yet for unemployment insurance, but the rationale back of it was that an individual could not create a job or a job opportunity for himself. He was dependent upon society. And we used to rationalize it this way: we used to like it if there would be hecklers at our meetings and they would say, "Oh you're just a bunch of bums and you think the country owes you a living." We used to respond, "The country doesn't owe anyone a living. It owes a living to the young and to the old and retired and to the disabled. But it doesn't owe any able bodied person a living. It owes every able bodied person the right to earn a living." And out of that we built up the argument that society should guarantee the right of employment to all. I took part in the
February 26th demonstration which led to the March 6th national demonstrations. There were national demonstrations under that slogan. Many of the major cities of the United States conducted them under the Communists or other radical organizations. It was national in scope and I have to say, preliminary to that, it was the first time I was ever arrested in my life. I was picked up for distributing leaflets calling for this February 26th demonstration. I was picked up again on February 26th and I was picked up a day or so before the march while I was in the Workers' Book Shop in Chicago on Division Street. Three times I was arrested that time.

I. By the Chicago police?

R. By the Chicago police. And we were defended at that time by an organization called International Labor Defense (I.L.D.). They furnished attorneys and mostly we would plead nolo contendere. There were mass arrests. I believe it involved hundreds of people, and the judge would find everybody guilty and fine them a dollar and a dollar and then waive the fine. They were freed but there was a record of their successful conviction, so to speak. Ha! Ha! A terrible political offense! This was a time when there were great numbers of people who slept under Wacker Drive in Chicago. There's a space there, underneath the Wacker Drive - people would stand at the elevated. People would come down from the elevated in the Loop in the morning, and they had bought the newspaper, the Chicago Tribune or some other newspaper. Then as they came down they'd hand it to the unemployed there in line. They would get these papers to
lay on. They would scatter these out under Wacker Drive and sleep on them. I
don’t think anybody can really realize the desperate need in the city at that
time. Well, I got a job then with Universal Oil Company, which was a purely
research laboratory in the refining of oil.

I. Again as a chemist?

R. Again as a chemist. I was a research chemist this time. And I worked for
them for two or three years. I escaped three lay-offs, I escaped two lay-offs.
The third one was a general lay-off and they laid off forty-five people and they
got me, too.

All during this time I was working I was involved in the movement to get
unemployment insurance. And I was in a left wing party. I used to speak on
street corners, various things. At one time I became involved in quite a serious
matter due to my speaking activities. I spoke on the corner of Irving Park and
I think it was California or Kedzie. We had what we called an open air
meeting and we started out with one or two people. We’d have probably half a
dozen people of our own around and set up a chair and the first one would
speak from the chair. A crowd would gather and if you were lucky you’d have
a hundred to two hundred people. Sometimes if it got to be interesting you
could have more. That night I remember that when it got to my turn to speak I spoke
on unemployment. We used to make comments on the day’s news. I remember that
the Mayor and Al Capone had attended the ball game and it was listed in the paper. I
worked on this question, and I went into the St. Valentine’s massacre and how the only way a gangster could approach another gangster without alarming him would be in a police uniform and in a police car, how the gangsters actually dressed in police uniforms and drove in a police car could ask these gangsters to line up so peacefully and then mow them down only because the gangsters were not afraid of the police. They figured the police would only be an inconvenience going in town. When I told this story the audience grew to two or three thousand people. And also this angered the police. It started out it was only one or two police there to observe me, but this was in a sense provocative. Pretty soon they came in two, three squad cars and it was ordered to get me. And here I was due to show up on the job the next morning. The crowd decided that I shouldn’t be arrested although I hadn’t done anything and they fought for me. In the altercation I was thrown against a store front window and it broke. It was my body that broke it. I was just pushed in by the struggle of the crowd with the police. Anyway I was taken downtown and I was accused of malicious mischief in the first degree. I went to trial in Circuit Court and I was held in the County jail. The trial was some sort of sensation in that court. Years afterward I’d meet people on the street who told me they were there, and I’d have to repeat my whole speech. I gave them the speech about the St. Valentine’s Day massacre.

Anyway, I was convicted and this called for an automatic sentence to Joliet penitentiary for one to ten years. Judge Fairbanks was the judge there. The jury concluded their conviction on late Wednesday afternoon and then he set Friday morning as the time for sentencing. I don’t remember dates. These dates could be verified by going to the
newspaper files. Anyway on Friday morning I was taken out of my cell in Cook County jail and brought up to the judge. I was taken directly into the judge’s chambers alone without the attorney. And Fairbanks took a real fatherly attitude toward me. He spoke to me almost as a father and said that I was in serious trouble and that he was concerned; that I seemed to be a nice enough young man; that he was sorry about this, but that he had no options in this case. The law called for a sentence of one to ten years and he had to impose that sentence. He said the only way he could do otherwise would be if I would plead guilty to a lesser charge, to a charge of second degree. Then the punishment would only be a fine of a hundred dollars, or it could be up to six months in jail. He says, "And if you will agree to that I’ll set aside this first trial and we’ll go immediately to trial before me without a jury, and I’ll find you guilty and I’ll be very lenient." Then we went into court and my attorney was there. The attorney made a plea for the setting aside of the verdict. When it was all over Judge Fairbanks, very sarcastic to the attorney, said his plea didn’t amount to anything and that he was not doing this on the basis of his plea. He says, "I’m going to set aside this verdict on the basis that the young man is innocent." He says, "But I can’t set him free. I’ll just call a mistrial and he’ll be up for another trial." "Well," he says, "I’ll never try it in my court; he’ll have to be assigned to another judge because I’m satisfied."

