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SPILT MILK:

DAIRY FARMER RHETORIC AND ACTIONS DURING THE WISCONSIN MILK STRIKES OF 1933

by

TIM YUAN-SHIAO KUNG

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of
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Striking farmers huddle around a camp fire under a winter night sky.
Milwaukee Journal, 20 February 1933

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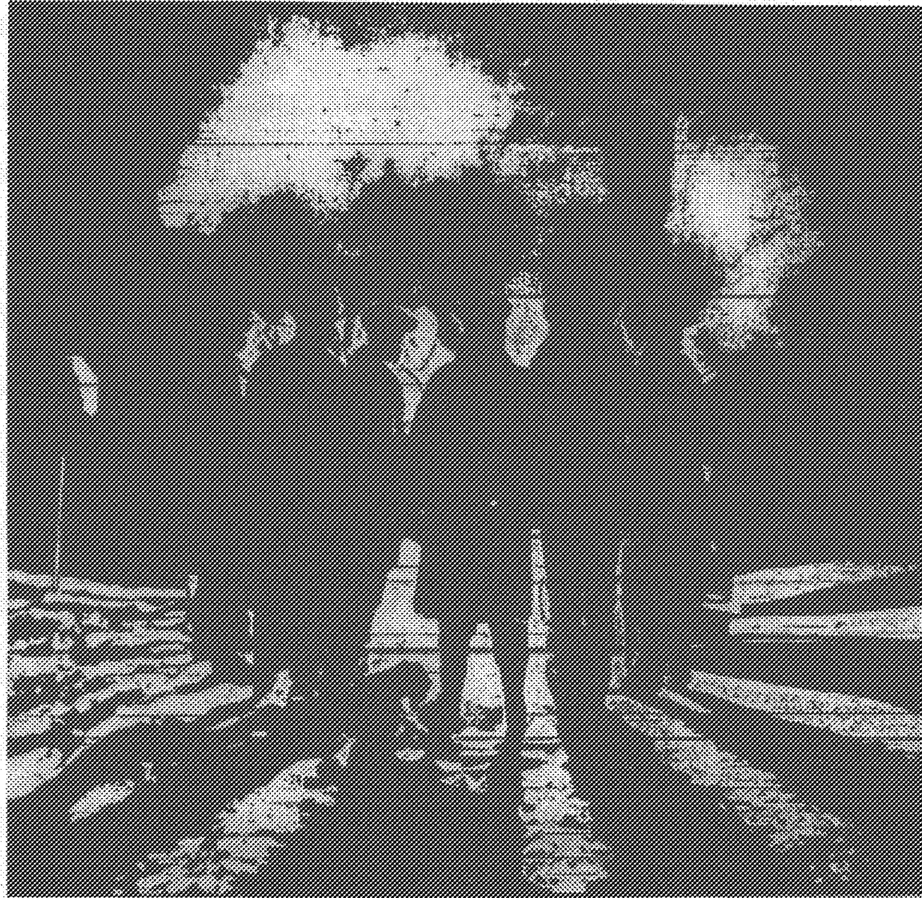

Striking farmers huddle around a camp fire under a winter night sky.
Milwaukee Journal, 20 February 1933

Chapter 1: Introduction

Seven years after the tumultuous Wisconsin milk strikes of 1933, federal officials in the Works Project Administration grappled unsuccessfully with the distinction between capital and labor in a rural setting. The label of "worker," they argued, should be applied to people who earned more of their income from expending labor than through owning property. "According to this definition," they concluded, "the great majority of farmers are primarily workers." In the same breath, however, they acknowledged that theory and practice did not always mesh . "Speaking in psychological terms," they allowed, "it is true that many farmers think of themselves as capitalists."[1] The W.P.A. was not alone in its failure to resolve this conundrum of farmers' ambiguous class position. Neither the farmers themselves nor the historians who have written about them since have adequately explained the full complexity of these events.

This thesis examines the Wisconsin milk strikes of 1933 as a way of exploring the problems with traditional Marxist class distinction in the discussion of twentieth-century agriculture. The fragmentation of the historical profession into ever-shrinking and ever-multiplying sub-fields such as economic history, business history, agricultural history, political history, and labor history has a cost. Some topics that lie on the periphery of several of these fields can elude the grasp of all. I argue that these Depression-era dairy strikes

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[1] Federal Works Agency Work Projects Administration—Professional and Service Division Report, *Farmer-Urban Worker Relations*, August 1940, p. 21. Found in the Farmers Educational and Co-operative Union of America records, Box 142, Folder 8, State Historical Society of Wisconsin, Madison, Wisconsin.

demonstrate how the economic position of twentieth-century small farmers remains such a topic.

The thoughts and actions of dairy farmers, their supporters, and their opponents during these strikes brought together a number of interesting forces at an historically critical juncture. Dairy farmers in the 1930s participated in an agricultural economy which, like the American economy generally, had fitfully evolved into a highly industrialized process. Rural Americans still comprised almost exactly fifty percent of the population, but agriculture's importance to the nation's economy ebbed as urban industries and population continued to swell. By looking at how rural farmers in the throes of industrialization fended for themselves in an increasingly global economy, this thesis seeks to illuminate broader aspects of economic and political history.

Casual observers, economists, and historians often explicitly or implicitly draw a neat theoretical division of the world into the opposing camps of labor and capital, a categorization that quickly proves untenable in the context of this story. In this series of strikes, farmers framed their troubles squarely within a conservative understanding of the nation's economy. That is to say, their rhetoric implicitly and explicitly acknowledged and sanctioned the particular distribution of economic resources that prevailed at the time. While such rhetoric may have challenged particular contours of the economic landscape, it did not challenge the legitimacy of the general system through which capital was acquired and used. But the rhetoric that strikers used to garner support both from fellow farmers and from non-farming citizens directly contradicted their very actions. Borrowing heavily from the

tactics of organized labor, striking farmers displayed with their actions a skeptical, and even a potentially radical, attitude toward the legitimacy of capital. For those actions challenged the legitimacy of such a system of capital and did so outside of the formal avenues for political change—outside the electoral process, state legislature, and municipal governance. Such actions qualify as radical, I argue, when they either forcibly redistributed economic power accumulated through sanctioned methods, or when they denied capital its legal function.[2]

The first two chapters of this work set the stage for my analysis. Chapter one lays out in more detail the research questions that this thesis addresses. It also addresses some of the historiographical and sociological literature relevant to these strikes. The second chapter describes the general political and economic circumstances of the period both across the

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[2] Examples of forcible redistribution include penny auctions and foreclosure blockages, which I shall describe in detail below. Challenges to the legal use of capital consist primarily of the forcible withdrawal of products from the market by striking farmers, but include also the sabotaging of vehicles and milk processing plants.

On another level, of course, such definitions fly in the face of my general argument, which after all seeks to break down the distinctions between the labels of capital and labor. One could just as easily argue for the futility of making distinctions between conservative and radical. And I would likely find such arguments persuasive. Nevertheless, for the purposes of this work, I will stick to such definitions because they help to illustrate the bankruptcy of a more commonly held set of ideological notions.

