

Unemployed Workers of Manchester: Our Poverty—Your Responsibility (1932)

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It is with deep concern and profound feeling that I address you in the present circumstances. We have a deputation thoroughly representative of the unemployed; the patient, quiet, respectable, long-suffering, industrious people who, through our present economic chaos, have been thrust outside industry, and who, in consequence, are suffering from want and poverty, and all the pains and penalties of the damned. [...]

To-day we have more than 70,000 unemployed men and women in Manchester and Salford, and nearly 300,000 men, women and children suffering the most frightful distress in consequence; roughly 2,750,000 unemployed in Britain and more than a sixth of the entire population of this country suffering the most frightful distress in consequence. [...]

That responsibility rests largely upon you, my Lord Mayor, upon you and the Aldermen and City Councillors. You are here to safeguard, to maintain, and to foster the well-being, life, and happiness of the citizens of our community. That is the reason why you are what you are and where you are. Our poverty is your responsibility. You cannot escape from it.

We tell you that hundreds of thousands of the people whose interests you were elected to care for are in desperate straits. We tell you that men, women, and children are going hungry. We tell you that great numbers of your fellow citizens, as good as you, as worthy as the best of us, and as industrious as any of us, have been and are being reduced to utter destitution. We tell you that great numbers are being rendered distraught through the stress and worry of trying to exist without work. We tell you that the means of life are being denied to

many of our fellow citizens. We tell you that unemployment is setting up a dreadful rot amongst the most industrious people in the body politic. We tell you that great measures of relief are needed, and that it is absolutely essential for you—our Public Authorities—to provide a vast amount of Public work. [...]

You will understand that we working people, and the unemployed whom we represent, are not bereft of all intelligence. Nor are we lacking in knowledge of the world about us. With that intelligence, with that knowledge, it is growing increasingly impossible to turn us off with tales of trade depression and fables about the need for economy. We know different. We know that we are being compelled to endure poverty in a world of plenty. We know that we are being compelled to suffer privation when the shops, stores, warehouses, are crammed to bursting point with all the things we need. We know that our folk are going short, going hungry, at a time when there are enormous gluts of wheat, tea, sugar, coffee, indeed of all the things necessary to satisfy that hunger. We have been made acquainted with these facts time and again in the public Press.

We know that the basic cause of unemployment is the very over-production of the things we need and our inability to buy back what we have produced. [...]

The necessary reorganisation and rehabilitation of Manchester and Salford would involve work in all the industries. In the matter of building (we refer to this as an example) many industries are involved—brickmaking, quarrying, timber, glass, metal and electrical, and so on. There are road-widening schemes needing to be done; bridge renovation and rebuilding schemes, the work of slum clearance; more parks and playgrounds, especially in the congested districts; cleansing and improving the Rivers Irwell and Irk, etc.; in short, the mighty complex task of getting Manchester and Salford into the mosaic of the present rather than leaving them to become derelicts of the past.

It will be impossible to beguile us with stories about the need for retrenchment, financial stringency, saving the rates, and so on. We know that these big wealthy cities of Manchester and Salford can, from all points of view, embark upon a vast scheme of necessary modernisation without harm to themselves and with infinite ultimate advantage. We are absolutely confident that there is capital enough and to spare

for such purposes. Why, if to-morrow an appeal was made for subscriptions for a loan to some foreign power, or to finance some ruinous war, the treasure chests would open wide. [...]

If you do not do this—if you do not provide useful work for the unemployed—what we ask is your alternative? Do not imagine that this colossal tragedy of unemployment is going on endlessly without some fateful catastrophe. Hungry men are angry men. This unemployment, this hunger and want, privation and poverty, this heaping of worries and tribulations and sufferings on to increasing numbers of innocent people; this persistent hounding of men, women and children into the lowest depths of misery and degradation; this vile pauperisation of the workless by the Public Assistance Committees through the Means Test inquisition—are all going to produce—what? If the problem of existence is reduced to a beast-fight, the consequences will come back on you with boomerang effect. [...]