Well, then I learned something about how you can worry a man or you can play with a person. I was required to report to the court at least once every thirty days for at least ten or fifteen times, well over a year’s time. And always then it was postponed another thirty days. But I’d have to show up and the bail was continued and so on.
Finally it was dropped altogether. But I learned something about our court procedures and jail. I was in the Cook County jail, which I once read afterward in the Saturday Evening Post was one of the worst county jails in the United States. Ha! Ha! I don't want to try any others.

Well, I was very active in this, and during this time there developed the central bill for unemployment insurance, introduced by one time Congressman Ernest Lundeen, a Farm-Laborite from Minnesota. Later he became Senator Ernest Lundeen, too. I'm not clear on the dates he was elected. I know he was a congressman and would later become senator. He introduced what we called the "Worker's Unemployment and Social Security Bill," which included medicare. It was a national health plan, full social security and full unemployment insurance. It was the whole dish all in one. We were waging a campaign of demonstrations on the streets and on petitions and getting resolutions from organizations that were putting pressure on Congress to adopt that bill. In fact we had hearings before the Labor Committee, Lundeen's committee. I appeared once at that. Went to Washington. Hitch-hiked there and appeared before that committee testifying on the need for such a bill. We couldn't get a rule to get it up there for a vote. Then the Congressman tried a petition. I can't think of that guy's name. He was the Congressman that Nixon defeated – Jerry Voorhis!

L. Oh, Jerry Voorhis!

R. Jerry Voorhis was one of the signers, one of the hundred Congressmen to discharge this rules committee from consideration of this bill and bring the bill directly onto the
Congress floor. When Nixon ran against Jerry for president this was one of the charges he brought to him – that this was a Communist bill, that he had supported a Communist bill.

I. For Congress you mean.

R. Yeah. When Nixon first ran for Congress in 1946 he ran against Jerry and he campaigned against him. He printed his stuff on pink to show that Jerry was a pink! One of the charges he made against him was that Jerry had supported this social security bill, unemployment insurance, social security and medicare bill. National health insurance was supported by the Communist Party and by the Unemployed Councils. But during this period another thing happened. Unemployment was very high in Chicago at that time. I would judge, and I don’t have the exact figures, but I believe it was running as high as 25% of the working force. And many of those that did work were only working two and three days a week. They were on very short rations. There were hundreds of evictions in court. There were great numbers of people, working people, that had built houses in the ‘20’s which were relatively prosperous times. They had built say fifteen to eighteen thousand dollar homes and now saw the bottom drop out of that market. They had an equity in that home. They had paid a certain amount down. They might have paid even as much as half and now they couldn’t continue to meet the payments. The sale price of the home wasn’t even equal to what they still owed on it.

I. Was that right away when you were in Chicago or after?
R. No this was in the '31-'32 period. See, unemployment really got bad in the winter of '29-'30. Each month it got worse. You got to realize, too, that people couldn't pay taxes. At that time we didn't worry about the government's problems, but you can see that the politicians had a problem, too. Here they had great demands for relief. There was no unemployment insurance at that time. There was no funds set aside to meet such an emergency, and all at once the demand for millions of dollars going in for relief. They called the Illinois Emergency Relief Commission and it just gave out food at first. It wouldn't even pay electric bills at first. It wouldn't pay rent. People had their electric lights shut off and they had their gas stoves shut off. There were hundreds of evictions, literally. The court would order the guy – he didn't pay his rent for three months and the judge would say, "Well the bailiff should move him out."

The bailiffs would come along and move these guys out in the street. And in this situation we organized Unemployment Councils or Councils of Unemployed. At first they had all kinds of names. They were called Councils on Unemployment and Councils of Unemployed, Councils on Unemployment insurance, and Councils for Unemployment Insurance. Actually in the end we all went under the name of Unemployed Council of Cook County.

I. Where did these things come from? Who organized them?

R. I would say that in the beginning a lot of it was spontaneous. But there were Communists. The Communist Party was definitely involved in organizing it. That's why there was such a conglomeration of names. There's no doubt that the
communists took the lead afterwards in calling a conference of all these and then deciding on one name. And there were branches. These councils then were councils of militant people. And they had people that were electricians. Electricians knew how to turn the electricity on just as well as the electric company could turn it off. They had their own committees and they did that. The gas company had a special key that they turned in the meters, and we had technicians who knew how to shape keys and turn the gas back on. And Unemployment Councils also would help if there was a rental case. In all these instances the first action would be always to go to the relief commission and demand that electricity should be turned on. When they refused then the so called illegal action was taken. But I think it was practice and a policy that no one should take extralegal action until you'd exhausted all legal means.

Now on the question of evictions, there sometimes the Unemployed Councils would go. If the fellow belonged to the Council or had sense enough to go there and he was in trouble, on that this Council would send a committee with him to the court and they'd plead with the judge. Then they'd go to the Relief Commission or to that Welfare Office. There was a welfare office set-up all over the city at that time. Relief stations they called them. They would plead that this rent should be paid to keep this family. When that failed, then they had their moving committees. So as the bailiffs cleared out, the people moved the furniture right back in the same house. This was done in literally hundreds of cases. On August 1 or August 3, 1931 there was an eviction on the South side in Chicago and the Negroes, or blacks as they're called, were quite militant on that
South side. This involved the furniture of an elderly woman living on the third floor. The bailiffs moved her out and presumably they left. The furniture sat out on the street for an hour or two. The Unemployed Council set out to get the relief to pay them. The relief refused to pay, so they came back and they started moving them back. They were met by deputies up there who fired on them and there were three of them killed there. I think the date of the funeral was on August 5, 1931. It could be verified. All the Chicago newspapers had pictures of that funeral demonstration which was estimated at 50,000 people. I remember being a part of that funeral demonstration.

