

“THEY SHALL NOT PASS”: EVICTIONS AND THE TORONTO UNEMPLOYED MOVEMENT, 1932-1936

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How do we understand class? How is it made and why is it an important category of analysis? Such questions frame how we approach the study of workers, of course, but they also define the politics of interpretation. Do we actually hold to the axiom that all history is, indeed, “the history of class struggles,” or is this singular maxim too brutally simplistic to animate research and writing in our theoretically sophisticated times?¹

What follows – a brief discussion of eviction protests in the Toronto unemployed movement of the 1930s – is premised on a particular understanding of class, one that widens appreciation of the fundamental, defining feature of what constitutes the working class and, in the process, returns us to understandings of class relations that necessarily accent class struggle. The point of origin of all class formation has always been, and remains, dispossession. It is dispossession, not one mark of its realization, the wage relation, that brings class into being.²

An appreciation of dispossession, and of how this is often lived out as wagelessness, brings us into direct encounter with just how capitalism, and its inevitable periodic crises, produce as much destruction as production, as much precariousness as stability, as much *unemployment* as employment. This allows an expansive approach to class struggle that connects the separations, so convenient for capitalist continuity, of production/reproduction, public/private, waged/unwaged, strained divisions that help to reproduce a global differentiation of metropole/hinterland, Empire/colony, North/South, developed/underdeveloped.

¹ Drawing on Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, “Manifesto of the Communist Party,” in Marx and Engels, *Selected Works* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1968), 35.

² Michael Denning, “Wageless Life,” *New Left Review*, 66 (November-December 2010), 79-97.

Dispossession's centrality to class formation and class struggle returns us to Marx's fundamental insights. His critique of political economy was premised on the notion that this dismal, bourgeois science did not recognize "the unemployed worker ... insofar as he happens to be outside" the reified labour relationship. "The rascal, the swindler, beggar, the unemployed, the starving, wretched and criminal workingman – these are *figures* who do not exist *for political economy* but only for other eyes, those of the doctor, the judge, the grave-digger, and bum-bailiff, etc; such figures are spectres outside its domain."³ Yet there was no denying the extent to which class formation proceeded in ways that, for Marx, reduced masses of humanity to *pauperism*, a sphere of surplus populations designated "the floating, the latent, and the stagnant," this immiseration nothing less than a "condition of capitalist production, and of the capitalist development of wealth."⁴ This happened as capitalist generals vied with one another, not so much to produce labour, but to shed it, the war for supremacy in the profit system being "won less by recruiting than discharging the army of workers."⁵

With this in mind, it seems appropriate to reconsider one of the many chapters of the long history of the dispossessed, going back to the 1930s to explore how class struggle was waged amidst the dislocations of capitalist crisis. Exploration of Toronto working-class struggles against home evictions and in opposition to the impoverishing conditions of relief in the Great Depression illuminate how resistance was forged outside of the wage relation, suggesting vividly that the contours of class struggle are not confined to the point of production.

Capitalist Crisis: Toronto in the Great Depression

Study of the crisis of unemployment in Canada in the Great Depression is a staple of modern historiography, and there are excellent, deeply researched monographic accounts and proliferating journal articles on the state and provisioning for the jobless, work camps

³ Karl Marx, "Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844," in Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Collected Works*, Volume 2, 1843-1844 (New York: Lawrence and Wishart, 1975), 284.

⁴ Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critical Analysis of Capitalist Production*, Volume I (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing, no date), 641-644.