For a much more comprehensive effort to do something similar with distinctions between political liberalism and economic liberalism, see Colleen Dunlavy, *Politics and Industrialization: Early Railroads in the United States and Prussia* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994).

My primary argument is, I realize, an essentially negative argument about how various approaches fail to explain this set of events. I argue against the application of the "modern" Marxist category of class in the specific case of agriculture and only suggest the possibility of another categorization scheme. But this work does, I hope, point toward potential viable avenues through which economic categories can be reconsidered and historicized.

nation in general and for Wisconsin in particular; it also sketches the main events of the three strikes as a way to familiarize the reader with the chronology. This summary stresses the similarities among the three episodes, similarities which explain why I have chosen to tell this story thematically rather than chronologically.

Against this background, chapter three explores the apparent disparity between the rhetoric and the actions of Milk Pool members. Farmers talked about their struggles in a way that identified themselves with small capitalists, and I argue that dairy farmers did indeed face a multitude of capital-related problems. At the same time, however, dairy farmer actions during the strikes closely mirrored those of industrial labor unions. When they sold their work product, I argue, dairy farmers faced the same set of market imbalances that unskilled and semi-skilled urban laborers confronted.

The fourth and final chapter lays out a more complete explanation for this disjuncture between rhetoric and action by exploring an array of evidence that dairy farmers functioned simultaneously as both labor and capital. One key to unlocking this puzzle can be found in some of the strikers' more ambiguous comments, as they failed to articulate a clear ideology when pressed to consider certain contradictions. Another key can be found in examining the responses of law enforcement officials, who diverged dramatically in their responses to the strike. Taken together, farmer rhetoric, farmer actions, and law enforcement responses reveal the full complexity of the milk strikes and suggest the bankruptcy of applying to small-scale agriculture a rigid, and I suggest ahistorical, template that divides history's actors into labor, capital, and petty bourgeoisie.

A number of different academic fields and disciplines inform this inquiry into farmers' economic position and identity in the 1930s. The topic touches several areas of study: the mass farmer movement involves agricultural and social history, farmer actions and organization include labor, business, and economic history, and farmers' ambiguous economic classification concerns sociology, particularly rural sociology. Each of these sub-disciplines contributes to our understanding of this organized mass-movement. In turn, this study suggests a number of possible avenues through which each of these disciplines might sharpen and deepen future analytical efforts.

Sociologists have done the most rigorous work in terms of analyzing the class position of different economic groups. Most Marxist theoreticians classify economic actors in three categories—workers, capitalists, and petty bourgeoisie—although they may argue over where particular groups of individuals should be placed. Erik Wright challenged such rigid classification by suggesting that many individuals' class position is considerably more ambiguous. Wright suggested that many people's positions in the class structure have a "contradictory character." Such positions combine elements of more than one Marxist categories. For instance, engineers share workers' relationship to the means of production but may enjoy the managerial oversight functions and lack of supervision of capitalists. Wright goes so far as to suggest that as much as fifty percent of the population currently occupies contradictory positions, a claim that destabilizes the rigid boundaries of traditional class distinctions.[3]

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[3] Erik Olin Wright, "Varieties of Marxist Conceptions of Class Structure,"

In the years since Wright's seminal writings, other sociologists have explored the application of his analysis to the position of small farmers. Rural sociologist Patrick Mooney explores Midwestern farmers' class position, paying particular attention to small farmers who produce single capital-intensive commodities. He suggests that sociologists and historians have overlooked such farmers in their discussion of rural workers by focusing exclusively on hired laborers. As the scale of agricultural processing and distribution expanded, Mooney argues, larger corporate institutions acquired sufficient market leverage to strip small farmers of their surplus value. The concurrent trend toward greater capital demands of modern agriculture have forced farmers to invest vast sums of money in order to compete. The increasing farmer reliance on credit to finance such expenditures gave creditors greater control over the labor, investment, and production strategies of individual farmers. Mooney concludes that twentieth-century farmers have moved simultaneously toward both of the Marxist categories of labor and capital, into a hybrid economic position consistent with Wright's "contradictory character."[4] Through his work on tobacco farming during the New Deal, sociologist Gary Green further criticizes the traditional three-class categorization. Building on both Wright's and Mooney's work, Green argues that traditional

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UW-Madison Institute for Research on Poverty Discussion Paper #524, August 1978; Idem, "The Labor Theory of Value and Class Analysis," UW-Madison Institute for Research on Poverty Discussion Paper #649, January 1981; Erik Olin Wright et al., *The Debate on Classes* (New York: Verso, 1989).

[4] Patrick Mooney, "Toward a Class Analysis of Midwestern Agriculture," *Rural Sociology* 48 (Winter 1983): 563-584. Unfortunately, Mooney's later book does not explore this issue as its central theme, and instead skims the surface of the economics behind farmer movement ideology. Patrick H. Mooney and Theo J. Majka, *Farmers' and Farm Workers' Movements: Social Protest in American Agriculture* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1995).

Marxist categorization has been ahistorical, that scholars have simply applied a inflexible template to events and struggles which in fact suggest greater complexity.[5]

Like their sociology counterparts, earlier historians of agricultural economic movements have been less than successful at teasing out the complex relationships between economic particulars and the shape and character of farmer movements. The main body of literature analyzing such movements is that of late nineteenth-century Populism. In his Pulitzer Prize-winning *The Age of Reform*, Richard Hofstadter suggested that Populists worried primarily about their loss of status in an increasingly urban and industrialized nation. Partly due to this psychological trauma, Populists' belief in a bond between farmers and urban laborers eroded around the turn of the century. Farmers became more conservative, which Hofstadter demonstrated by pointing to a "rapid decline of the traditional identification with all laboring men [and] the growing tendency of substantial farmers to think of themselves as businessmen and employers."[6] Lawrence Goodwyn rebutted this argument in *Democratic Promise*, suggesting that Hofstadter and other historians had failed to grapple with the elements of Populism that represented a legitimate intellectual movement. In Goodwyn's formulation, Populists—particularly The People's Party—pursued fundamental

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[5] Gary Green, "Class and Class Interests in Agriculture: Support for New Deal Farm Programs Among Tobacco Producers," *The Sociological Quarterly* 28 (4): 559-574.

[6] Richard Hofstadter, *The Age of Reform* (New York: Vintage Books, 1955): 121. An interesting, though not historically-grounded counterpart to this analysis is Walter W. Wilcox's *Social Responsibility in Farm Leadership: An Analysis of Farm Problems and Farm Leadership in Action* (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1956). Wilcox examines questions of equity in farming, focusing in particular on farmers' relationship with hired laborers and farm leaders' ability to successfully

reforms in the nation's economic system. The narrow-minded movement of nativists and anti-Semites, he argues, did not represent the views of the majority of organized farmers.[7]

Both interpretations inform our understanding of farmer economic movements but fail to explore the variety within such movements. Striking farmers did, as Hofstadter suggests, lean heavily on the notion that farmers were the preeminent economic actors because they fed the nation—a Jeffersonian ideal that farmers themselves knew to be decreasingly true as the nation's percentage of farmers dwindled and global food markets expanded.[8] And as Goodwyn notes, cooperative organizations also represented an egalitarian reform, a type of economic organization that challenged the anti-democratic tendency of capitalism to consolidate economic and political power in the hands of relatively few individuals on the basis of their ownership and not their citizenship. But both pay relatively little attention to regional differences in Populism. After all, Western ranchers, Southern sharecroppers, plains states grangers, and Midwestern dairy farmers each faced vastly different economic equations. These historians describe fairly monolithic versions of Populism that suggest a homogeneity to farmer economic position and ideological motivation that historians since have viewed skeptically.

