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**“For the Right to Live”: Radical Activity in Portland’s Parks During the
Great Depression**

Ana Bane

“The morning glow is in the sky,
Now waken, comrades all,
Now take the world-wide roadway,
Now see exploiters fall;
For rust and chains are breaking,
And working youths unite.”

- Josephine Colby, “May Day Song” in *Brookwood Labor Songs* (1935)

Portland, Oregon has long been regarded as a progressive city, and this perception was reinforced during the Black Lives Matter riots in the summer of 2020, as thousands of Portlanders took to the streets for months in protest of police brutality and racism. While rioters occupied public spaces throughout the city, one area became notorious in the media’s portrayal of Portland—the three downtown park blocks adjacent to City Hall and the courthouse.¹ Until December 2021, the city fenced off these parks as they completed necessary restoration to the lawns damaged from constant trampling and tear gas.² In January 2022, the city painted over the sprawling graffiti covering the plaza’s historic monuments, thereby erasing “Black Lives Matter” and the names of Black men, women, and children killed by the police. Despite the city’s efforts, however, the memory of Portlanders’ brave efforts there cannot be so easily erased, and in fact, the parks have a legacy of supporting radical activism.

In the 1930s, nearly a century before the Black Lives Matter movement claimed the plaza, the space served as an important meeting ground for labor activists. Then called Plaza Park, local labor organizations used the green space

¹ For an in-depth look at Black Lives Matter protesters’ use of the parks, see Kate Conger and Derek Watkins, “Inside the Battle for Downtown Portland,” *The New York Times*, July 31, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/07/31/us/portland-protests-map-photos.html>.

² The blocks are officially known as Terry Schunk Plaza, Chapman Square, and Lownsdale Square Park, but commonly referred to as the Plaza Blocks.

for political demonstrations such as mass meetings, protests, and May Day parades. As International Workers' Day, May Day demonstrations took on heightened significance during the Depression, as it became all the more urgent for organized labor to "renew their pledge" to fight for a better future.³ May Day 1934, for instance, was an especially dramatic event. Organized by the Unemployed Councils and the Portland Communist Party, hundreds of workers and sympathizers marched to Plaza Park to demand unemployment insurance, social security, "more and better relief," and the "release of all class war prisoners." The march's success was punctuated by a large red flag flying boldly over City Hall, which remained there for most of the day due to a malfunction in the flagpole mechanism, much to the dismay of Mayor Joe Carson and the delight of demonstrators.⁴

The 1934 May Day march was one of numerous large gatherings in Plaza Park put on by Portland labor organizations in the 1930s. Sparked by the devastating hardships of the Great Depression, Portland labor activists joined in the national surge of radicalism to fight for economic relief and social justice. One of organized labor's most effective strategies was to stage mass demonstrations in highly visible public spaces. Rallying in city parks represented workers' determination to exercise their free speech in spite of the period's suppression of leftist radicals.

My research draws on the methods of several urban environmental historians who have explored the intersection of parks and labor. Thomas G. Andrews provides a meta-analysis of historians' integration of labor and environmental history and the questions they have raised about the relationships between workers and the political, social, and material dimensions of nature.⁵

³ May Day Arrangements Committee: May Day Conference, 1935, Red Squad, AF/161139, Portland City Archives, Portland, Oregon.

⁴ Michael Munk, *The Portland Red Guide: Sites & Stories of our Radical Past* (Oregon: Ooligan Press, 2011), 93.

⁵ Thomas G. Andrews, "Work, Nature, and History: A Single Question that Once Moved Like Light," in *The Oxford Handbook of Environmental History*, ed. Andrew C. Isenberg (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

Colin Fisher depicts how immigrant and marginalized working-class communities utilized natural spaces within and outside the city to engage in culturally meaningful leisure and recreation, as well as advocate for improved social conditions.⁶ Roy Rosenzweig and Elizabeth Blackmar investigate how urban green spaces can be culturally transformative sites that support and even encourage broadening definitions of the public.⁷ Similarly, Brian McCammack illustrates how class conflicts and racial disparities frame competing ideas of leisure and recreation in public spaces.⁸

This essay explores the role of public parks in the history of the labor movement in Portland during the Depression, primarily focusing on Plaza Park since it was a hub for radical activity. Examining Plaza Park through a spatial analysis highlights the critical role of this downtown public space and also underscores the reasoning behind labor's strategy of using language that hinged on freedom of speech and survival. Beyond Plaza Park, workers utilized an array of indoor and outdoor meeting spaces for recreation and community building that often went hand in hand with the movement's political mobilization. Through the organizing that took place in these urban green spaces, Portland laborers built solidarity with the community's most marginalized groups, forming alliances across racial and ethnic lines. As the following sections illustrate, public parks were vital sites for the labor movement in which workers organized to demand relief, exercised their freedom of speech, strengthened communal ties, and fought for collective liberation.

With millions facing unemployment and starvation nationwide during the Great Depression, Portland laborers organized in public spaces to call attention to the needs of the working class. Plaza Park, because of its geographic significance,

⁶ Colin Fisher, *Urban Green: Nature, Recreation, and the Working Class in Industrial Chicago* (Charlotte, North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 2015).