⁵ Karl Marx, *Wage-Labour and Capital/Value, Price, and Profit* (New York: International, 1933), 45.

and their discontents, and the organization of the out-of-work, including much discussion on major events such as the On-To-Ottawa trek, a protest march that culminated in police attack on unemployed demonstrators in Regina in 1935.⁶ Document collections on the 'dirty thirties' provide powerful and provocative evidence of the depth of resentment and anger that engulfed the unemployed in the precipitous economic collapse of 1929-1939.⁷

The wageless, then, get some of their due in treatments of the single decade in Canadian history that is most readily associated with an undeniable crisis of capitalism and its human costs in terms of unemployment. It is not hard to understand why. In June 1931, 435,000 of Canada's 2.5 million wage earners were unemployed, or roughly 17 percent. That rate soared to 25 percent by February 1932, and then crossed the incredible 30 percent threshold in 1933. Dominion Bureau of Statistics estimates were that between 600,000 and 700,000 Canadians were without waged work in 1932, and a year later that number had grown to 876,000. The percentage of the unemployed among trade unionists rose each year from 1929-1932, more than tripling from 6.3 percent to 22 percent. Almost a million-and-a-half people were on relief. There was no denying the dimensions of the crisis.⁸

Toronto followed these trends. From August to November of 1931, 36,550 unemployed men registered with the Toronto Central Bureau of Employment Relief, 16,664 of them single and 19,886 of them married with dependents. A large number of these men were returned soldiers, 60 percent could be classified as unskilled or semi-

⁶ James Struthers, *No Fault of Their Own: Unemployment and the Canadian Welfare State, 1914-1941* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1983); Victor Howard, *The On to Ottawa Trek* (Vancouver: Copp Clark, 1970); Ronald Liversedge, *Recollections of the On to Ottawa Trek* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1973); Lorne Brown, *When Freedom Was Lost: The Unemployed, the Agitator, and the State* (Montreal: Black Rose Books, 1987); Bill Waiser, *All Hell Can't Stop Us: The On To Ottawa Trek and the Regina Riot* (Calgary: Fifth House Publishing, 2003).

⁷ Michiel Horn, ed., *The Dirty Thirties: Canadians in the Great Depression* (Toronto: Copp Clark, 1972); L. M. Grayson and Michael Bliss, eds., *The Wretched of Canada: Letters to R.B. Bennett, 1930-1935* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1971).

⁸ John Herd Thompson and Allen Seager, *Canada, 1922-1939: Decades of Discord* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1985), esp. 193-221 and Struthers, *No Fault of Their Own*, 12-103 present summaries of the dimensions of the unemployment crisis in the early 1930s. See also A.S. Whiteley, "Workers During the Depression," in H.A. Innis and A.F.W. Plumptre, eds., *The Canadian Economy and Its Problems* (Toronto: Canadian Institute of International Affairs, 1934), 110-126; H.M. Cassidy, *Unemployment and Relief in Ontario, 1929-1932* (Toronto: J.M. Dent & Sons, 1932); Leonard C. Marsh, *Canadians In and Out of Work: A Survey of Economic Classes and Their Relation to the Labour Market* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1940).

skilled, and only one-third of the wageless were born in Canada. Of the significant number of immigrants among the out-of-work, roughly half had been in the country less than five years, and were thus liable to be deported should they become recipients of public relief, which was often dispensed in vouchers redeemable for food, clothing, or rent payments. Virtually none of the workless had any tangible property, such as real estate or automobiles, and only a bare 4.4 percent could claim a bank account. Many were of course forced to turn to institutions of relief, such as the House of Industry, which saw the number of Toronto families drawing from its resources increase from 3,470 in 1929 to over 20,000 in 1932. The almost 63,000 Torontonians drawing relief in January 1932 constituted roughly ten percent of the population of 631,207, but in specific working-class suburbs, like East York, the crisis of unemployment hit harder, with the percentage of residents on assistance approaching 30 percent in January 1934 and surpassing 45 percent in February 1935. With about eight percent of the nation's population, Toronto paid out 19 percent of the country's relief bill. To sustain such a massive expenditure, the municipality and its working-class suburban districts relied on funds from the provincial and federal governments and private charitable sources as much as it dipped into its own resources.⁹

Crisis of Unemployment = Housing Crisis

Housing was a fundamental human need that was placed in jeopardy by the jobless crisis of the 1930s. Expenditures on providing the unemployed with shelter far exceeded all other costs associated with relief during the Great Depression. Maintaining a house that had been purchased or that was being rented from a landlord, then, was a critical component of living through the experience of wagelessness. As unemployed families found themselves