Q. Were the guys who were killed black?

R. They were all black, yeah. I don’t know their names. But immediately after that there were two things happened then in Chicago at that time. There was an emergency citizens meeting and there was an announcement by the Illinois Emergency Relief Commission that they now would pay rents. A group of clergymen and members of the old Socialist Party, including Frank McCulloch, who used to be secretary to Senator Douglas from Illinois afterwards, I believe he’s on the Interstate Commerce Commission, or he’s on some federal commission now in Washington. Frank McCulloch and a man by the name of Carl Borders, who was a resident of Hull House, they had a meeting and they decided that they would organize the unemployed in a more moderate organization than the Unemployed Councils. Many ministers then organized in their church basements and stuff. There came into being at that time
The Workers' Committee on Unemployment. They had an organization that must have had at one time sixty or seventy locals in the City of Chicago.

I. Who could be a member of the Council?

R. Well, the Unemployed Councils anybody could belong. In fact we encouraged employed people because it wasn't just an organization to fight for unemployment insurance. I was elected secretary of the Unemployed Councils of Cook County, and we conducted a number of campaigns. Our central campaign was for unemployment insurance, of course. But there were a number of standards of relief even in Cook County suburbs where there was no organization. We used to say then that it's the squeaking wheel that gets the grease. And on that basis we went out to the suburbs and we had what you call a very opportunistic organization slogan, "All relief in Cook County up to the Chicago Standards." And we even found at that time we could get officials in some of these cities to cooperate with us. In Berwyn, for instance, the Mayor of Berwyn – I forget his name now, but he spoke at our meeting and endorsed the principle that the citizens of Berwyn should get the same relief per person per family as any person in Chicago. And we won that in there.

I. Was this still '31 you're talking about?

R. This is still '31, yes, this is mostly '31 and '32. I'm not sure of all the dates of this anymore. I'd have to look it up in records.

We had a very serious experience in a little town by the name of Melrose Park, which is on the West side. We went into Maywood and we organized Maywood all
on this slogan. We had a number of arrests there. I never was arrested, but there were a number of people arrested for distributing leaflets and literature. We went into Melrose Park, and there the town officials caught two of our unemployed people and beat them. A fellow by the name of Ed Brown, I forget the other names, but I had pictures of these people. When they got through with their beating their faces were swollen up double, twice their size, and I have pictures of them. Their eyes – they were gone over something fierce.

L. That wasn’t the night of the demonstration you went to speak at?

R. No this was before that, but we were determined to organize that. And we had contacts in that town. We enlisted the support of our Unemployed Councils in other neighboring towns, in Melrose Park and Schiller Park. We had Unemployed Councils there and in Berwyn and in Maywood, and we asked those people to come. We were going to have an open air meeting in an empty lot there in that town where we were going to speak to the unemployed and organize them and send a delegation from there to the City Hall. I was supposed to speak at that meeting. Anyway I’d come there five minutes late and it’s fortunate for myself that I did because the police had a program. They had had members of the clergy and they had had businessmen, and they were going to the home of very unemployed person in that community the night before warning them not to come out to that meeting, that this was a red meeting. They told them one thing or another. We didn’t know it at the time, but we learned this afterwards from people.
That there was going to be trouble?

That there was going to be trouble. And then the police picked up every person that did show up, which were the people from Elmwood Park and the suburbs. They picked up anybody that they didn’t know in town and they assembled them on a lot with a brick wall on one side. I don’t know just how many they picked up, but they must have picked up twenty or twenty-five people that were from outside of Melrose Park, from neighboring suburbs, and that had come there. They knew they’d come because they had literature in their hands. Some of them might’ve been innocent people. I mean in a sense they were all innocent, but I mean they may have been just people in town. Anyway they assembled them there on that lot and then turned a machine gun on them at knee level. They wounded nine of them and the rest fled. I was supposed to speak at that meeting and I was just coming down, getting off the elevated train, when I met some of them going back up. They told me what had happened and we all left town quickly. I cannot give you the date on that. I have pictures, newspaper photographs of those people laying there wounded. The photographer there took a picture of them. There was a lady there that was administering to the wounded. They have a very good picture of that and I have that in my file.

It was published?

It was published.

But it would have been in ’31?

'31 or '32, I could look up that date.
I. What time of year? Snow?

R. It seems to me it was in the winter time. It could’ve been February, March, in that time. I’m not definite on the date. Anyway it’s inconceivable, the brutality – actually bringing people together on a lot and then turning a machine gun on them.

I. Who was it really? The cops?

R. Well the police were part of it! At that time Melrose Park was a Capone stronghold. It was afterward we found that out. I’m sure that it had to have the connivance of the police, but no one was ever punished. It’s inconceivable to have it happen. I mean it couldn’t happen that way now. In such a case there would have been a national outcry against that kind of thing. But that happened in Melrose Park.