⁷ Roy Rosenzweig and Elizabeth Blackmar, *The Park and the People: A History of Central Park* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1998).

⁸ Brian McCammack, "Playgrounds and Protests Grounds," in *Landscapes of Hope: Nature and the Great Migration in Chicago* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2021).

became a central hub for radical activity. Positioned between Portland City Hall, the District Courthouse, the Portland Police Bureau, and the Multnomah County Justice Center, Plaza Park was essentially the courtyard for the decision-makers and law enforcement of the city. The park's proximity to multiple centers of power made it an optimal location for placing pressure on the local government. Labor organizers purposefully leveraged this visibility to disrupt the everyday business of city leaders and garner the attention of the press.



Portland, Oregon Commission of Public Docks, 1921. Harvard University Map Collection, Record ID: 990114808120203941. <https://id.lib.harvard.edu/curiosity/scanned-maps/44-990114808120203941>. Note Plaza Park in the blue box.

The importance of Plaza Park's location extended beyond its proximity to municipal political buildings, however, for the park also sat within a five-block radius of numerous relief agencies. These included the headquarters for Oregon's Works Progress Administration (WPA), local Civil Works Administration (CWA) programs, and other local unemployed councils. Therefore, Plaza Park also supported labor demonstrations targeting New Deal organizations that could

provide more direct aid. Plaza Park was also adjacent to the Portland Labor Temple, located on the corner of Southwest 4th and Jefferson streets. The Labor Temple served as a site for working-class men and women to participate in educational and social programs while also uplifting the movement for better working conditions. Furthermore, the Plaza Park squares stood in close proximity to Portland's largest industrial plants.⁹ Shipbuilders, iron and steel workers, and dockworkers along the west bank of the Willamette River could easily access the plaza via the many railroad and streetcar lines running from the factories to downtown, with one of the main north-south tracks intersecting the plaza. Thus, Plaza Park stood in the heart of Portland's political and industrial centers, making it an easily accessible and highly visible location for workers to rally. For these reasons, park protests led to significant gains for organized labor in the form of heightened public awareness and support, as well as concessions from the local government and relief agencies.

It is important to contextualize these labor protests within the broader narrative of free speech in the early twentieth century. With the start of U.S. involvement in World War I in 1917, the federal government's legal power expanded, and questions of national loyalty came to the forefront. Left-wing political organizations such as the Socialist Party and the Industrial Workers of the World were painted as "subversive agents undermining the war effort."¹⁰ That year Congress passed the Espionage Act to punish any individuals convicted of obstructing the war effort—a "new weapon" that the federal government used to restrict radical organizations and individuals. As the war escalated, many states, including Oregon, followed suit, enacting their own criminal syndicalism laws that would severely penalize anyone convicted of advocating a forceful overthrow

⁹ See "Industrial map, Portland, Oregon" showing the locations of port facilities and principal industries with rail connections. "Industrial map, Portland, Oregon; Harbor map of Portland, Oregon; showing location of port facilities and principal industries with rail connections," Harvard Library, <https://id.lib.harvard.edu/curiosity/scanned-maps/44-990114808120203941>.

¹⁰ Andrew Nils Bryans, "The response to left-wing radicalism in Portland, Oregon, from 1917 to 1941" (M.A. Thesis, Portland State University, Portland, Oregon, 2002), 9.

of the government for revolutionary aims. During the war, the local government in Portland leveraged the Oregon criminal syndicalism statute to suppress the rights of free speech and association in public. Enforcement of the law continued even after the war's end, and the law was used to target radicals throughout the Red Scares of the 1920s and 30s.¹¹

Amid this suppressive environment, organized labor demonstrations in highly visible public spaces represented workers' resistance against attacks to their constitutional rights. Labor organizers drew attention to the battle over free speech, appealing to the public's belief in protecting fundamental rights. This was illustrated in a 1934 flyer issued by the Portland Communist Party titled "Free Speech Fight On!" that lambasted the police's violence against peaceful public meetings. At the time, the local Communist Party would hold weekly street meetings just a few blocks north of Plaza Park on Southwest 4th and Alder streets. Mayor Carson was attempting to convince the City Council to require that all street meetings and park meetings first secure his written permission. The flyer urged all workers to push back against this suppressive measure:

Carson thus hopes to put an end to all meetings and demonstrations of militant workers. Every worker, professional and intellectual, who believes in the right of free speech should pack the Council Chambers Wednesday in protest against this measure.... Let them know we are determined to keep the streets, even if it takes a repetition of the FREE SPEECH FIGHT IN THE PAST.

...PREVENT THE SUPPRESSION OF WORKERS'
ORGANIZATIONS!!
SMASH THE CRIMINAL SYNDICALISM LAW!!!!¹²

Organized labor's insistence on exercising their First Amendment rights made waves in the press and public opinion.

¹¹ Ibid. On widespread public protests of the escalation of World War I, see Michael Kazin, *The War Against War: The American Fight for Peace, 1914-1918* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2017). For more on wartime dissent and the suppression of free speech during this period, see the *Oregon Historical Quarterly's* Summer 2017 special issue, "World War One Centennial Roundtable," *OHQ* 118, no. 2 (Summer 2017).