⁹ Cassidy, *Unemployment and Relief in Ontario*, esp. 35-44, 65, 121-122, 129-150; Marcus Klee, "Fighting the Sweatshop in Depression Ontario: Capital, Labour, and the Industrial Standards Act," *Labour/Le Travail*, 45 (Spring 2000), 13-52; Struthers, *No Fault of Their Own*, 221; Thompson and Seager, *Decades of Discord*, 210; James Lemon, *Toronto Since 1918: An Illustrated History* (Toronto: James Lorimer, 1985), 62; Patricia V. Schulz, *The East York Workers' Association: A Response to the Great Depression* (Toronto: New Hogtown Press, 1975), esp. 5-8. General accounts of welfare provisioning in the 1930s include Michiel Horn, ed., *The Dirty Thirties: Canadians in the Great Depression* (Toronto: Copp Clark, 1972), 251-304; Dennis Guest, *The Emergence of Social Security in Canada* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2003), 83-102; James Struthers, *The Limits of Affluence: Welfare in Ontario, 1920-1970* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1994), 77-116.

unable to pay the rent, strapped to come up with the difference between what their housing vouchers might provide and what landlords demanded, or failing to meet their mortgage or interest obligations to the city or various financial institutions, they faced evictions from their homes. Thousands of such evictions took place in Toronto and its blue-collar suburbs over the course of the 1930s, and the appearance of the bailiff on the doorstep of working-class households was a hated reminder of the economic distress engulfing proletarian neighbourhoods.

Canadian Communist leader, Tim Buck, claimed that by November-December 1930, evictions had become a socio-economic guillotine hanging over the collective head of a working class decimated by joblessness. Metro Toronto, Buck claimed, faced some 13,000 dispossession orders, precipitating panic among the unemployed. Probably an exaggeration, Buck's figures can be questioned, but his assessment of the central importance of resistance to evictions by the unemployed movement is undoubtedly true. "In every city of Canada our programme against the crisis boiled down into a struggle against evictions, for relief, and to organize the unemployed," Buck claimed. To do this the CPC, and others who joined the growing proliferation of unemployed councils, associations, and leagues created networks of roaming activists, "unemployed workers who pledged themselves ready, at any moment, to go to the assistance of a worker threatened with eviction." Word received at a central office – which might be the home of a particular leader of the neighbourhood jobless or a more formal storefront address – "the squad would rush off." Sometimes these "flying" militants would be given streetcar tickets, on occasion transported by people who owned cars or trucks. A designated group then telephoned others of the need to support an ongoing eviction protest, and to appear at an address where sheriffs were threatening a family and heft was needed to haul furniture back into homes. In Toronto's Cabbagetown, the anti-eviction committee was said to be led by an Irishman known as "Hammer-the-Mug." These vigilante bodies, as a 1933 article on evictions in the *Globe* detailed, could muster more than 200 "members," committed to spend all day camped out on front and rear verandahs, thwarting those who sought to execute the hated warrants of eviction. Communist rank-and-filer Dick Steele participated in a number of these Cabbagetown protests, battling bailiffs with bravado, going so far as to rip the court order from the hands of the sheriff, and do a runner with it into a maze of the poor district's

alleyways. Steele understood that such actions were merely stalling for time, but they did impress upon the masses of the unemployed that it was possible, through solidarity and struggle, to resist. Bill Walsh, Steele's comrade and close friend, concluded, "We believed that if enough people took on the local authorities, someday soon they would be ready to take on the state."¹⁰

Evictions: 'They Shall Not Pass'

Evictions and resistance to them could happen in many ways and involve all manner of scenarios. I present details from four elaborate eviction case files Gaetan Heroux and I have constructed from newspapers and other sources, outlining how evictions unfolded and resistance to them was mounted in the case of specific families: the Traches, the Pattersons, the Braithewaites, and the Drapers. This discrete sample is drawn from over 40 detailed examples out of the thousands of eviction cases occurring in Toronto during the 1930s.