Several historians of agriculture have chipped away at this Populist monolith, suggesting a wider variety of both economic position and ideological orientation of the

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[7] Lawrence Goodwyn, *Democratic Promise: The Populist Moment in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976). Among the works Goodwyn singles out as misrepresentative of the "true" nature of Populism are Richard Hofstadter's aforementioned *The Age of Reform* and Norman Pollack's *The Popular Response to Industrial America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1962).

[8] Hofstadter, *The Age of Reform*, pp. 7-8.

movement's participants.[9] James Green's work on Populism in the Southwest suggests an authentic alliance among agricultural laborers, sharecroppers, poor farmers, and timber workers.[10] Robert McMath, Jr. suggests a slightly different interpretation in *American Populism: A Social History, 1877-1898.* McMath argues that while Populists did incorporate early nineteenth-century arguments of anti-monopolism and "producerism," different social institutions undergirded and informed much of the Populist program. Concepts like "producerism" were present throughout nineteenth-century, but the Populist alliance—particularly the People's Party—struggled to keep wage laborers and farmers under the same tent through "Greenback" policy and not by fostering a proletarian class consciousness. McMath argues, however, that Progressives and New Dealers broke substantially with Populists when they generally accepted the preponderant role of corporations.[11]

McMath's discussion of "producerist" ideology in the late-nineteenth-century Populist movement suggests that we delve further into this alternative economic vision. Victoria Hattam, in her research on the early-nineteenth-century origins of "producerism," looks at what she calls the producer's alliance of the 1820s and 1830s. She describes its composition as primarily master craftsmen and small manufacturers who sought to curb monopolies and

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[9] For a very specific two-part example of this same historiographical trend, see Sheldon Hackney's work on the Populist legacy in Alabama and Samuel Webb's corrective case study of an individual county's economic and political development. Sheldon Hackney, *Populism to Progressivism in Alabama* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1969); Samuel L. Webb, "From Independents to Populists to Progressive Republicans: The Case of Chilton County, Alabama, 1880-1920," *Journal of Southern History* 59 (November 1993): 707-736.

[10] James Green, *Grass-Roots Socialism: Radical Movements in the Southwest, 1895-1943* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1978).

[11] Robert C. McMath, Jr., *American Populism: A Social History, 1877-1898* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1993). See especially pp. 7-17, 45-53, 61-65, 151-153, 209-210. Also helpful was McMath's bibliographic essay on Populist historiography, pp. 213-231.

what they called the "fictitious capital" of bankers and speculators. While the alliance nominally included farmers in its list of the nation's producers, farmers in fact played little active political or ideological role. Moreover, producer ideology excluded wage laborers and instead promoted propertied independence. It seems, then, that striking Depression-era dairy farmers were not parroting either their century-old producer alliance counterparts or their Populist forefathers. While they may have adopted elements of the earlier philosophies—like appeals for credit reform and anti-monopolism—they also pursued alliances with wage workers and fought milk industry players who would have been considered producer allies in the earlier formulations. Encouraging projects like this one, Hattam suggests that "hard-and-fast" divisions between subjective and objective definitions of class have served historians poorly. Only by historicizing both the economic conditions and the interpretative framework of participants can historians begin to understand both the motivations and actions of historical actors.[12] Her analysis suggests that when historians see contradictory behavior along class lines, it may be the rigid definitions of class and ideology that do not make sense.

A number of labor historians suggest ways to describe historical actors when their rhetoric fails to comport with their actions.[13] Lizabeth Cohen notes a similar disjuncture

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[12] Victoria Hattam, *Labor Visions and State Power: The Origins of Business Unionism in the United States* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993). See especially pages 87, 93-101, 109, 204-208. Hattam's conclusion that the alliance of producers did not substantially include wage workers is confirmed by McMath's discussion of early Populists, who both argue drew heavily on producerist ideology. See McMath, *American Populism*, p. 70-73.

[13] Unfortunately, most labor historians who look at agriculture neglect small farmers in favor of agricultural laborers and tenant farmers. For a sampling of such works, see Rene Perez Rosenbaum "Unionization of Tomato Field Workers in Northwest Ohio, 1967-1969,"

between rhetoric and action in the struggles of Chicago's Communist Unemployed Councils and Socialist Workers' Committee on Unemployment during Great Depression. She suggests that their radical rhetoric hid actions that sought merely to involve the federal government in labor reforms—that radicals pursued and achieved significant, but not radical, reforms.[14] In his book on the unionization of electrical workers, Ronald Schatz makes a more subtle argument about classifying combinations of rhetoric and actions. He uses "militant" to describe the actions of strikers willing to act desperately in pursuit of conservative results; he uses "radical" to describe those strikers who were ideologically opposed to capitalism, regardless of their actions.[15] Such a distinction works less well for the purposes of this study, however, for Schatz has two competing unions with clearly defined differences, whereas all striking farmers in Wisconsin congregated in a single organization. Nevertheless, his classifications provide a potentially helpful model. Of the two labels, "militant" seems to best apply to the actions of striking dairy farmers, but this study will no make use of it. Schatz's formulation turns on the relationship between strikers' means and ends in a case where the actions pursued and the ideas advanced are not in contradiction, whereas this study explores the overt contradictions between ideological rhetoric and direct economic action.[16]

Labor History 35 (Summer 1994): 329-344; Dennis Nodín Valdés *"Al Norte: Agrricultural Workers in the Great Lakes Region, 1917-1970* (Austin, TX: University of Texas, 1991); Idem, "Formation of an Agricultural Proletariat in the Midwest, 1897-1930," *Labor History* 30 (Fall 1989): 536-562; Frederick A. Bode and Donald E. Ginter, *Farm Tenancy and the Census in Antebellum Georgia* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1987); James Green, *World of the Worker* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1980).

[14] Lizabeth Cohen, *Making a New Deal: Industrial Workers in Chicago, 1919-1939* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990), pp. 251-253.

[15] Ronald W. Schatz, *The Electrical Workers: A History of Labor at General Electric and Westinghouse, 1923-60* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1983).

[16] One could still argue that I could transplant and grow the meaning of Schatz's

These various attempts inform our current understanding of economic classification, the character and legacy Populism, and definitions of labor, but this study seeks to improve such understanding by deepening our grasp of the specific economic problems that early twentieth-century small farmers faced. It suggests that historians, like Wright and Mooney, should expand the traditional Marxist understanding of class to include new possibilities and even new categories. My study, while far from conclusive, suggests that Mooney is essentially correct in his limited formulation of single-commodity producers moving simultaneously toward both capital and labor. More broadly, I argue the milk strikes force us to discard rigid and ahistorical classification templates in order to understand the complexities of historical motivations and actions.