¹² Portland Communist Party, "Free Speech Fight On!", 1934, Red Squad, AF/160405, Portland City Archives, Portland, Oregon.

The *Oregonian* frequently reported on these free-speech demonstrations, raising public awareness of the struggles and demands of the working class. Although the *Oregonian* was explicitly anti-communist and often published articles criticizing the labor movement's more radical branches, they sympathized with the cause of free speech. Starting in late 1934, the editors of the *Oregonian* took a solid stance against the criminal syndicalism statute and began publishing editorials calling for its repeal. For example, an editorial from January 21, 1935, stated:

Communism is an abhorrent thing from the viewpoint of free Americans... Yet the bogey of communism is continually kept at the forefront by those who advocate and defend the criminal syndicalism act... It is a law that sets at naught the fundamental right of free speech guaranteed by the federal constitution.¹³

Public parks were not only outlets for laborers to assert their freedom of speech—they also provided workers a platform to express the severity of their demands. Throughout their printed materials, labor organizations utilized language that hinged on survival, stressing workers' struggle for basic needs. The Multnomah County Federation of Unemployed (MCFU), a coalition of all the unemployed organizations in Portland, used this tactic in their January 15, 1934, demonstration at Plaza Park. In their flyers, the Federation described the miserable conditions of laborers and their families:

On the CWA jobs also the workers are met with serious grievances. Promised steady work many are laid off after a few days or weeks not knowing when a job or relief will be available again. Work under all sorts of weather conditions with improper work clothes is sapping the strength of many workers, at least one death from exposure is already known of.

Such circumstances place before the unemployed in Multnomah County, organized and unorganized, the necessity of immediate action to put a stop to the misery which is growing by leaps and bounds.¹⁴

¹³ *Oregonian*, January 21, 1935, quoted in Bryans' "Response to left-wing radicalism in Portland."

¹⁴ Multnomah County Federation of Unemployed (MCFU), "A Job Or Relief For All Unemployed" and "All Out To The Plaza-Park," 1934, Red Squad, AF/161012, Portland City Archives, Portland, Oregon.

The flyer then outlined the goals of the demonstration—employment for all workers or its equivalent in relief—and stated, “These demands are necessary to protect the life and health and every[sic] existence of the unemployed.” By stressing the threats to workers’ “life and health and [very] existence,” the MCFU asserted that the government was failing its working class in the most fundamental form. The Federation drove this point home in a second flyer, which broadcasted in bold block letters: “EVERYONE OUT – DEMONSTRATE – FIGHT FOR THE RIGHT TO LIVE!” The emphasis on survival must have resonated with Portland’s working class because the January 15th demonstration attracted nearly 2,000 workers to Plaza Park. Following a mass meeting, demonstrators paraded through downtown carrying banners and shouting rally cries demanding unemployment insurance.¹⁵

Labor activists championed “the right to live” in numerous demonstrations at Plaza Park. A month after the January protest, the Single Workers Unemployed Council organized a demonstration in the park using similar survival-based language. Their leaflet urged all laborers to join in “the struggle for the right to live like men” as opposed to being treated as disposable wage slaves.¹⁶ The council decried the “intolerable” conditions of being “herded into soup lines and flop houses, driven to despair by a system of discrimination and forced labor.” The *Voice of Action*, a radical labor newspaper based in Seattle from 1933 to 1936, reported 3,000 workers attended this “mighty demonstration,” which resulted in “big gains” when over 350 demonstrators stormed the CWA headquarters just four blocks north of the park.¹⁷ A week later, the MCFU and the Relief Workers Protective Union arranged another protest in light of threats to shut down all CWA jobs. Demonstrators made a direct appeal to the public on this

¹⁵“Jobless Make Demand: Unemployment Insurance Urged by 2000 Men,” *Oregonian*, January 16, 1934.

¹⁶Single Workers Unemployed Council, “Cash - Relief for All Single Unemployed,” 1934, Red Squad, AF/160987, Portland City Archives, Portland, Oregon.

¹⁷“Make Big Gains When 3,000 Ore. Jobless Protest,” *oice of Action*, February 20, 1934.

issue, warning that the loss of these jobs would not only be a vital matter to the working class of Portland but also to “all those small businesses and professional groups whose incomes fall with the loss of wages by the workers.”¹⁸ In a park protest in June, the MCFU again employed language that emphasized workers’ lack of basic necessities and the burden this placed on families. They accused relief agents of denying workers and their families adequate food, clothing, and shelter, leaving children to suffer from undernourishment. The message was clear: “The very lives of the workers and their families are being threatened.”¹⁹



Paul Callitcote, “Communist gathering near the D. P. Thompson Elk Fountain between SW 3rd and 4th Ave,” April 10, 1935, Red Squad, A2001-074, AP/611, Portland City Archives.

The emphasis on survival and human well-being was at the core of organized labor’s United Front campaign in the spring of 1935, a series of protests against cutbacks in New Deal programs.²⁰ In fact, labor organizations advertised

¹⁸ MCFU, “Protest Shutting Down of C.W.A. Jobs,” 1934, Red Squad, AF/161012, Portland City Archives, Portland, Oregon.