The first eviction case comes from the Communist stronghold of Toronto's Ward 4 and involves the family of Nicholas Trach. It highlights many of the characteristics of evictions and the organized way in which the often Red-led unemployed movement of the 1930s refused to simply accept the bad hand dealt to the jobless.

Trach, his wife suffering from a heart condition and sick in bed at the time, and their three children, were evicted from their Rebecca Street home in late February 1935. They were \$16 in arrears on the rent, one month behind according to the landlords, apparently a couple who derived income from owning properties and letting them out. They obviously cut their tenants no slack, not being inclined to let the rent slide more than 30 days in the dead of winter. Complaining to the Department of Welfare, the owners of the Trach house served notice they were going to evict the family from their premises. The city welfare

¹⁰ Tim Buck, *Yours in the Struggle: Reminiscences of Tim Buck*, ed., William Beeching and Phyllis Clarke (Toronto: NC Press, 1971), 154-155; Rick Salutin, *Kent Rowley: The Organizer – A Canadian Union Life* (Toronto: James Lorimer, 1980), 11; Peter Hunter, *Which Side Are You On Boys ... Canadian Life on the Left* (Toronto: Lugas, 1988), 21-22; "Attempting evictions, bailiffs are balked," *Globe*, 10 April 1933; George H. Rust-D'Eye, *Cabbagetown Remembered* (Toronto: Stoddart, 1984), 39; Cy Gonick, *A Very Red Life: The Story of Bill Walsh* (St. John's, Newfoundland: Canadian Committee on Labour History, 2001), 86-87. For a discussion of resistance to evictions in the United States see Randi Storch, *Red Chicago: American Communism at its Grassroots, 1928-1935* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2007), 111-115.

agency offered the Trachs accommodation elsewhere, but according to a Ward 4 Unemployed Association spokesperson, the condemned house that was available was “swarming with bugs.” Countenancing no compromises, the landlords made sure the police were on hand in forceful numbers to buttress the bailiffs. Trucks were on hand to load up the evicted family’s belongings, which would then be sold to recoup the unpaid rent. The Trach family was in readiness as well. A contingent of the Toronto Workers’ Association gathered, supposedly 100-150 strong. The sheriff’s officers and landlady’s determination prevailed over the ranks of the unemployed. It nonetheless took battle to secure this victory. Police claimed they were bombarded with “half-pound bricks” and they were involved repeatedly in a series of scuffles. The door was broken in, and a bedroom window smashed by the landlady, as furniture, clothing, and food was commandeered by the landlords’ agents. Attempting to remove a washing machine from the bailiffs’ truck, Trach was physically restrained and struck; his relief ticket disappeared in the tumult. Bereft of their belongings, including the clothes of the children and all bedding, the Trach family was now homeless. When twenty friends of the family proceeded to the home of the landlords and entered it to register their discontent, police arrived, ordered the delegation to depart, and then remained to guard the property.

The Trach eviction occasioned further protest. Captain T.E. Heron of the Department of Welfare was ostensibly concerned Mrs. Trach’s well being. He sent a public health nurse to the domicile, instructing her to try to put a stop to the actions of the landlords. Nothing, obviously, came of this. Heron also subsequently addressed the aggressiveness of those who undertook the removal of the Trach family. “It’s a very serious thing,” Heron told the Toronto Board of Control, “if these bailiffs have gone into a house and left it with the door out and the window broken. ... I understand the bailiffs took practically everything in the house, which they are not supposed to do.” Among goods prohibited from seizure, apparently, were beds, bedsteads and cradles, bedding, necessary and ordinary wearing apparel of the debtor and his family, and cooking and heating stoves. Police, their purpose limited to “keeping the peace,” were also criticized by unemployed activists: they failed to stop the illegal seizure of specific domestic items, and showed their partisan colours in a vigilant defence of the landlords’ residence.