I. Well what threat was there? What threat did that meeting pose to anybody in Melrose Park?

R. Well you’d have to ask them that. All we were doing was organizing for relief. We were organizing the unemployed. It could very well mean a threat in that it meant labor unions after the workers got back in the factories. The establishment is always against organizing labor no matter at what level, but we didn’t think in those terms. It’s a fact that later on when the workers went back into the factories, many of the people that had experience serving on delegations and had been officers in the Unemployed Council or had been on the grievance committee were just the logical choices to carry on that kind of work on the Local level of the CIO when it came in. And many of them did do that. They had learned the value of organization. You can also say this – that they over reacted. Our organization, our efforts to raise the relief
level in Melrose Park shouldn't have been a threat to anybody. As a matter of fact it should have been welcomed by the merchants there.

During that time when I was Executive Secretary of the Unemployed Council there was a man in this whole area called the Main Street Crusader. What was his name? Winfield Caslow or something like that, and he organized the merchants against the chain stores. He used to be on the radio and he was kind of a personality and quite an organizer. Believe it or not his organization, when we were trying to get increased relief – I remember one time they cut relief in Chicago and we had a joint demonstration, the Workers Committee on Unemployment and the Unemployed Council. The first time we had what you call a United Front. This was on October 31, It was a great demonstration, fifty thousand demonstrators going through the Loop of Chicago. Caslow, at that time, donated money to help us publicize that demonstration, get out leaflets and stuff like that. Not Caslow himself, I mean their organization of merchants, because they were interested, too. Relief orders in some stores was 25 to 30% of their business, and it was sure because relief orders weren't credit. Without them they were badgered greatly for credit. Human sympathies were such that here's a family starving and they have nothing. Well I'd give them credit. The progressive merchants really understood that the flight of the unemployed for a grocery order was in their interests, too. Besides some of them were people of social sympathy. They sympathized with the idea. They agreed with us that there should be unemployment insurance.
I. Was the Unemployed Council identified in the minds of just your average guy as being more leftist or more radical?

R. Yes, if there was an altercation at a relief station or something like that they would never say the Unemployed Council had the demonstration. They would always say, "Reds Demonstrate," or "The Reds Riot." The press in that sense was very unfair. They attempted to smear the organization. This period was characterized by that. The labor movement itself was not all convinced that unemployment insurance was the answer. In 1930 at the Vancouver Convention of the AFL there was a resolution introduced by the progressive people for unemployment insurance. William Green, who was the president of the AFL, spoke at that meeting against endorsing that resolution. It's almost unbelievable that a labor leader in 1930 would have spoken against unemployment insurance, but the head of the AFL at that time did. I can quote him directly because we used it so often at that time. He said, "American labor is too proud to accept the dole." The dole was really not unemployment insurance. The dole was the relief that was being given in Great Britain at that time and it was on a pauper basis. You had to prove you were a pauper in order to get this dole. We weren't asking for that at all. We wanted unemployment insurance as a right of the individual even if he had money in the bank. If he didn't have a job and was applying for a job and no job could be furnished he didn't have to take a pauper's oath to be insured in his right to work. This is our concept of unemployment insurance. That's what we fought for. We never really got it. We don't have full insurance to this day. In this day, for instance the young
person graduating from high school is not guaranteed a job under our present system of unemployment insurance. He has to work eighteen weeks and then he's covered. If he don't work eighteen weeks or maybe it's sixteen. Let's say he works fifteen weeks and the boss discharges him, he's not eligible for unemployment insurance.

We believe unemployment insurance should be, (as the Lundeen Bill that we advocated way back there in the 1930's would have provided), that if a person registers for a job and the employment agency cannot furnish him with a job he immediately qualifies for his weekly benefit period. That bill stipulated that a young person or even an older person could be required, if he was in a job category that was abolished, to attend a vocational school while he was getting his pay to qualify him for other employment.

The Unemployed Council became a national organization. It became a state organization. We conducted a hunger march in Illinois. We called a number of conferences in Springfield, Illinois where we invited the unions, the coal miners' organizations, any labor organization to come. We sent delegations to the governor and at one time we got thrown out of the governor's office. At one time we organized a hunger march to Springfield.

1. When was that?

R. I can't set that date. I'd have to go back up into the attic and look it up. Anyway that was certainly an interesting thing. It shows you how few civil rights we had at that time. We had a man that joined the Unemployed Council. He had come from that.
tri-city area—there's LaSalle, Oglesby and Ottawa, Illinois. It's a cement manufacturing part, and of course all construction was down. That town was practically all unemployed. There's a Westclox that's got a clock manufacturing company in those towns, too. And that was his native town. So he was real impressed with the Unemployed Council. He went back to those towns and he told them about it, and his friends invited us to come down and organize an Unemployed Council in LaSalle and so we did. We had a meeting down there and we signed them all up. I think the dues were five cents a week or something like that. Well they were minimum dues. We had to have something to keep going on.

Incidentally, the secretary of the Unemployed Council by that time received a magnificent pay of fifteen dollars a month. (laughed) That was me. I lived with an unemployed family who had an extra room. You know how we had meals at noon? We had an office, you see, our headquarters, and all our workers would come in there at noon. We'd buy a stick of butter for five cents and a loaf of bread and maybe a can of beans and we'd have coffee and we'd feed the whole crew. Maybe some of the workers would bring in an extra can of food. That's the way people ate in those days. We didn't have any money. When I say we got paid fifteen dollars a month, we got paid if we had it, but often there wasn't any money. We were lucky we had car fare and that sort of thing. The people that worked in this were a dedicated group. They never thought of themselves. When I think back on all those people. They were a special breed of people! They just worked. I've known of times when people worked twenty-four hours, they worked right around the clock. I remember at the time, for instance, when these three
people were killed. Some of us then worked right around the clock. There was a great
deal of organization to do because there was a tug of war between the officialdom and
the Unemployed Councils as to who was to conduct the funeral for these three that
were killed there.