Furthermore, this study suggests that Wisconsin dairy farmers implicitly recognized the bankruptcy of such categorizations and may have struggled to articulate a different economic vision. Striking farmers used the terms "labor" and "capital" repeatedly in their descriptions of both their economic plight and their political vision, but they chafed at the inflexibility of such categories. And despite strong Populist and Grange legacies, Wisconsin farmers did not revert to nineteenth-century economic notions of producer and non-producer classes. Instead, farmers both asserted the rights of small capital and formed alliances with

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"militant" label to describe tension between farmer actions and rhetoric. This would not, I think, contribute productively to my study. It would cloud the value of Schatz's analysis for describing an aggressively-pursued conservative agenda and would obscure the fact that farmers in these strikes seemed confused about how to position their actions and their words. If his division between "militant" and "radical" were used to describe potential divisions among striking farmers, it would just supplant the original formulation of labor-capital with an equally interesting and equally troublesome militant-radical question. The essential problem of contradiction would remain.

wage workers. This combination of actions, along with their increased reliance on cooperatives as a means of organizing small producers, suggest a considerably more subtle critique of the anti-democratic potential of large-scale capitalism. Alliances with urban workers and rejection of the larger "productive" firms involved in processing and manufacturing dairy products seem to signal a decidedly different economic world-view than either the nineteenth-century producer model or the Populist agrarian ideal. At the same time, farmer ideology stopped well short of parroting a modern labor-capital economic model. If those models fail us, what should the new model look like? This study is of neither the scope nor the depth to lay out definitive plans for how such a model should be constructed. But by demonstrating the ways in which farmer actions and rhetoric suggest such a fresh interpretation, I hope to point the way toward a potential new formulation of the relationship between economics and ideology among small farmers.[17]

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[17] The tiny literature that addresses these specific milk strikes remains both consistently thin and occasionally misleading. See Herbert Jacobs, "The Wisconsin Milk Strikes," *Wisconsin Magazine of History* 35 (August 1951): 30-35; A. William Hoglund, "Wisconsin Dairy Farmers on Strike," *Agricultural History* 35 (January 1961): 24-34; Paul Glad, *The History of Wisconsin*, vol. 5: *War, A New Era, and Depression, 1914-1940*. (Madison, Wis.: State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 1990), pp. 412-419.

Chapter 2: Background

I. Dairying in Wisconsin

Wisconsin was not always the "dairy state." Agriculture had begun in Wisconsin primarily to supply the state's mining and timber operations with food. During the middle decades of the nineteenth century, the state's farmers produced primarily wheat. Dairy was produced almost exclusively for on-farm consumption. Three main factors contributed to the demise of wheat and the ascendance of dairy. Wisconsin's mediocre soil proved inadequate for sustained wheat farming. A wheat price depression in 1858-1859 pushed farmers into exploring other commodities, primarily dairy. And the arrival of the railroad and an expanded dairy export market made distant cheese markets both accessible and profitable for Wisconsin farmers. By 1890, reports historian Eric Lampard, "wheat had almost disappeared, over 1000 cheese and butter factories dotted the state, with physical investments of roughly $1.8M." By the 1920s, advances in dairy technology such as the cream separator, pasteurization, and the reliable butterfat tester teamed with rapidly expanding transportation networks to enable a truly industrial dairy industry, one that topped the state's list of manufacturing business.[18]

Those same trends which made dairy farming possible—technology and transportation—changed farmers' relationship with consumers. Railroads increased the importance of fixed plants en route and established networks to supply those plants. Dairy

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[18] Eric E. Lampard, *The Rise of the Dairy Industry in Wisconsin: A Study in Agricultural Change* (Madison, Wis.: The State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 1963), pp. 7, 23, 83-84, 91-99, 109, 115, 142-143, 190-212, 291-292.

plants themselves became much more expensive, far beyond the means of individual farmers. By 1920, six large corporations controlled one-third of the nation's butter production. By the 1930s, two-thirds of the state's cheese moved along the tightly integrated channels of dairy corporations and meat packers to the eventual consumers.[19]

Other case studies confirm this trend. Oliver Heintzelman's study of changes in the dairy economy of Tillamook County, Oregon, found that trucks and trains replaced the horse and buggy in the early twentieth century. As that evolution took place and great distances became smaller obstacles, many local processing plants and condenseries closed down even as the milk trade continued to expand. In 1919, twenty-five plants handled 53.5 million pounds of milk per year; by 1956, the ten remaining plants handled 96.7 million pounds per year. Patrick Nunnally found much the same result in Iowa; on-farm production gave way to a creamery system controlled largely by a few large corporations. Even dairy farmers themselves began to purchase butter from stores, since it was more profitable to sell all of their raw materials to the local creamery and buy the finished product back.[20]

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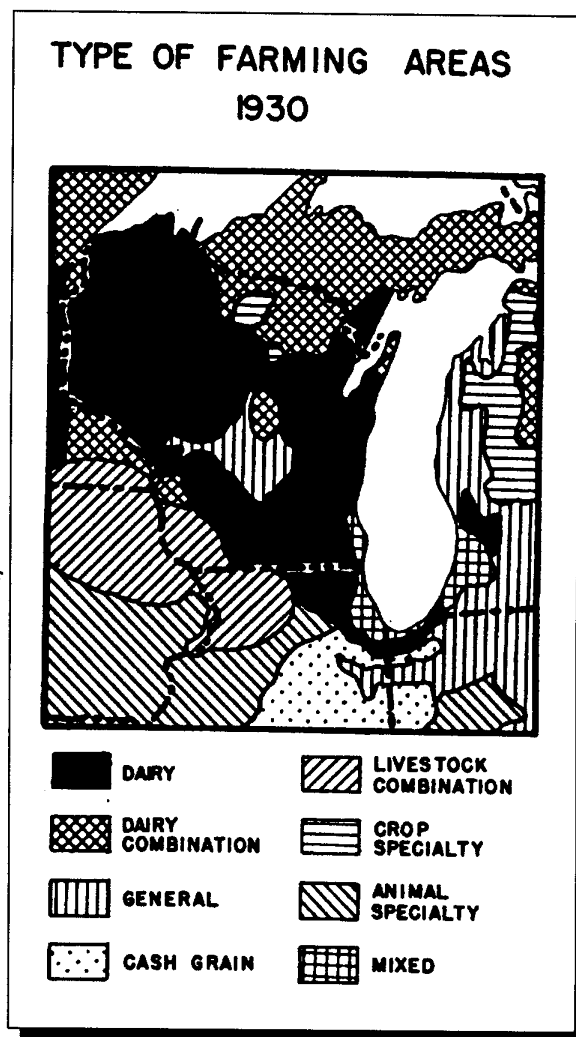
[19] Lampard, *The Rise of the Dairy Industry in Wisconsin: A Study in Agricultural Change*, pp. 311, 319-321. Any history of the milk industry's structure would require considerable attention to its biggest player, Borden, which owned a majority of the condenseries in the state at the time of the strike. Unfortunately, so thin is the available literature about Borden that it consists of works such as a history of the canning industry written by magnates and pamphlets from Borden itself. These histories characterize inaccurately the structure of the dairy industry and the relationship between corporate processors and farmers. Needless to say, a good history of Borden still needs to be written.