With Communist-defender lawyer Onie Brown advising the Trachs and the presence of the Unemployed Association, social democratic Mayor James Simpson and Police Chief Draper were not inclined to be charitable. Simpson, who had already publically accused the Communists in 1933 of fomenting discord and confrontation around evictions for the purpose of personally discrediting him, agreed to have the Trach complaint raised before the Board of Police Commissioner. But he made it clear that he thought the Trach family was being ill-used by the Toronto Unemployed Association to bump the stock of the Communist Party of Canada. Chief Draper simply denied the claim that the police behaved improperly, attacking and scapegoating the much maligned 'Red' agitators.¹¹

Other popular defences of working-class homes highlighted the ways that women might become central players in protests of the unemployed. This, of course, was a logical development in struggles that were directly aimed at preservation of domestic life, protections of family units, and the defence of women, children, and their human rights to shelter, clothing, and living space.

An East York eviction of Mrs. Patterson and her family, at least two of whom were grown sons, illustrated vividly the increasingly important place of women in the struggles against eviction. The Patterson eviction had been known about in East York for some time, the home-owning Mrs. Patterson being in arrears on tax payments due on her 598 Woodbine Avenue address for a considerable period, possibly "a number of years." The Board of Control was of the view that "it was in the interests of the city that the matter be brought to a head, and so ordered the eviction." They apparently rejected some kind of compromise proposed by the Department of Welfare. On the morning of 7 July 1936, the Reverend D. Wallace Christie and one of Patterson's sons met with Acting Toronto Mayor, William D. Robbins, to try to stop the Sheriff's office from proceeding. The meeting led to confusions and, in any case, officers were on their way to the Patterson home. They found it surrounded by men from the social democratic-led East York Workers Association (EYWA) and the Ward 8 Workers' Association, in which rank-and-file Communists

¹¹ The above paragraphs on the Trach eviction draw upon accounts in the Toronto *Daily Star* and the Toronto *Globe*, Toronto's leading daily newspapers of the time. To economize on citation space I will simply refer to TS and TG below. Fuller citations are of course available. For Simpson and his 1933 charges against Communists using evictions to embarrass him see John Manley, "'Starve, Be Damned!' Communists and Canada's Urban Unemployed, 1929-1939," *Canadian Historical Review*, 79 (September 1998), 476, quoting *The Worker*, 29 April 1933.

predominated. Twenty women from the neighbourhood stood on the verandah, which was draped with a Union Jack. Mrs. Patterson's threatened eviction managed to bring together Reds and Oranges, for her family ties linked her to the CPC, and her neighbourhood affiliations drew in United Empire Loyalists. Both sides of this incongruous network of support were of long historical standing. On the Red side, Mrs. Patterson was the sister of Tom Bell, whose radicalism reached back to the Socialist Party of North America, the founding of the Communist Party of Canada, and revolutionary organizing in Manitoba in the aftermath of the Winnipeg General Strike. Bell ended up a Comintern functionary, working in Moscow for several years, and Party activists in the unemployed movement were not about to let his sister be given the bailiff's bum's rush.¹² Long resident in the neighbourhood, moreover, Mrs. Patterson had many ties with her British neighbours, most of whom would have had little knowledge of her Communist brother.

Sheriff's Officer Jeffrey told the unemployed men and the score of women to move aside, but his orders were of no avail. Insistent that he would "die rather than back down and not execute the warrant," Jeffrey preferred to live in the company of an armed contingent, and he left to return with confreres from the Police Department. A riot ensued; police reinforcements were summoned. Forty-three officers were eventually needed to assist Jeffrey in evicting the Patterson family as "a free for all" erupted. With a verandah choir belting out a lusty version of the National Anthem, "screeching women and howling men" clashed with police and bailiffs. When the sheriff managed to get to the front door he found it barricaded from the inside. Windows had to be smashed to secure authority's entrance, but not before those trying to force themselves into the building suffered scratches and bites from women opponents. A bailiff and three policemen were injured, along with several of the unemployed. Chivalry apparently dictated against the arrest of women, but twelve men, including both of Mrs. Patterson's adult sons, Hugh and John, were taken off to No. 10 Police Station. Among the Communist Party members arrested were Jack Scott, Phil Hughes, Richard Pratt, and Bill 'Barber' Smith. A passerby, swept up in the street fight, was let loose by the cops, but Scott recalled, "We later recruited him to the Party." Before the bloodied arrestees were settled into their cells, Mrs. Patterson's friends brought