I. What officialdom?

R. Well the Chicago officialdom – churches and stuff. They said don’t have a
demonstration of this, and don’t let these people make of cause of this and try to
promote their organization.

I. These were these three black guys?

R. Yes. Well this wasn’t the only killing in the struggle for unemployment insurance in
Chicago. There was a fellow by the name of Joe Sposab died, too, I remember the
name. I was working at that time, but this involved what they called a “Single Mens
Unemployed Council”. You see, families had one problem, but single men also had a
problem. The single men were the ones that were sleeping under Wacker Drive by the
thousands there. Some of them were organized and they had their own headquarters
and they made their own relief demand. They organized their own demonstration
once and the police shot into it and killed a fellow by the name of Joe Sposab. I never
knew the man, and I didn’t even know the incident until after it happened. I was
working at the time. I was not secretary of the Unemployed Council at that time. At
the same time as this affair at Melrose Park we organized a great protest at the
Coliseum and that took some doing.
Back to the LaSalle thing. We got off on how people lived that were doing this work and what dues we had. Anyway we organized. We wanted the Illinois legislature to endorse the idea of unemployment insurance, and we had had these delegations, these conferences in Springfield. We had the resolutions, and we had the delegation to the governor. Now we were going to have a hunger march, and we got people in the ricketiest old cars and tracks. We must have had seven or eight hundred people and a line of vehicles. Well they were old let's say. It was a mile or two long. We set out and we didn't set out directly for Springfield. We went straight west from Chicago to LaSalle. We were to spend the night in LaSalle, then go from there down to Springfield, a two day trip. It wasn't just a march straight to Springfield, otherwise we'd have taken highway 66 right down. But we were interested in recruiting people and in propagandizing our cause, the cause of unemployment insurance.

Well, Governor Horner didn't want to see us at all. We got word before we got to LaSalle that there would be no place for us to stay in LaSalle that night. And we found a filling station operator on the way just out of Ottawa who was sympathetic to our ideas on unemployment insurance. He had a couple of acres of land there. He said, "Well you just pull your trucks and cars in here. You can put a camp fire in here and I'll sell you gas." Well we had enough money for that. We had food along and we cooked our supper there. In the morning, though, we woke to the realization that the camp was pretty well surrounded by state troopers. They allowed us to make breakfast and stuff and there was no interference. I even tried to contact the officer in charge and I was just turned
Aside. "You can't speak to anybody." All at once we were ordered by an officer with a megaphone, "I want all these vehicles to be back on the Ottawa road and head back to Chicago. The roads are blocked from here. You're not going anywhere. You've got so many minutes to leave." Well we all decided not to leave. Then they pumped tear gas into there. We wanted to buy time. We wanted to telegraph in and protest that we had the right to use the highway and stuff. They didn't want to give us any time, see. So they gave us a half hour. When we didn't get out in that time they pumped tear gas into the trucks and everything. Pretty soon everybody was leaving. My truck was stopped and I was taken out. That time I served thirty days in Ottawa County jail. That was a better jail than the Cook County jail. I don't know what the charge was that time.

I. That must have been after you lost your job, huh?

R. Oh yeah. Then I was working full time for the Council.

I. So you never did get to Springfield?

R. Not on that trip, no. We never did make a hunger march to Springfield, but we did have another conference after that. And we were warned that some of us would never be allowed into town. We got into town and we got out, but I don't think we ever got the Illinois legislature to endorse the principle of unemployment insurance.

In 1935 you got to understand that Mrs. Perkins, who was Secretary of Labor, was very sympathetic to the idea of unemployment insurance. In fact they advocated unemployment insurance. It was part of the Roosevelt platform I believe. In 1935
America passed its first unemployment insurance law. The Social Security law was passed. It took some time to implement it, to put it into effect, and of course the benefits under the law were very little. It seems to me that the first payments for unemployment insurance were only for thirteen weeks. They’ve been extended several times since, but they don’t yet cover fifty-two weeks in the year. The present unemployment insurance law, as often as it’s been improved, does not yet measure up to the Lundeen Unemployment Insurance Bill that we advocated back in the ’30’s. And we didn’t get the Medicare. Incidentally though, Medicare was extended to the disabled people. Any person who has been on disability on July 1, 1973 and who has been on for two years will have his medical bills paid for him no matter what his age is. We’re beginning to carry Medicare below the age of sixty-five. We’ve had Medicaid, too, but that’s on a pauper basis, on a means test. I don’t know what else to tell you. We published at that time a little paper in Chicago called The Hunger Fighter. I still have copies of that in my files.

L. Did you write for that?

R. Yeah, I was the editor. We covered the problems of unemployed people. People brought them in, see. I remember at one time we devoted a whole issue to home owners’ problems. You know Roosevelt set up a Home Owners Loan Corporation and he, at one time, called a moratorium on foreclosures of homes. It was a pitiful thing that many a working class, very frugal family had decided in the ’20s to buy a home. Maybe they’d paid $16,000. In those days $16,000 could buy a nice home,
They would have a good down payment, and they would pay so much a month. They would have paid $8,000 and now here comes the depression and they had no job and they couldn’t make a payment on that home anymore. They had bought it on what you call contract. They didn’t have the deed. They’d pay for twenty years and then they’d get the deed, and now here they were going to lose it all. They had already paid for over half but they were going to lose it. You see their equity was the first equity that disappeared. The mortgage holder — his equity was safer. Roosevelt then, under the emergency, called for a moratorium. Then there was a Home Owners Loan Corporation where you could get government loans to cover some of this stuff.