[20] Oliver H. Heintzelman, "The Evolution of an Industry: The Dairy Economy of Tillamook County, Oregon," *Pacific Northwest Quarterly* 49 (Spring 1958): 77-81; Patrick Nunnally, "From Churns to 'Butter Factories': The Industrialization of Iowa's Dairying, 1860-1900," *Annals of Iowa* 49 (1989): 555-569.

But farmers were finding business profitable, and dairying spread throughout the state. Wisconsin's vast milk supply was gathered by both trucks and trains and processed into butter, cheese, cream, and fluid milk. By the early 1930s, the state produced a majority of the nation's cheese. Virtually every area of the state depended substantially upon dairy production, and by 1933 dairy accounted for over half of total farm income.[21]



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[21] For a rough breakdown of milk use by product, see "Butter, Cheese Price Rise Boosts Milk Checks 4 Thousands of Farmers," *Capital Times* (Madison, WI), 22 April 1933, p. 1. A more complete breakdown of all milk production by region, creamery, product, etc. can be found in Wisconsin. Wisconsin Department of Agriculture and Markets—Dairy and Food Division, *Dairy Statistics for Wisconsin for the Year 1932* (Madison, Wis., 1934), pp. 1-3, 6.

National Cheese Institute report, *Cheese Manufacturing by States, 1932-33* (Plymouth, Wis., 1935), p. unknown. Document found in the Wisconsin Cooperative Milk Pool Records, State Historical Society of Wisconsin, Madison, Wisconsin, Box 3, Folder 3 (hereafter, WCMP Records). For information on farm income and the relative position of dairy in the state's agricultural income for previous decades, see "Livestock Accounts for Five-Sixths of State Income," *Marshfield* (Wis.) *Journal*, 16 February 1933, p. 2.

[22] Loyal Durand Jr., "Dairy Region of Southeastern Wisconsin and Northeastern Illinois," *Economic Geography* 16 (October 1940): 416.

Spread across the state, Wisconsin farmers were losing market power when compared to the companies that bought, shipped, and processed their milk. Dairy farms were not huge agribusinesses with thousands of cattle. E. Melanie DuPuis's study of the development of the milk industry suggests that the average farm's herd remained at between fifteen and nineteen cows in most counties, and only twenty-five to forty-nine cows in the counties with the largest farms.[23] When the price depression hit the state dairy industry, there was little question who would fare most poorly.

I. January 1933

By the beginning of 1933, American agriculture had reached what would be its twentieth-century nadir. Farmers across the nation struggled to make ends meet while retaining their land. Agricultural prices had fallen slowly since the end of World War I, but the decline since 1929 had been precipitous. An article in the *Milwaukee Leader* in late 1932 estimated that American farmers had lost over $14 billion in the preceding three years. Farm debt, already a growing problem in the 1920s, had reached epidemic proportions by the early 1930s. By the end of 1932, one-half the nation's farmers were reportedly renting, and the other half was, in the words of one journalist, "groaning under a mortgage indebtedness . . . the interest on which alone exceeds the value of the present wheat and cotton crops." As one despondent man said, "the American farmer has worked for nothing and paid for the privilege of doing so during 1932."[24]

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[23] E. Melanie DuPuis, "Sub-National State Institutions and the Organization of Agricultural Resource Use: the Case of the Dairy Industry," *Rural Sociology* 58 (1993): 452-453.

[24] "Stop the Waste of Unemployment," *Milwaukee Leader*, 23 December 1932, p.

The problems that farmers confronted mirrored those that faced most American workers, and many farmers, like workers, turned to collective action to fend off bankruptcy and foreclosure. As wages and prices spiraled lower and lower, newspapers were filled with stories of labor organizing, industrial strikes, and new cooperative farming ventures.[25] Indeed, agricultural cooperatives were never as numerous as during the early years of the Great Depression. By 1930, roughly 12,000 co-ops with over three million members dotted the countryside. Not all actions were peaceful, however. Upset with the way banks sometimes treated their neighbors, some farmers joined together informally to halt farm auctions and foreclosures, sometimes by simply refusing to let local authorities evict delinquent farmers and occasionally by forcibly removing potential bidders from auctions in order to buy back farms and supplies for mere pennies. So close to the brink were most

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unknown. Portion of the newspaper was found in the Farmers Educational and Co-operative Union of America records, Box 79, Folder 6, State Historical Society of Wisconsin, Madison, Wisconsin; "A New Deal Needed," *Milwaukee Leader*, 26 October 1932, p. unknown. Found in the Farmers Educational and Co-operative Union of America records, Box 79, Folder 6, State Historical Society of Wisconsin, Madison, Wisconsin; "Official Figures Tell of Ruin of Farmers," *Unattributed newspaper clipping*, 29 November 1932, p. unknown. Found in the Farmers Educational and Co-operative Union of America records, Box 79, Folder 6, State Historical Society of Wisconsin, Madison, Wisconsin.

[25] For a contemporary outline of the various strikes going on in summer months of 1933, see "3,000 Striking Miners Storm Carnegie Plant," *Capital Times* (Madison, WI), 29 September 1933, p. 1. By July of 1933, worker-days lost to strikes reached 1,375,000 in Wisconsin alone—more than double the time lost in any previous month of that year. Glad, *The History of Wisconsin*, vol. 5, p. 426. For farmers forming livestock shipping co-ops, see "Farmers Plan to Ship Stock Through Association," *Green Bay Press-Gazette*, 12 January 1933, p. 9. For letter about shipping calves, see W. A. Velmen, "People's Forum," *Green Bay Press-Gazette*, 2 February 1933, p. 6. For coverage of Chicago labor unions in particular, see Cohen, *Making a New Deal: Industrial Workers in Chicago, 1919-1939.*

farmers that one leader warned in January 1933 of "the biggest and finest crop of revolutions you ever saw. . . sprouting all over this country right now."[26]

At the same time, however, many Americans also found at least one reason for hope. Franklin Delano Roosevelt awaited his March inaugural while an expectant nation awaited the promised flurry of legislative relief. Many farm leaders pledged a 100-day halt to their economic agitation as a window of opportunity during which Congress and the president could enact substantive farm relief. Congressmen pushed for regional financial support for their farming constituents, and many raced to propose more generous commodity-specific amendments to the farm bill.[27]

The economic crisis in the dairy state of Wisconsin closely paralleled that of the nation. Like most commodity prices, steady milk prices of the 1920s began to erode during the Depression. One report traced milk prices paid by Wisconsin creameries, condenseries and cheese factories from 1910 through 1941. Farmers received roughly $2.50 per hundredweight during World War I. Prices gradually declined in the 1920s, holding relatively steady between $1.60 and $2.30 per 100 pounds. After 1929, prices simply collapsed. By 1932, all three types of processors paid less than $1 per hundredweight on average. By 1933, only condensery prices had bounced back over $1.00. The late 1930s

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[26] Gene Ingalsbe and Frank Groves, "Historical Development," in *Cooperatives in Agriculture,* ed. David W. Cobia (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1989), p. 118; "Postpone Sale by Sheriff of Widow's Farm," *Green Bay Press-Gazette*, 9 January 1933, p. 1. See also "Holiday Members Force Dime Auction on Leader," *Milwaukee Journal*, 18 January 1933, p. 1; "Revolution of Farmers Near, Is Warning Given U.S. Senate," *Milwaukee Journal*, 25 January 1933, p. 1.