¹² See Bryan D. Palmer, ed., *A Communist Life: Jack Scott and the Canadian Workers Movement, 1927-1985* (St. John's, Newfoundland: Canadian Committee of Labour History, 1988), 36; Ian Angus, *Canadian Bolsheviks: The Early Years of the Communist Party of Canada* (Toronto: Trafford, 2004), 76-77.

them a “basket of sandwiches and a gallon jar of tea.” Released later that evening on \$500 bail, some of the group proceeded to the corner of Woodbine and Danforth, where a protest meeting was underway. Mrs. Patterson spoke to the crowd: “I’m not a public speaker. I tried to buy my house Hard times came. I couldn’t pay my taxes. The city wouldn’t accept the welfare department offer.”

The next day a deputation of twenty women from the Ward 8 Progressive Women’s Association, some with babies in tow and headed by Mrs. P. Hughes, wife of a Communist Party member, attended a Toronto Board of Control meeting along with the Reverend Christie and a group of unemployed men led by Robert H. Brown. Plainclothes police and uniformed officers guarded the doors. Mrs. Hughes wanted to know if women would be protected “from abuse and not molested by the police.” Another female speaker angrily demanded to know if it was the Acting Mayor’s order that the police tear down the British flag. “We are here to protest about it,” said Mrs. J. Kemsley, “We are Orange women and we are British.” Mrs. Margaret Hambleton recounted being attacked on the Patterson porch by police, who dragged her down the steps. Before fainting, she remembered a lot of cops shouting and “lashing out with their billies everywhere.” Leader of the unemployed men, Robert Brown, also protested police violence, drawing cheers from the gallery, filled with the jobless, when he declared: “Four thousand organized workers from Ward 8” were committing themselves to see that civic officials “treat Mrs. Patterson decently.”

None of this was looked upon favorably by constituted authority. Assistant Crown Attorney W. O. Gibson, well aware that many of those charged after the struggle outside Mrs. Patterson’s house were Communists, was outraged by attempts to influence the judicial process and exempt those who had clearly committed criminal acts – a sheriff’s officer had been stabbed in the leg! – from punishment. The crowd that resisted the Patterson eviction had, in Gibson’s word, been engaged in a “revolution.” Such hyperbole aside, even a Toronto *Globe and Mail* editorial acknowledged that “public opinion” was on the side of the unfortunate victims being subjected to removal from their home. Not responsible for their situation, they should hardly be treated as hard-core “members of the criminal class.” But Jack Scott and some of his comrades received twenty days in the Don

Jail from the magistrate, ten of the days of incarceration, Scott figured, because he refused to swear on the Bible.¹³

The Patterson eviction was not your normal eviction blockade. Sandwiches and four o'clock tea served up to the arrested in lock-up, police tearing down a Union Jack, lodge brothers from the Orange Order linking arms with militants of the Communist Party, both groups battling the police, and the evicted a woman home-owner without a husband but with a brother high up in the Comintern, who simply could not scrape up her long overdue taxes – this was not the stuff of most of the unemployed protests that proceeded against sheriffs, bailiffs, landlords, police, welfare officers and inadequate relief payments. But it did accent the place of women and of Communists in anti-eviction protests. It also went up with a bang, and continued on with a further bang before the Toronto Board of Control. But it was, by all accounts, a two-day affair. Other eviction resistance had more longevity.