¹⁹ MCFU, Flyer for city-wide demonstration, 1934, Red Squad, AF/161012, Portland City Archives, Portland, Oregon.

²⁰ During this period the Roosevelt administration was shifting from job relief programs through the CWA to programs through the WPA, which was administered following passage of the Emergency Relief Appropriation Act in April 1935. The Wagner National Labor Relations Act passed that July, and the Social Security Act passed in August.

these demonstrations as a fight against mass starvation.²¹ Posters and handouts describing the severity of labor's plight were distributed and displayed throughout the city, likely eliciting shock and disgust from passersby. Workers exhibited their suffering most dramatically during a demonstration in August 1937. Just a few blocks north of Plaza Park, members of the Oregon Workers' Alliance picketed in front of the state WPA headquarters in protest of the administration's decision to cut 2,000 relief jobs. Shining a harsh light on the effects of prolonged unemployment, picketers held signs reading "We need to eat," "We refuse to starve," a "We refuse to boost the suicide rate."²²

Appealing to the public's sympathy helped labor organizers sway public opinion. One *Oregonian* op-ed empathized with laborer's struggle to earn more than a "bare subsistence pittance" and likened relief strikers to the members of the Boston Tea Party. The author painted workers' revolutionary spirit as "a fine flame...sparkling with idealism and resentment for oppression."²³ Additionally, stressing workers' survival led to significant concessions from relief bureaus, as was the outcome of an October 1937 demonstration in Plaza Park. Over 1,000 lumber and sawmill workers and members of the Oregon Workers' Alliance came *en masse* to demand an end to a nine-week crisis during which the families of approximately 3,000 sawmill workers had gone without pay. Demonstrators raised their demands to the Multnomah County WPA commission, and commissioners were receptive to the mass pressure. The commission's chairman responded: "You have presented a situation here that is an emergency and is getting to be more of an emergency."²⁴ The chairman promised to take action to rectify this crisis, vowing to ask the state WPA administrator and the national

²¹ Central Federation Against Unemployment and Relief Workers' Protective Union, "United Front Mass Protest" and "Protest Against Mass Starvation," 1935, Red Squad, AF/161037, Portland City Archives, Portland, Oregon.

²² "Pickets Protest Cut in WPA Rolls," *Oregonian*, August 6, 1937.

²³ "Relief Strikers, Patriots: They are Credited with Spirit of Boston Tea Party," *Oregonian*, June 23, 1934.

²⁴ "County Jobless Present Demand: Committee of Unemployed Calls Upon Officials," *Oregonian*, October 28, 1937.

administrator to employ more Oregon workers, to ask the state relief committee for more funds for Multnomah County, and to fully investigate charges that relief agents were illegally discriminating against union members based on political affiliations.

By stressing workers' very survival in the physical space of Portland's centers of power, park protests were a direct way for workers to tell government leaders that they held workers' lives in their hands. To take up public space is a political act, and that is exactly what these labor activists did. Workers strategically drew attention to their body's basic needs while physically occupying a public space, therefore communicating the urgency of their circumstances and the gravity of the government's negligence. Laborers' constant presence and pressure in Plaza Park underscored their commitment to occupy leaders' physical and mental space until they met labor's demands.

During the Great Depression, Portland labor leaders, many of them communists, used May Day celebrations to remind the working class of the labor movement's past struggles to spread the message that through organizing, a better future was possible. May Day demonstrations harkened back to the origins of the holiday as the date for International Workers' Day: the 1886 May Day strike in Chicago in which over 80,000 workers paraded through the streets. The 1886 strikers formed a coalition between moderate trade unionists and leftist groups from the socialist and anarchist movements. Despite their differing political affiliations, they all united around the cause of the eight-hour workday. In his book *Urban Green: Nature, Recreation, and the Working Class in Industrial Chicago*, historian Colin Fisher highlights the important role of time for leisure in the labor movement's fight for reduced work hours, showing how many working-class Chicagoans used their free time to retreat to nature on the outskirts of the urban landscape.²⁵ Portland radicals observed the holiday with public parades and demonstrations in Plaza Park, as well as more intimate celebrations in

²⁵ Fisher, *Urban Green*, 38-63.

workers' halls.

With a more radical base, the demands presented at May Day demonstrations went beyond reform and advocated the abolition of the capitalist system. On May Day 1932, for example, the Portland Communist Party, the Trade Union Unity League, the International Labor Defense, and the Unemployed Council joined forces to call for a “day of revolutionary protest against wage cuts, unemployment, starvation, imperialist war and capitalist exploitation!”²⁶ May Day parades and mass meetings were boisterous events in which leftist workers reinforced community bonds through their common struggle and shared hope for the future. Furthermore, May Day allowed laborers to voice their demands proudly and boldly. In preparation for May Day 1935, for example, the Arrangements Committee sought “to make all possible efforts to obtain loud speaking equipment” to make the demonstration as jubilant and disruptive as possible.²⁷ Likewise, the committee collaborated with other labor organizations to “prepare stunts to make May Day popular and to make the parade colorful.” As the planning suggested, May Day demonstrations were simultaneously political and recreational. Basked in sunlight and encircled by trees, workers observing May Day could experience the inspiration and joy of comradeship while simultaneously advancing their movement.