At the beginning of the New Deal we were very hostile to it. You’ve got to understand the times to be able to understand us, how we thought. In a sense our economic system collapsed. Now I was familiar with the situation in Wisconsin because I had roots here and it was almost — well in Chicago people were starving literally. They were going without food. Maybe they weren’t dropping and dying, but there was real acute suffering for lack of food. In Wisconsin here the farmers would ship their cattle and pigs to market through Equity Livestock Shipping Association, a coop livestock association. They’d ship them to Milwaukee and the hog wouldn’t bring enough in Milwaukee to pay to ship it to Milwaukee. So instead of getting a check for the pig they’d get a statement: You owe us seventy-five cents yet for freight. Everything had collapsed. For instance in California they would take great loads of oranges and dump them into a gully and cover them with oil so that they couldn’t be used. There was a surplus of everything. There was too much of everything, yet at the same time there was
acute hunger in the land. We used to say you don't need production engineers you need social engineers. You need somebody to find sense in a land that has so much you have to destroy it and yet you have hungry people. The contradiction between the needs and the great sources of food! So many things to be done and so many people wanting work and nobody can put them to work. The economic contradictions of society made people feel that the economic system had broken down and they were looking for cooperative systems, socialist systems, communist systems. The whole country was in a ferment.

When Roosevelt came he was elected by a tremendous majority, but there were people with real doubts, you see, because he was accused of being communist, left wing, a socialist and a pinko. Actually he was a person that wanted to preserve the present system, and he did it through reforms - badly needed reforms. People were looking for somebody so they voted for him, but at the time there wasn't too much confidence. As he stayed in office the confidence of the people in Roosevelt grew so that he became a hero to all of the unemployed and the whole working force of the nation. He came along with Section 7A of the National Labor Relations Act, you know, allowing unions to organize. These were tremendous advances.

When I talk about this, you know, many things come back to mind that I'd forgotten. We used to combine our campaign. I remember often that we carried slogans on our Unemployed literature, “Free Tom Mooney.” This was the period before Tom Mooney had been pardoned and we carried various labor slogans like that.

It was quite strange that at one time the Illinois Emergency Relief Commission - They had their own problems of how to raise money, you see, and the Illinois
Legislature one time said the only way they could raise it was the sales tax. This was peculiar in a sense. The Unemployed took the stand that the proper way to raise money was with a tax raised on the ability to pay, which would be a graduated income tax and not the sales tax. We opposed the sales tax. A man by the name of Adamowski —

I. Benjamin Adamowski?

R. Benjamin Adamowski, yeah. Is he still active?

I. In Chicago politics – a machine politician.

R. Well at that time he was a big shot in the Illinois legislature and he was pushing this bill for a sales tax. I led a demonstration once in front of his home advocating an income tax rather that a sales tax. And who was Roosevelt’s right hand man?

I. Hopkins?

R. Hopkins. Harry Hopkins issued us a warning or two that no more federal funds would come to Illinois unless they raised some by taxes, and he didn’t care what kind of taxes. We sent a delegation in an old rickety car, and five of us from Illinois had an appointment with Harry Hopkins. Herb Benjamin, the president of the National Unemployed Councils, arranged the interview for us, and we rode all night one night to get into Washington D.C. and got into Harry Hopkins’s office. I’ll never forget because it struck me so very funny that what we were doing was so futile. We got in Hopkins’s office and he said, “You have to understand that the states have got to raise some of this money. A sales tax is a very poor way to raise it.” He says, “I agree with
you fully that this sales tax is a regressive tax.” He preached to us what we were
going to tell him. And then he ended up, “But I don’t care how they raise their
money. They have to raise their money, and we’re not going to tell them how to raise
it. I can agree with you that a sales tax is wrong.” I remember that I almost went into
a fit of hysterical rapture when I heard this. It just struck me that here is the most
absurd thing. Here was this man telling us what we were going to tell him, agreeing in
principle that the sales tax was regressive. Well we went back and of course the
sales tax was passed. Illinois got its sales tax.

I. Way back in the ’30’s.

R. Way back in the ’30’s, and got it on the basis that it was earmarked to furnish funds
for the Illinois Emergency Relief Commission. I can remember we conducted
demonstrations of the Illinois Unemployed Councils on behalf of the Illinois coal
miners one time

I. In Chicago or down state?

R. In Chicago right before the Peabody Coal Company offices. The Peabody Coal
Company was involved in a strike down there, and we were doing it because the
rainers were supporting our position on unemployment insurance and we in turn
wanted to support their struggle. You see what I mean? There was some solidarity.
There was no solidarity between us and the Chicago Federation of Labor. I told you
about Bill Green opposing it. That was the last convention where the American
Federation of Labor went on record against unemployment insurance. Well, let’s put
it this way, they didn't really go on record against it. They just refused to endorse it but the speech was made against it. After that they endorsed unemployment insurance. But at that convention, the Vancouver convention, they refused to endorse unemployment insurance.

We, through our contacts, then set up what they called an AFL Committee for Unemployment Insurance because many of the members of the AFL, particularly in the building trades, were unemployed. And if we knew, for instance, that there were so many carpenters in the Unemployed Council and involved in the union, we would ask were their dues paid up. If their dues were paid we would have them go back to the membership meeting. It's a strange thing, in many unions the members never go to those meetings. We'd send them in and they would work in that committee and try to get that local to endorse a resolution for unemployment insurance which would be sent on up and also go to the congressman that such a local of the AFL endorsed unemployment insurance. That would also go on up, and that was the lever that brought us to an endorsement of unemployment insurance at the next convention of the AFL. We were instrumental in organizing that. Of course that, too, was blamed on the communists.