One of the more protracted, convoluted, and successful instances of anti-eviction insurgency took place in Alderwood, as the local Workers' Association guarded the Albany Avenue house of a relief family for almost 20 days in the summer of 1933. A landlord, F. Strang, arrived on the doorstep of a rented domicile when its occupants, the Braithwaite family, were away. The Braithwaites owed Strang \$40 in back rent. In their absence, Strang proceeded to move his furniture into the house. Fifty vigilant members of the Alderwood Workers' Association quickly gathered and, ascertaining what was going on, marched the landlord's furniture out in the street quicker than he could get it inside the house. It was all giving the landlord "a sample of his own medicine," in the words of one newspaper headline. Soon Strang gave up, and moved some small items to a nearby relative's house. The unemployed stood guard, protecting the vacant Braithwaite residence "from sunset to sundown." While 20 of the unemployed remained at the house, others pressured the local council to assist the family to find another house. J. Bankler, a leader of the organized unemployed in Alderwood, where Communists were apparently not in positions of leadership, explained to the press that, "We want to work within the law and

¹³ TS & TG; Palmer, ed., *A Communist Life*, 36-37; Lara Campbell, *Respectable Citizens: Gender, Family, and Unemployment in Ontario's Great Depression* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009), 127-128, which also has a discussion of how understandings of British citizenship rights were utilized by the unemployed, 174-183.

not do anything rash. We don't want to see this man on the street. He can't repay his rent and the township won't. We are taking up the matter with Council on Monday." With no concessions forthcoming, another squaring off with the bailiffs was likely. It came on 14 July 1933. A bailiff, accompanied by police, arrived at the Braithwaite domicile, a warrant authorizing the removal and sale of the Braithwaite's furniture in hand. Two hundred unemployed protesters surrounded the building and refused the bailiff entry. Knowing retreat was the wisest move, the bailiff announced that the eviction was postponed until the following Wednesday, but promised to have enough police officers with him to enforce the warrant and later advertised the sale of the Braithwaite home furniture. Upon his return, 400 Alderwood Workers' Association members had gathered at the Braithwaite home; determined to thwart the eviction, a large contingent remained until sunset. Hanging in the window was a large sign: "This House Protected – Alderwood Workers."¹⁴ The eviction and sale never took place.

One thing the Alderwood militants had done that irked police was erect a mock gallows in front of the house on two separate occasions during their July occupation. They then hung in effigy likenesses of the landlord and the sheriff's officer serving the eviction writ. Such theatrical gibbets were a common form of mockery among those resisting evictions, effigy hangings of bailiffs and offensive *rentiers* being an important part of the theatrical arsenal of resistance of the jobless. At the Braithwaite residence, protesters also placed a cardboard casket in front of the house, a large doll laid out in it to symbolize death and starvation.

Constituted authority did not appreciate the humour. Police Chief Draper, for instance, took the tongue-in-cheek claims of those resisting evictions seriously, expressing shocked indignation that protesters were erecting scaffolds from which they ostensibly meant to publicly hang bailiffs. Another officer of the court, directly involved in evictions and protests against them in East York, viewed the unemployed's mock executions of his kind against the hard realities of tenants facing homelessness. "[T]here had been a lot of hanging during the past five years," Sheriff A.M. Gorrie told Reeve Arthur Williams, a prominent EYWA figure and member of the Cooperative Commonwealth Federation, "and he had not worried about them. What caused the officer/bailiff sleepless nights, confessed

¹⁴ TS & TG.

Gorrie, was “the worry of having to go out the next day and put people out of their homes.” After a year in which some 475 eviction notices had been served in East York, it was still the case, in 1936, that 450 more were threatened. Williams worried in June of that year that he would not be “surprised if bloodshed ensued.”¹⁵

Among the most active in the eviction blockades, and among the most vocal of opponents of inadequate relief for the unemployed, were ex-servicemen, angered that after having served in the armed forces in World War I, they were reduced to penury 15 years later. The most dramatic defence of veterans’ homes came in East York in June 1936. On the morning of 5 June 1936, at 7 AM, men with large signs paraded through East York streets, rallying the unemployed to defend people’s homes against the bailiffs. Hundreds of ex-servicemen assembled in front of the residence of a former comrade, George Durant, taunting the bailiff, who arrived at 9 AM. By this time the Durant crowd had swelled to 300-400, and four other homes threatened with eviction were being guarded by the EYWA. A confrontation was narrowly avoided as Arthur Williams and an East York Councillor negotiated with provincial officials to stay the evictions. Ten days later, the families threatened with forcible removal from their living premises were still safe and ensconced in their homes, cordoned off by a defence guard. Draped across the Durant family’s front-yard fence was a large sign: ‘THEY SHALL NOT PASS’.¹⁶