[27] For an example of such proposals, see "Dairy Farmers Would Benefit by Proposed Andreson Amendment," *Green Bay Press-Gazette*, 10 January 1933, p. 1.

brought only a gradual recovery. The swing in some of Wisconsin's regional milk prices was even more pronounced. By 1933, northern Wisconsin condenseries which had been paying more than $2.00 per hundred pounds of milk in the years just after World War I paid as little as 63 cents per hundred pounds of milk.[28]

Downwardly spiraling prices left all involved wondering about declining profit margins—or growing debt margins. A survey by the Agricultural Economics Bureau charted the decline in farm values in Wisconsin from an average of $81.62 per acre in 1930 to only $72 in 1932. The twin scourges of burgeoning debt and depreciating land holdings left more than sixty percent of farms mortgaged and carrying an average debt of $52.50 per acre. A *Milwaukee Journal* headline said it all: "Wisconsin's Farm Debt the Heaviest in Country." Farmer debt troubles translated into bank debt troubles. One farmer described the situation this way: "The banks were going broke . . . they had $50 mortgages on $20 cows." Landless farm workers fared poorly as well. The Wisconsin Department of Agriculture estimated that

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[28] "Hundredweight," used hereafter, means one hundred pounds of milk. The price per hundredweight refers simply to the price paid per one hundred pounds of fluid milk, usually adjusted to reflect a standard cream content. A slightly higher price might be paid for one hundred pounds with higher cream content. Likewise, a less rich batch would likely fetch a slightly lower price.

Wisconsin Department of Agriculture, *Wisconsin Dairy Statistics: Crop Reporting Service Supplement No. 1 to Bulletin No. 200* (Madison, Wis., 1942), p. 17; "Another Milk Order is Near," *Milwaukee Journal*, 3 February 1933, p. 6. Prices generally improved closer to urban areas, but even the Waupun condensery was paying only $1.00 per hundredweight. See "Milk Prices Remains (sic) $1 per 100 Pounds," *Waupun* (Wis.) *Leader-News*, 5 January 1933, p. 1. For yet another account of average milk prices between 1910 and September of 1933, see Wisconsin. Wisconsin Department of Agriculture and Markets—Dairy and Food Division, *Dairy Statistics for Wisconsin for the Year 1932*, p. 8.

for 1932 the supply of farm labor ran 135 percent of normal, while demand had slid to just 59 percent of normal.[29]

In 1932, during the worst year of the Depression for dairy prices, farmers formed the Wisconsin Cooperative Milk Pool (WCMP) in an attempt to win higher fluid milk prices.[30] Concerned about the plunging price of milk, dairy farmers sought additional revenue from two sources: higher milk prices from consumers, and higher negotiated prices from milk distributors and processors. Distributors and processors held substantial market advantages when bargaining with farmers, and co-op members hoped that by gathering thousands of farmers under one bargaining organization, they could achieve a level of market power that no individual farmer could possibly command. One farmer calculated that the going rate paid to farmers translated into three cents per quart of milk compared with a consumer price of about eight cents. This left a difference of about $2.32 per hundredweight. "The milkmen [distributors and processors] have kept that in the dark, under their hats," he said, "if they have any."[31]

Centered in the Fox River Valley, the new membership quickly elected Walter Singler as its president. Singler, a huge ex-Texan with a booming voice, stylish goatee, and

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[29] "Wisconsin's Farm Debt the Heaviest in Country," *Milwaukee Journal*, 22 January 1933, p. 1; Interview with Harvey Dueholm by Dale E. Trelevan, *Wisconsin Agriculturalists Oral History Project*, State Historical Society of Wisconsin, Madison, Wisconsin, Interview held on 19 December 1978, Audiocassette, Tape 14, Side 1 (hereafter, Dueholm interviews); "Daily Farm Wages in Wisconsin are Lowest in Years," *Green Bay Press-Gazette*, 27 January 1933, p. 12.

[30] For a description of one of the WCMP's less successful immediate predecessors, the Central Co-operative association, see Hoglund, "Wisconsin Dairy Farmers on Strike," p. 26; Glad, *The History of Wisconsin*, vol. 5, pp. 411-412.

[31] Capt. H. M. Boyce, "From the People," *Milwaukee Journal*, 15 February 1933, p. 8.

trademark ten-gallon hat, had been one of the driving forces behind the formation of the cooperative as a highly successful organizer. Farmers flocked to the WCMP. In the seven months after its formation, the pool grew from a few hundred members to perhaps 50,000. Enthusiasm ran so high that the main office secretary continually ran out of the printed by-laws she mailed to new members and inquisitive parties. One man explained farmer interest very simply: "Our main concern was, how are we gonna be able to get a little more money for our stuff."[32]

Many Wisconsin residents sought to improve their economic situation by electing new state leaders, but the resulting myriad of parties and factions made legislative solutions difficult at best. In the fall elections of 1932, Wisconsin voters broke with nearly 80 years of Republican-dominated state government and elected a Democratic candidate, Albert Schmedeman, to stave off its economic collapse. Candidate Schmedeman had pledged strong support for urban laborers and farmers alike and reaffirmed this commitment in his January 1933 inaugural speech to the state legislature. But the state's political landscape had numerous fissures. Stalwart Republicans fended off the highly-successful advance of

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[32] Interview with Milo K. Swanton by Dale E. Trelevan, *Wisconsin Agriculturalists Oral History Project*, State Historical Society of Wisconsin, Madison, Wisconsin, Interview held on 21 March 1975, Audiocassette, Tape 7, Side 1 (hereafter, Swanton interview).

"Milk Embargo 95 Pct. Effective Here Today," *Green Bay Press-Gazette*, 21 February 1933, p. 12. This article describes the birth and growth of WCMP, from June 1932 to 50,000 members in February 1933. The numbers cannot be confirmed. Various estimates were floated by different WCMP officials before and during the strike, and the WCMP records only have thorough membership records after the period in question.

Ruth Brouchek, "Letter from Ms. Brouchek to Mr. Dries," 17 January 1933, WCMP Records, Box 2, Folder 2; Interview with Rangnar and Margaret Segerstrom by Dale E. Trelevan, *Wisconsin Agriculturalists Oral History Project*, State Historical Society of Wisconsin, Madison, Wisconsin, Interview held on 29 September 1976, Audiocassette, Tape 3, Side 1.