Actually it was a man from the painters union that was secretary of the National Rank and File American Federation of Labor Committee for Unemployment Insurance. I forget his name. He was always in the news there because he was very aggressive and very much of a pusher for this. And of course the AFL leadership felt threatened by this rank and file movement there. Some of the locals would participate. I remember the
October 31\textsuperscript{st} united front demonstration between the Chicago Workers Committee on Unemployment and the Unemployed Councils. They had a joint demonstration – at least fifty thousand. We had some labor unions that carried banners. I believe the Amalgamated Clothing Workers, though I wouldn’t want to officially state that because I couldn’t verify that from my records. But I know there were some unions – the meatcutters or what not took part in these demonstrations and supported the idea of unemployment insurance, so we were making progress.

I. What about individual trade unions, though? I mean the AFL was an agglomerate of the individual trade unions.

R. Yeah. You mean the individual locals. It was the locals where we’d send these people in, and they pass the resolutions from the locals you see.

I. Was the leadership in these locals – what kind of people were they?

R. Well in some of these locals – like there was a Milk Drivers Union in Chicago. The head of that union, I believe he had a life time job and I think it was $50,000 a year. There was a Committee for Unemployment Insurance in his local, a so called progressive committee that was trying to get control of the local and bring the union back into what they thought was a democratic way. Those guys used to get regularly beaten up.

I. That was part of the Teamsters Union wasn’t it?

R. No, at that time it was not part of the Teamsters.

I. Where did he get $50,000 a year from?
R. Well that was an important union at one time. You know where Carmen’s Hall is at Ashland and 16th? Some of this you can’t trust your memory. But I do remember that these employed workers, this rank and file committee, were getting pretty good salaries. They used to come to the Unemployed Council and say, “Will you distribute leaflets in various milk barns on such and such a morning?” So we would meet each and every driver with their message, and we’d use our people for that. But they got wind and then the goons would meet our people, too. Then it wasn’t safe for our people to distribute leaflets in the land of free press.

I. When was this?

R. This was in the early ‘30’s, ‘31, 32, 33, along in there. I left Chicago in ‘35.

I. What about some of the other trade unions? You mentioned the meatcutters.

R. Well, I didn’t have any direct contract with them. Our locals would contact them. We had lots of people that were members of the Unemployed Councils that were also members of these things. Many times, once they didn’t pay their dues if they were unemployed they were no longer eligible to speak up. Then we tried to get a waiver through that a person could continue his active membership in the union if he was unemployed through no fault of his own, if there was a general lay-off. We had no success in that. Maybe now it’s different, but at that time if you were unemployed and you were a member of the union but you weren’t working, you missed paying your dues for so many weeks, why you were out. We tried to get that an exemption, that they could keep their status. We tried to get the unions to set up grievance relief
committees for their members. Supposing some member was having difficulty at the relief station.

I could tell you one more story. This involves a court case. The man's name doesn't matter, but he had gone to the Lawndale relief station. He had been a hard working man and had accumulated a little money and had lived a couple of years on it and then he was broke. Then he no longer blamed himself, he blamed the system. And he believed they ought to support him. He loved his children, too, and his children were quite willing. He left his two children at the relief station. He said, "I can't feed them and you won't give me the grocery order." He had received his monthly grocery order and it had run out before the month was out and he had a week or so to go. I don't remember just the details but he had taken that militant step. He left his children at the relief station. The cops picked him up and he was held for disorderly conduct.

He was a member of our Council, but he had done this on his own without having a committee. Nevertheless we were informed that he had been arrested and we were going to furnish him a lawyer. I remember telephoning that morning to the International Labor Defense, the ILD as we called it, asking if they could have an attorney in Judge Green's court. First they said yes and then they called me back. There'd been a number of arrests that day. It was quite common in those days of unemployment that there would be fifty or a hundred arrests in various squabbles in various relief stations or demonstrations, and there just weren't enough lawyers to go around. So they called me back and said they couldn't have a lawyer. And they told me, "You have to be careful in
Judge Green's court." Well I knew that. He instructed me and said, "You have this man go before the judge and put his hands in his pockets and not take his hands out of his pockets, because if he raises his hands they'll say he's sworn in and put him on trial right then. Leave his hands in his pockets and say, "I want a jury trial," loud enough so everybody can hear and repeat it once or twice.

So we got this man. I went to him personally and I had other people in the court room, too. We were in the Lawndale police station courtroom, and there must have been two or three hundred cases, lots of family cases, neighborhood disputes and all these things. Pretty soon this case was called. This man walked up and he did just as we had told him. He had his hands in his pockets and he said, "I want a jury trial." The judge never looked at him. He said, "Are you ready for a trial?" to the city attorney or whoever was running the thing. He said, "Yes, I'm ready," and he started swearing witnesses. I was in the middle of the room back in the court room. I walked to the front of the room, and I said, "Your Honor, this man has asked for a jury trial. He has no attorney here today." And the judge turned to me and said, "Officer, arrest this man." So I was removed from the court, taken back into what you call the bull pen and locked up.