Conclusion

The struggle against evictions that raged in Toronto and its working-class suburbs in 1932-1936 constituted nothing less than a war of the dispossessed waged against the propertied, the powerful, and the politically callous. It signalled the determination of the unemployed to resist the debilitating consequences of the Great Depression. Ewart Humphries, Communist leader of the militant York Township Workers’ Association, perhaps deserves the last word on the Toronto eviction blockades of the 1930s. In late July

¹⁵ TS & TG; Campbell, *Respectable Citizens*, 127.

¹⁶ TS. They shall not pass/On ne passe pas/No pasaran was a slogan of determination to defend a position against an enemy. It was apparently first proclaimed during World War I at the Battle of Verdun, and it would gain popular currency in the summer of 1936 (after the evictions discussed above) as the slogan of Republicans in the Spanish Civil War, where the term was used in relation to the Battle of Madrid.

1936 a defiant Humphries attended a York Council meeting, angered by the recent eviction of a veteran and his large family. “The unemployed are not a bunch of dogs who will run away with their tail between their legs because Premier Hepburn opens his mouth and issues a few warrants,” Humphries thundered, noting that eviction of the ex-serviceman only proceeded without incident because not enough people knew about the family’s plight. “If the unemployed had known about the case ... they would have been there to prevent the eviction and all the police and warrants you want wouldn’t have stopped them.”¹⁷ Humphries had come to the Council meeting fresh from jail, out on bail after having been rounded up by police in a midnight raid that netted the state a score of Communist and Trotskyist anti-eviction militants, all charged with leading various relief-related ‘disturbances’.

Eviction resistance in Toronto in the 1930s was, of course, but one small part of the arsenal of the dispossessed, wielded at the height of a crisis in which a class war from above was being waged against the working class with intensity. Conventional strikes in workplaces; free-speech fights along streets known as “Red Spadina”; the downing of tools by workers forced to labour on public worksites, not for wages but for relief vouchers; hostage takings of welfare administration officials; effigy hangings and burnings; marches on the legislative buildings of Toronto’s Queen’s Park; and occupations of relief offices – such actions and more constituted an impressive, creative, and relentless wave of resistance to the plight of joblessness during the Great Depression. Often led by the left, especially the Stalinized Communist Party of Canada, such actions spoke the language of class in the dialect of unambiguous struggle. They did not hive off the class war of their era in the politics of diversified identities, but instead rallied all to the cause of a solidarity sustained by understandings that men and women, children and the elderly, immigrant and native born were united in dispossession, the injuries to one a threat to all.

As capitalism attacks the working class with more and more vigorous assaults, in which its periodic crises constitute a weaponry determined to destroy labour rather than produce it, workers are forced to extend class struggle beyond battles over the exploitation of the wage in the productive arena into realms of necessity that center more directly on dispossession and the reproductive sphere. This they did in the 1930s. Evictions were a

¹⁷ “Jobless Won’t Run Like Dog Tail Between Legs, Warning,” *Toronto Daily Star*, 24 July 1936.

substantive and symbolic refusal of dispossession and its discontents. Labour can often fight capital by *refusing to be where it is supposed to be*, at workplaces where employed labouring people produce the surplus value of class tribute. Withdrawal from this geography of exploitation is the weapon of the strike. Dispossessed labour can also fight capital and its servile state, however, by being where it is *not supposed to be*. This is the weapon of the occupation. Fighting with both of these kinds of armaments, bringing together the waged and the wageless, resisting on the fronts of *both* production and reproduction – this is the class struggle agenda of the future. Crises of capitalism are forcing the hand of the dispossessed. But the crisis is never restricted solely to the objective conditions of material decay. Rather, the crisis is also subjective, a failure of consciousness and proletarian leadership, of a contingent of class struggle advocates who can rally the entirety of the dispossessed to a standard of revolutionary resistance that raises the stakes of solidarity to include not simply this or that fragment of the working classes, but the working class as a whole.