In addition to the leisure embedded in some inner-city park protests, the labor movement often used green spaces on the urban fringe for recreation. Events like workers' picnics were not only a chance for workers to socialize and reinforce communal ties, but they also supported the movement's mobilization efforts. For example, workers attending the Oregon Workers' Alliance's June 1936 “picnic and rally” at Jantzen Beach Park in North Portland first listened to a

²⁶ Portland Communist Party, May Day flyers, 1932-1937, Red Squad, AF/157813, Portland City Archives, Portland, Oregon; Rank and File Veterans May Day Committee, “Ex-Service - Men May First is International Working Class Holiday, Demand our Bonus!”, 1932, Red Squad, AF/161131, Portland City Archives, Portland, Oregon.

²⁷ May Day Arrangements Committee: May Day Conference, 1935, Red Squad, AF/161139, Portland City Archives, Portland, Oregon; Portland Communist Party, “Flyers regarding May Day celebration,” 1935, Red Squad, AF/160430, Portland City Archives, Portland, Oregon.

panel of prominent labor leaders, then ate lunch, participated in “games and sports for young and old,” and danced to live music provided by the Portland Union Orchestra.²⁸ The Portland Communist Party also held picnics to provide workers and their families with opportunities for leisure while simultaneously bolstering their political base. In July 1938, the Communist Party organized a

Big Workers’ Picnic” at Russellville Park in Southeast Portland, and then hosted a “Peoples’ Picnic” the following September at Viking Park along the Columbia River Highway. The Party’s flyers advertised food, races, swimming, musical entertainment, dancing, and a program of speakers.²⁹

In his study of Oregon laborers’ use of nature for recreation, Lawrence Lipin suggests that “these trips were opportunities for workers to take control over a small portion of their lives.”³⁰ Similarly, Fisher argues that venturing into nature was a deeply meaningful way for workers to escape the long monotony of factory work.

Park-based labor protests did not exist in a vacuum; they often represented a public display of mobilization that took place in more private spheres. In the weeks before the masses came together at Plaza Park on January 15, 1934, for example, laborers organized on the neighborhood scale. The MCFU called laborers to rally at each relief unit they received aid from, including specific relief agencies for families, veterans, single men and women, and transient workers.³¹ This kind of grassroots organizing was an important factor in the labor movement’s mobilization tactics. Several labor demonstrations began on a neighborhood scale and then coalesced into mass gatherings at Plaza Park. Working-class neighborhoods were key sites of mobilization. Not only could

²⁸ Oregon Workers’ Alliance, “Liberals and Progressives of the Northwest,” 1936, Red Squad, AF/161106, Portland City Archives, Portland, Oregon.

²⁹ Multnomah County Communist Party, flyer for “Peoples Picnic,” 1938, Red Squad, AF/157809, Portland City Archives, Portland, Oregon; Portland Communist Party, flyer for “Big Workers’ Picnic,” 1938, Red Squad, AF/157809, Portland City Archives, Portland, Oregon.

³⁰ Lawrence Lipin, *Workers and the World: Conservation, Consumerism, and Labor in Oregon, 1910-1930* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2007), 90.

³¹ MCFU, “A Job Or Relief For All Unemployed,” 1934, Red Squad, AF/161012, Portland City Archives, Portland, Oregon.

neighbors talk with each other about labor issues and the movement, but many relief stations were also located in their neighborhoods.

By demonstrating first at spatially dispersed relief stations, labor organizers could effectively “divide and conquer,” growing their base and spreading their message in preparation for mass central demonstrations. This was the case for the June 1934 demonstration. The MCFU distributed flyers instructing all workers, organized and unorganized, employed and unemployed alike, “to immediately check up on the needs of the unemployed workers in their neighborhoods...and rally the workers to demonstrate at their local relief stations” on June 5th.³² Workers were then called to come together for “a large central mass demonstration” at Plaza Park on June 12th to present their demands to various relief bureaus. Building on the momentum of the year’s earlier demonstrations, the Federation gave a robust list of demands they would call for at neighborhood relief stations and Plaza Park. In addition to steady employment or its equal compensation, the demands included a thirty-hour work week at six hours a day, higher wages, free healthcare, free light, rent, and water for all unemployed workers, a 40% increase in relief measures to account for inflated prices, and “the enforcement of the unemployment and social insurance bill.”³³ Organized labor’s repeated call to mobilize on the residential scale illustrates its importance as a first step to organizing large-scale demonstrations downtown. As a central, public place, Plaza Park was the final stage of many demonstrations in which laborers could present their grievances after establishing a base in more private settings, such as residential neighborhoods and indoor meeting halls. Indoor meeting halls created space for workers to build community on social and political levels. Workers’ halls, neighborhood unemployed councils, and ethnic community centers were spaces for laborers to share their grievances, listen to lecture series about the labor movement, hold meetings to plan mass demonstrations, and

³² MCFU, Flyer for city-wide demonstration, 1934, Red Squad, AF/161012, Portland City Archives, Portland, Oregon.

³³ Ibid.

engage in cultural celebrations. Workers' halls, such as the Albina Workers Hall, the Errol Heights Community Hall, the Beaumont Neighborhood Hall, the Finnish Hall, and the Communist Hall, were dispersed throughout the city and, therefore able to reach more members of the working class.