Well I didn't know what was happening at the time, but they completed the trial and gave him thirty days for disorderly conduct. I must have been in there a couple of hours and pretty soon they came back in and dragged me in. Then the courtroom was empty except there was about three or four lawyers sitting around there. There was no attorney there for me. People who were members of the Unemployed Council had gone back and notified the ILD what had happened but they hadn't got anybody there yet. They were
busy. So when they got into court it was just like a ball session or something. The judge says, "What are you going to do with a guy like that?" One lawyer says, "I don't know. Well it's almost like contempt of court isn't it?" Pretty soon the judge said, "Thirty days for contempt of court." So I was sentenced to thirty days and taken back to the ball pen. This other fellow was there for his thirty days, too, and he told me what had happened. Pretty soon the wagon came along and took us down to Bridewell. Have you ever heard of the Bridewell in Chicago?

I. Yes, I've heard of it.

R. If you think the Cook County jail is tough you should see the Bridewell. We went in there and that's really a stinking place. We ended up by starting to make bricks. That's what they do there, they make bricks. I learned how to make bricks. We made bricks there about a week. About the third day I was there the attorney came in, Albert Goldman. He was a prince of a fellow.

I. He was an ILD guy?

R. He was an attorney for the ILD. I think it was Albert Goldman. He came there and had me tell him exactly what had happened, just as I've told you here. I think he had the power of a notary. Anyway we had to notarize the statement there. Then he called this person from the League, too, to tell him what the altercation was all about. Well there was no altercation, no disturbance you see, just this statement. It was about three or four days after he'd been in there that we were let out. Both of us were pardoned, pardoned by Mayor Ed Kelly. Afterwards we found out that he had taken
this statement to a higher court. And the City Club in Chicago, whom I had spoken to once on unemployment insurance – As a matter of fact I got a chance to speak before a number of, should I say, important organizations. Anyway, before lots of organizations outlining what we felt should be done about unemployment insurance particularly. So I was known to some of these people, and they claimed credit for putting the pressure on to get me out. Of course this other fellow got out at the same time, too, which was a good thing. And Judge Green was removed from this city bench and put on traffic after that. He was known notoriously for just trampling right over the defendants that came before his court, especially in relief cases. I don’t think that kind of thing could happen in Wisconsin. Well it did happen there.

There were so many free speech fights that we went through. Suppose we wanted to go into a neighborhood and we hadn’t covered that neighborhood. We would go down to the police station and ask for a permit to speak on Friday night or Saturday night on a certain street corner. Usually it was a vacant lot. They might give us the permit, then again they might say no. If they said no we would ask why and if there was a legitimate reason, okay. Otherwise we would tell them we have a right to speak and we’re going to speak. Then of course they would arrest us. We would have to pick out people who could afford to be arrested. We’d do this two or three weeks and then finally we’d get a permit. We would have won the free speech fight. We would speak in what they called Bug House Square. Does Bug House square still operate?
I. Yeah.

R. Yeah, I've never spoke in Bug House Square. But we did speak at many corners in Chicago, always on this theme that we must have an unemployment and social security law and a complete national medical care system.

I. Did you ever have anything to do with CIO organizing?

R. No, the CIO came after I left, it came afterwards. But many of the people that had been in the Unemployed Councils, when they went back into the factories they were ripe for organization. And not only that but many of them had been president or chairman of an Unemployed Council, or secretary. They had some experience in organization work. They had served on grievance committees. They knew Roberts Rules of Order and they knew the value of organization. They had seen the value of organization. When the call came to organize these unions these were the guys that went up. They were the ones that were not afraid to speak up. Great numbers of them became the local officials of the CIO organizations. It was a good training ground for the unions, for the mass unions that were to come when the factories reopened.

I. Did the Unemployed Council, as such, have anything to do with the national March on Washington?

R. Oh yeah, we organized that. It was organized on a city by city basis, you see. We had a contingent in that. That was held in November of the last year that Herbert Hoover was in office. That was in '32. Roosevelt took office in March 1933, it could have been January or February. I seem to remember that it was awfully cold. When we got to Washington there were four or five thousand people. There was three or four
caravans from all different parts of the country. One came from New England, New York and down the East coast. One came up from the South and one came from the Southwest. And we came in from the Northwest.

I. Did it start in Chicago?

R. No, it started at Seattle and went through the Dakotas and Minneapolis and then to Chicago and then to Detroit and so on. When we got into Pennsylvania the coal and iron police went to every filling station and told them not to sell us gas, and we were getting in desperate straits. You know we had all broken down trucks, and I don’t think we had a vehicle in the whole caravan that was not at least six or eight years old. Some were ten and twelve. There was one old ex-coal miner that was running a filling station and he says, “I sell to everybody.” He had a sympathy for the labor movement. We all filled up at that station. It took us hours. He must have had big tanks or something, anyway he didn’t run out. I’m sure they would have held back his supply, you know. He filled us up so we got through Pennsylvania.

I. The guy made a little money on the deal, too.

R. Yeah, but all the money he made he was entitled to, because imagine what they did to him afterwards, how he would be ostracized and boycotted. But when we got into it they run us into a street on the edge of town.

I. In Washington?

R. In Washington. There were high banks on both sides of that street, and they camped with machine guns, police and men. Whether they had the Army there I don’t know.
They had the Army when we marched through town. We got a permit after three or four days camping. They didn’t allow any of us out at night or anything. We couldn’t get a pass. We slept in the trucks in our clothes and we ate there. We didn’t come, you know, equipped to camp. We cooked outside there. Well anyway that was a mess. But we marched through town finally, sent our delegations to Congress.

I. How many people total?

R. I think we had a contingent of about a hundred or so from Chicago. We had quite a few cars. I think we might as well stop now.