Progressives, led by "Fighting Bob" LaFollette's two sons. Democrats, while not openly splintered, still waged an internecine war between party liberals and long-time conservatives. In addition, some politicians broke away from each party and gathered under the banner of "Conservatives," though they lacked a formal party structure to back them. Facing considerable partisan impediments to bold state initiatives, Schmedeman brought few substantive agricultural reforms to the legislature. Unable or unwilling to address dairy industry problems specifically, he eventually supported limited abatement of mortgage foreclosures until the legislature could fashion a relief bill. Whatever the political impediments, Schmedeman acknowledged the heavy toll that mortgages extracted from Wisconsin farmers. At the President's Conference of Governors in March of 1933, he quickly pointed to Wisconsin farmers' debt-to-value ratio, noting that it was the worst in the nation. Furthermore, Schmedeman claimed, Wisconsin's proportion of mortgaged farms exceeded that of every state but North Dakota.[33] Wisconsin farmers clearly had the attention of state politicians, but whether that attention could be channeled into efficacious policy-making remained very much an open question.

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[33] Glad, *The History of Wisconsin*, vol. 5, p. 399. The Democratic sweep was not limited to the executive office, as the Democrats took fifty-nine of the 100 assembly seats and added six senators to their previous total of one.

"Speech to WI Legislature," *Green Bay Press-Gazette*, 12 January 1933, p. 5; Glad, *The History of Wisconsin*, vol. 5, pp. 400-401, 405; Richard C. Haney, "The Rise of Wisconsin's New Democrats: A Political Realignment in the Mid-Twentieth Century," *Wisconsin Magazine of History* 58 (Winter 1974-1975): 92; "Governor Requests Judiciary to Hold Up Farm Judgments," *Green Bay Press-Gazette*, 13 January 1933, p. 1; Albert Schmedeman, "Wisconsin's Problems," in Wisconsin. *Presented by Governor Schmedeman at the President's Conference of Governors, 3/6/33* (Madison, Wis., 1933), p. 8.

II. The Strikes in Brief

Emboldened by their success at winning mortgage concessions but wary of the political improbability of greater legislative concessions, Wisconsin farmers pressed their agenda outside the political process. In January of 1933, just eight months after its formation, the Wisconsin Cooperative Milk Pool decided to withhold their commodity as a means of boosting fluid milk prices. State farmers eventually struck in February, May, and October of that year, and they used the constant threat of the strike in a year-long struggle to boost farm incomes.

The three milk strikes of 1933 followed roughly similar lines. Each was led in Wisconsin primarily by the Wisconsin Cooperative Milk Pool. Each sought some combination of measures to increase farmer income, principally through the negotiation of higher prices, and reduce debt load, typically through a combination of inflationary fiscal policies, debt write-offs, and mortgage foreclosure abatement.[34] During each strike and with almost metronome-like repetition, certain farm and non-farm groups supported the strikers while others opposed them. And in each strike, promises of non-violence from strike leaders were quickly broken by strikers themselves. Farmers manning the picket lines used any number of tactics to enforce the strike, including door-to-door organizing, threats, road blockades, clubs, kerosene, and even bombs. Yet, throughout each of the strikes, strikers pleaded their case with measured, moderate rhetoric. That is, they focused on righting economic wrongs by lodging limited complaints about specific imbalances of power in the

[34] "Predict Milk Strike Feb. 15 in Wisconsin," *Green Bay Press-Gazette*, 2 February 1933, p. 1; "U.S. to Act in State Farm Strike," *Capital Times* (Madison, Wis.), 13 April 1933, p. 1.

dairy market. With virtually no exceptions, that rhetoric did not call into question systems of property ownership, access to capital, the necessity of corporate involvement in agriculture, or the long-term accountability of the political economy. The details of farmer actions and farmer rhetoric will be explored in chapter three.

In desperate financial shape, WCMP members planned the first strike as simply a non-coercive withholding of products from the market, an idea shared by other Midwestern agricultural groups. The national Farmers Holiday association was promoting a similar agenda. Borrowing its name from the bank holidays when banks refused to disperse funds to their customers, the national Holiday association received most of its support from grain belt farmers. Nevertheless, the association and its leader, Milo Reno, pledged support for the strike. This recommendation strengthened the WCMP's position both because of the state's substantial Holiday association chapter and the widely-recognized membership overlap between the two organizations.[35] Just days before the strike began, however, the national

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[35] The state chapter of the national Farmers' Holiday Association was formed on September 2, 1932. For details about its formation, see R. Douglas Hurt, "Farmers at the Barricades," *Timeline* 7 (June-July, 1990): 25; Jacobs, "The Wisconsin Milk Strikes," p. 32. I never found any concrete assessment of the overlap between the Farmers Holiday association and the WCMP. Without exception, newspaper articles and organizational papers acknowledged that the overlap was significant, but no one seems to have known exactly how large it was. Furthermore, there seems to be very little organizational or ideological difference between the two groups—both has small hierarchies (board, director, minimal staff), both advocated withholding products, both pushed for cost of production (discussed later). I would like to have uncovered more to discuss about the relationship between these two groups, but the evidence I have uncovered suggests that such exploration would not be fruitful. For an account of the Farmers Holiday Association in areas more widely organized by the group, see Charles and Joyce Conrad, *50 Years: North Dakota Farmers Union* (1976), pp. 35-39.

Parenthetically, I should say that capitalization and punctuation of these various farm organizations varied considerably. The Farmers Holiday association was also the Farmers Holiday Association was also the Farmers' Holiday association. Likewise the Wisconsin

Holiday leadership withdrew its support, citing a desire to give Congress more time to resolve its agricultural legislation. This eleventh-hour reversal left the Milk Pool as the only major agricultural organization actively championing the strike.

Despite those daunting odds, the first strike succeeded in stemming the flow of milk in the state. As the strike opened on February 15, co-op leaders promised not to picket or blockade facilities for the first week of the strike. By the following morning, however, farmers began to blockade roads, bridges, and creameries in an attempt to shut down the flow of milk. Within days farmers had successfully stopped milk flow in some areas. In several central and north-central counties, farmers nearly unanimously withheld their milk, and relatively little violence was reported. Outagamie County reported that twenty factories had closed by February 16, and those which remained open were receiving only fifty-percent of the usual supply. By the morning of February 21, the *Green Bay Press-Gazette* reported "Less than five percent of the normal flow of milk into the city was coming through usual channels, as truck drivers refused to attempt running the blockade." In a few isolated cases, milk dealers granted farmers the price that they demanded: $1.40 per hundredweight. Those victories were hard won, however, as upper Fox River Valley conflicts left towns "virtually in a state of siege." As the second week of the strike began, strikers had sharply curtailed milk movement throughout the state. Milwaukee was receiving no shipments from the north and very few from the west. The Fox River Valley and central Wisconsin were almost completely shut down, and Madison area strikers had begun to dent the capital city's supply.[36]

Cooperative Milk Pool was often hyphenated as "Co-operative" and occasionally "Co-Operative."