In June 1935, the Beaumont Unemployment Council in Northeast Portland held a mass meeting for unemployed workers.³⁴ The event featured speakers outlining the current “menace of Unemployment” while also advocating organizing as the only way out of this crisis. Like almost all flyers advertising indoor worker's meetings in this period, the Beaumont Unemployment Council's flyer mentioned free admission and refreshments. The offer of free food reveals something deeper that workers could find some relief from their hunger in these settings. Moreover, these meetings built solidarity among unemployed workers, which was crucial to the labor movement's ability to unite for a common cause. A small moment of respite, of leisure, could be a turning point in desperate times. One of the most important indoor spaces where Portland laborers mobilized and strengthened communal ties was the Labor Temple, which sat on the corner of Southwest 4th and Jefferson streets, directly across from Plaza Park.³⁵ Understanding the Labor Temple's early years helps to explain its significance as a meeting space for workers during the Depression. The Labor Temple had been an established base for the city's labor movement since its founding in 1920, and it housed the Portland Labor College (PLC) from 1921 to 1929. The PLC was part of the national movement for union-sponsored education in the 1920s pioneered by the Workers' Education Bureau.³⁶ The PLC laid out their mission statement in

³⁴ Beaumont Unemployment Council, “Unemployment Mass Meeting,” 1935, Red Squad, AF/160991, Portland City Archives, Portland, Oregon.

³⁵ Portland Socialist Labor Party, flyer for a meeting at the Labor Temple for a lecture titled “The Answer to Technocracy,” 1933, Labor Collection, Mss 1505 box 6, folder 10, Oregon Historical Society Research Library; Pamphlet for a lecture series titled “Labor Institute on N-R-A,” February 1934, Mss 1505 box 5, folder 45, Oregon Historical Society Research Library; “Johnson Scored By State Labor,” an article about the 32rd annual convention of the Oregon state Federation of Labor at the labor temple, *Oregonian*, August 28, 1934.

³⁶ Jerry Lembcke, “Labor and Education: Portland Labor College, 1921-1929,” *Oregon Historical Quarterly* 85, no. 2 (Summer, 1984): 117-134.

the *Oregon Labor Press*:

To prepare the individual worker, as well as the organization for a share in the responsibilities of democratic control of industry, such preparation requiring a knowledge of the history, practices, problems and policies of the labor movement and of the fundamental principles of the production and distribution of wealth. To furnish that inspiration and faith so essential to the successful realization of labor's ideals and ambitions.³⁷

While it was operating, the PLC offered a variety of courses ranging from practical skills and knowledge such as “Elementary English,” “Home Economics—A Course for Housewives,” and “Current Political Problems,” to more elective style subjects such as Drawing, Dramatic Art, and Public Speaking.³⁸

Labor Studies scholar Stephen McFarland highlights the significance of labor temples and union halls in the formation of the American working-class identity.³⁹ In the early twentieth century, labor leaders from across the country erected these buildings to support their local labor organizations. McFarland argues that the Brooklyn Labor Lyceum, one of the first and most influential labor organizations of the time, gave “spatial expression” to the working-class movement. As central physical spaces, labor temples “served as a conscious spatial instrument of working-class formation, designed to bring together, reconcile, build on, amplify, and develop the various and uneven stirrings of class consciousness, fellow-feeling, and organization present among its city's workers at the neighborhood and urban scales.”⁴⁰ Labor temple advocates believed they would serve as monumental symbols to the city’s leadership and urban elite, demonstrating organized labor’s status as a “formidable player” in local politics.⁴¹

This attitude was shared by the proponents of Portland’s Labor Temple, who likely chose the building’s location—steps away from City Hall and other

³⁷ *Oregon Labor Press*, September 16, 1921.

³⁸ Lembcke, “Labor and Education.”

³⁹ Stephen McFarland, “‘With the Class-Conscious Workers Under One Roof’: Union Halls and Labor Temples in American Working-Class Formation, 1880-1970,” (Ph.D. diss., City University of New York Graduate Center, 2014).

⁴⁰ McFarland, “‘With the Class-Conscious Workers Under One Roof,’” 36.

⁴¹ McFarland, “‘With the Class-Conscious Workers Under One Roof,’” 54.

municipal buildings—to signal the strength of unionism and “check” the power of the local government. Especially in its early years of operation, the Portland Labor Temple was praised for its grandeur. Editors of the *Southwest Washington Labor Press* called it “the finest labor temple in the west if not in the United States.”⁴² In addition to the external image it cultivated, the Labor Temple benefitted laborers’ ability to organize and coordinate by uniting a spatially dispersed labor movement under one roof.

The Labor Temple’s all-day dedication ceremony and celebration in September 1920 embodied the labor movement’s typical blend of recreation and mobilization.⁴³ Brimming with excitement for the progress the building represented, workers gathered in the Temple’s auditorium to listen to speeches by well-known labor leaders. After the speaking program, the crowds took the streetcar to Council Crest Park for a free picnic. Working-class families enjoyed games, sports contests, and of course, dancing. Through this lively outdoor celebration, like other indoor and outdoor workers’ events, labor organized fostered unity through leisure.

Examining organized labor’s use of urban parks illuminates how the labor movement was committed to fighting for all workers, regardless of race and ethnicity. Indeed, the demands raised at public demonstrations often included rights for all workers “without discrimination.”⁴⁴ It was the more radical labor activists, such as members of the Communist Party, who organized to protect the community’s most vulnerable to the impacts of the Depression—undocumented migrant workers and Black laborers. This radical use of public space to build coalitions and broaden support would be a precursor to the Popular Front of 1935-

⁴² “More Shares Sold In Labor Temple,” *Southwest Washington Labor Press*, May 2, 1924.

⁴³ “Labor to Dedicate Temple Tomorrow: Open Meeting Will Be Held at Auditorium, Picnic on Programme,” *The Sunday Oregonian*, September 5, 1920.

⁴⁴ Michael Kazin describes the Popular Front’s organizing tactics in the chapter “The Paradox of American Communism, 1920s-1950s,” in *American Dreamers: How the Left Changed a Nation* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2011). For a view of a socialist alternative to Communist-organized activism, see William Robbins, “Toward a Cooperative Commonwealth,” in *A Man for All Seasons: Monroe Sweetland and the Liberal Paradox* (Corvallis: Oregon State University Press, 2015).

39, in which the Communist Party organized to include independent socialists, liberals, and moderates in a widespread movement against the rise of fascism.⁴⁵

A 1930 issue of *Industrial Solidarity*, a weekly publication by the Industrial Workers of the World, whose motto was “Education, Organization, Emancipation: One Union, One Label, One Enemy,” conveys radicals’ commitment to fight for all workers, regardless of citizenship status or race. The editor encouraged workers “to unite without distinction of race or nationality” because “the master class does not discriminate between alien and non-alien in hiring its laborers. He wants only one thing out of them—labor power. He wants it docile and cheap.”⁴⁶ The periodical urged readers to not be “deluded into anti alienism.”⁴⁷ Portland labor activists took this to heart, exemplified in an anti-deportation demonstration in January 1933. Following the deportation of several foreign-born laborers in Portland, the city’s chapter of the International Labor Defense (ILD), the legal wing of the American Communist Party, staged a mass protest at the North Park Blocks, steps from the Immigration Department. The ILD rallied politicized elements of the working class to “Stop the Terror of U.S. Immigration Authorities,” asserting:

Not only are the workers being terrorized and deported, but the wives and families of these foreign-born workers are left without means of support, faced with the slow starvation and degradation of the boss’ charity soup lines. Only the mass action and protest of all the workers can stop these vicious attacks! Answer the bosses’ terror drive by a united front of all workers, native and foreign born, black and white, for the fundamental right to live!⁴⁸

The ILD utilized the same language of survival to appeal to the public’s sympathy for human suffering. Radical organizers tried to unite all members of

⁴⁵ MCFU, Flyer for city-wide demonstration, 1934, Red Squad, AF/161012, Portland City Archives, Portland, Oregon.

⁴⁶ *Industrial Solidarity*, c. 1930, Labor Collection, Mss 1505, box 3, folder 13, Oregon Historical Society Research Library.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ Oregon Section International Labor Defense, “Stop the Terror of U.S. Immigration Authorities!”, 1933, Red Squad, AF/160776, Portland City Archives, Portland, Oregon.

the working class under the same umbrella because all workers' "fundamental right to live" was threatened by the common enemy. In 1930, *The Advocate*, a Black newspaper run out of Portland, reported on a bloody series of lynchings happening in the American South, arguing that white imperialists had been perpetuating this violence to discourage the emerging union between white and Black laborers.⁴⁹ Southern capitalists, the editors wrote, had effectively divided poor white and Black workers in order to exploit them both, but interracial cooperation could overthrow the capitalist regime. This principle guided organized labor's efforts to work together with Black laborers to fight for collective liberation.

Communists worked closely with leaders of the Black community to mobilize Portland laborers around the fight for the Scottsboro boys. In March 1931, nine Black youths were charged with raping two white women in Scottsboro, Alabama. Despite evidence of their innocence, the all-white jury found eight of the nine boys guilty and sentenced them to death. The trial sparked national outrage, and the ILD led the charge to reverse the decision, a legal battle that lasted nearly two decades. In Portland, the ILD held rallies and meetings to galvanize workers around the Scottsboro case in the Colored Elk's Hall, the Worker's Hall, and Lincoln High School.⁵⁰ In 1932, *The Advocate* described one such meeting in which Irvin Goodman, a distinguished local ILD attorney, spoke to a crowd of over three hundred in the Worker's Hall. Goodman condemned racial injustice and insisted that "the white worker cannot be emancipated without



⁴⁹ "Lynchings," *The Advocate*, July 5, 1930.

⁵⁰ Oregon Section International Labor Defense, Flyers regarding the Scottsboro case, 1932-1936, Red Squad, AF/160782, Portland City Archives, Portland, Oregon.

emancipation of the Negro worker.”⁵¹ Portland Communists further built solidarity with Black laborers by organizing a mass meeting in 1933 to educate local workers on the Scottsboro case, featuring speakers such as Janie Patterson, mother of one of the framed boys, and Richard B. Moore, a prominent member of the national ILD committee. In a flyer for the International Scottsboro Day Mass Conference, Communist organizers urged white laborers to demonstrate against this “legal lynching,” stating, “This legal murder is only part of the vicious attacks of the bosses upon the entire working class. It is an attempt to terrorize the oppressed negro masses and break up the growing spirit of solidarity between negro and white workers in their common fight against capitalist exploitation and brutality.”⁵²

In addition to the Scottsboro trial, the Portland section ILD organized to fight for Theodore “Ted” Jordan, a Black railroad worker who became known as “Oregon’s Scottsboro Case” in 1932 when he was sentenced to death for allegedly killing a white man in the Klamath Falls railroad yards.⁵³ The *Voice of Action* kept Portland radicals up to date on the proceedings of Jordan’s trial and pressed upon workers to join in demonstrations for his release.⁵⁴ One of these events took place on May Day 1934. After parading around Plaza Park, hundreds of demonstrators streamed to the nearby Italian Federation Hall to watch “Pigment,” a play written by Portland radical Dawn Lovelace and performed by an interracial cast. From his death cell at the Oregon Penitentiary, Jordan praised the performance and urged workers of all races to see it. Echoing the sentiments of a shared struggle, he wrote, “there is nothing tragic about the uniting of the Negro and white millions,

⁵¹ “Goodman Urges Workers To Unite,” *The Advocate*, December 3, 1932.

⁵² Oregon Section International Labor Defense, Flyers regarding the Scottsboro case, 1932-1936, Red Squad, AF/160782, Portland City Archives, Portland, Oregon.

⁵³ Illustration to the right is a cartoon about Ted Jordan’s exoneration from the *Voice of Action*, July 6, 1934, via Seth Goodkind’s article “*The Voice of Action: A Newspaper for Workers and the Disenfranchised*” in the University of Washington’s [Great Depression in Washington State Project](#).

⁵⁴ “Oregon Supreme Court is Hesitant in Jordan Case: Jordan Defense Scores Point in Fight for Negro Worker,” *Voice of Action*, February 5, 1934; “ILD Wins Re-hearing for Theodore Jordan in Ore. Supreme Court: ILD Calls for Even Greater Protest Campaign,” *Voice of Action*, February 20, 1934.

as they smash the barriers set up between them, and march, however painfully, toward a common liberation.”⁵⁵

In the same way that labor organizers strengthened communal ties among predominantly white workers through leisure, Portland Communists sought to cultivate solidarity with Black workers in the outdoors. This interracial unity through recreation arose early in the Depression. For example, in 1930, the Women’s League of the Portland Communist Party put out an ad in *The Advocate* to invite Black families to attend a picnic at Co-Operative Park in Tualatin. The Women’s League made note of the growing inter-racial unity among the working class, saying, “In every section of the country the workers, both white and colored, are meeting together in a common body whether at work or play.”⁵⁶ The picnic offered live music and dancing. The significance of white and Black people dancing together in 1930, even in the Pacific Northwest, cannot be overstated. Elizabeth Cohen captures this perfectly, observing that “recreation could provide a glue to bind workers of different races, ethnicities, and ages together.”⁵⁷

A copy of the *Brookwood Labor Songs*, a songbook published by the Brookwood Labor College in Katonah, New York, can be found amongst other ephemera and printed materials in the Oregon Historical Society’s Labor Collection. From this songbook, “May Day Song” by Josephine Colby stands out for its naturalistic imagery. Colby begins: “The morning glow is in the sky, now waken, comrades all.”⁵⁸ This passage suggests that organized labor’s use of green spaces, from political activism to recreation, was deeply linked with their vision of a better future. As an environment to both rally for change and connect with community, nature represented hope. One can imagine Portland laborers noisily singing this anthem in unison as they celebrated May Day in Plaza Park,

⁵⁵ Munk, *The Portland Red Guide*, 96-97.

⁵⁶ “Communists Invited Colored People to Coming Picnic,” *The Advocate*, June 14, 1930.

⁵⁷ Elizabeth Cohen, *Making a New Deal: Industrial Workers in Chicago, 1919-1939* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 341.

⁵⁸ Josephine Colby, “May Day Song,” in *Brookwood Labor Songs*, 1935, Labor Collection, Mss 1505, box 6, folder 56, Oregon Historical Society Research Library.

themselves under the glow of the morning sky.

As this paper has shown, the 2020 Black Lives Matter protests in Plaza Park occurred in a space with a history of radicalism. For nearly a century, the plazas have sustained the radical political act of occupying public space to demand social justice. Indeed, Park demonstrations played a key role in Portland's labor movement during the Great Depression, as they enabled workers to organize for relief, assert their freedom of speech, and foster unity across the working class. Because of its central location next to the seats of power, Plaza Park, in particular, was the ideal meeting place for the labor movement to press its case with political leaders. Labor organizers strategically utilized public parks to convey the severity of their circumstances, resulting in significant gains from relief agencies and in public opinion. Furthermore, the mobilization that took place in public parks and organized labor's network of indoor meeting spaces crossed racial and ethnic lines. It was through these public demonstrations that radicals fought for every worker's "right to live."

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