[36] "Statewide Milk Strike Underway," *Marshfield* (Wis.) *Journal*, 16 February 1933, p.

The substantial population involved with dairying combined with the strike's impact on consumers quickly pushed farmer demands to the political forefront. All sides demanded action from the state: dairy farmers wanted state-mandated price increases, consumers wanted assurances that the milk supply would not dry up, non-striking dairy farmers wanted the state to keep the roads open, and condensery and processing plant owners wanted their plants safeguarded. Governor Schmedeman attempted to assuage the fears of the electorate even as he negotiated for an end to the strike. Despite the widespread success of the strike, when WCMP leaders reached a settlement agreement with Schmedeman after nine days of the strike, farmers achieved little of tangible value.[37] The WCMP's president, Walter Singler, insisted it had won the upper hand and that "this is not a peace but a truce." But the co-op actually sought a truce because it had failed to organize sufficiently in southern Wisconsin, leaving significant leaking points in the strike lines. Many creamery and condensery plants had operated at partial capacity, but most simply closed up shop and waited out the storm. Nearly all continued to pay low prices once they reopened. Even a WCMP board member

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1; "Strike Truce Halts Wisconsin Milk War," *Green Bay Press-Gazette*, 23 February 1933, p. 3; "Milk Strikers are Active in Outagamie Co.," *Green Bay Press-Gazette*, 16 February 1933, p. 1; "Farmers are Spilling Milk on Roadsides," *Green Bay Press-Gazette*, 17 February 1933, p. 1; "Milk Embargo 95 Pct. Effective Here Today," *Green Bay Press-Gazette*, 21 February 1933, p. 1; "Milk Strikers are Active in Outagamie Co.," *Green Bay Press-Gazette*, 16 February 1933, p. 1; "Strikers Dump Milk on Many County Roads Today," *Green Bay Press-Gazette*, 20 February 1933, p. 2; "Milk Moving as Truce is Called," *Appleton* (Wis.) *Post-Crescent*, 23 February 1933, p. 4.

[37] In fact, it is difficult to come up with anything that farmers won. The text of the agreement basically gives kudos at the farmers for prompting a "great moral awakening." It abdicates primary responsibility for economic solutions to the federal government and recommends only the appointment of another farm problem committee at the state level. For other portions of the agreement, see "Singler Agrees to Stop Strike, Report," *Milwaukee Journal*, 22 February 1933, p. 1.

admitted that the prices being paid to farmers at dairies, cheese factories, and condenseries did not change over the course of the strike. Members on the picket lines were so disgruntled with the surrender that deputies had to circulate copies of a telegram from state officials and Milk Pool leaders announcing the end of the strike before they would dismantle picket lines and allow traffic to flow freely.[38]

The second strike—which the WCMP characterized as a resumption of the strike—began in much the same way. The co-op pressed for farm relief on two fronts: increased income through a legislative guarantee that prices would at least cover farmers' cost of production, and debt relief through mortgage refinancing and inflation. Again, the national Farmers Holiday pledged to lead a larger multi-commodity strike in support of these commonly held goals. Again, Farmers Holiday pulled its support just before the strike began. Again, its leader cited cooperation with Congressional efforts as the reason for the reversal. The state government, anticipating further violence, pressed milk dealers to voluntarily close down distribution and processing plants to prevent clashes.[39]

Despite the fact that milk prices had risen slightly in the preceding weeks, the strike opened successfully on May 13 with one newspaper estimating that half the state's residents lived in areas which had been closed either voluntarily or by strike action. The state's plan to avoid violence quickly crumbled. In areas largely supportive of the strike, pickets stopped

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[38] "Singler Will Address Meet on Saturday," *Green Bay Press-Gazette*, 24 February 1933, p. 1; "Fred Bergelin Returns from Madison Today with Report on Negotiations," *Green Bay Press-Gazette*, 23 February 1933, p. 1; "Strike Truce Halts Wisconsin Milk War," *Green Bay Press-Gazette*, 23 February 1933, p. 3.

[39] "Name Farm Strike 'Minute Men'," *Capital Times* (Madison, Wis.), 12 April 1933, p. 1; "State May Close All Milk Outlets If Farmers Strike," *Capital Times* (Madison, Wis.), 5 May 1933, p. 1.

traffic and physically disrupted distribution. In areas that the state determined were unsupportive of the strike, attempts to re-open distribution and processing plants erupted into massive battles among farmers, dealers, guards hired to protect plants and trucks, and occasionally local police. Some communities deputized additional forces while the state deployed national guard troops. One observer described the scene near Mukwonago this way: "Battling with fists, clubs and riot sticks in the veritable cloud of tear gas, 400 angry farmers Sunday dumped 30,000 gallons of milk from six trucks in Walworth county."[40]

The resolution of the second strike reflected heightened tensions among farmers, milk dealers, processors and local and state law enforcement officials. Governor Schmedeman, upset with widespread violence across the state, announced beforehand that "unconditional surrender is the only proposal Wisconsin will accept to bring an end to the milk strike." To encourage such a surrender, the governor called out some 2000 state troops backed up by roughly 4000 civilian deputies.[41] But despite considerable success in stemming the flow of milk, farmers won little. The final agreement hammered out between state administration officials and WCMP leaders called only for the creation of another special committee by the governor, composed of three "practical farmers," at least one of whom would be a milk pool member. This committee was to be charged with exploring ways to work out what one

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[40] "Promise Free Food and Milk to Dane County Needy During Farm Strike," *Capital Times* (Madison, Wis.), 8 May 1933, p. 14; "Milk Supply for 1 1/2 Million Cut Off," *Capital Times* (Madison, Wis.), 13 May 1933, p. 1; "Farm Holiday Association May Rejoin Strike; Threaten to Bomb Deerfield Creamery," *Capital Times* (Madison, Wis.), 15 May 1933, p. 1. For another similar account of the violence, see "'Surrender!' State Strike Command," *Capital Times* (Madison, Wis.), 16 May 1933, p. 6.

[41] "'Surrender!' State Strike Command," *Capital Times* (Madison, Wis.), 16 May 1933, pp. 1, 6; "1 Killed, 3 Near Death in Milk Strike; Company G Ordered Out," *Capital Times* (Madison, Wis.), 18 May 1933, p. 1.

newspaper called "the muddled Wisconsin milk situation," a situation which it summarized this way:

> It is estimated to date that the milk strike has cost state, counties and farmers close to $1,000,000. Some 6,000 special deputies and troops were on duty during the greater part of the six day strike period, being paid at the rate of $4 and $5 each per day. Hundreds of gas bombs have been used to quell riots, costing from $7 to $10 each. Special clubs have been made by thousands, and transportation costs have been tremendous. Thousands of gallons of milk have been dumped, and many other thousands of gallons have spoiled on the farms. One man has been killed, two persons shot, two others suffered fractured skulls—and hundreds are suffering scratched scalps and bruises along with sickness resulting from gas.[42]

To no one's surprise, all sides claimed victory in the struggle and blamed others for the violence. One WCMP leader said, "We have won our battle. We have not given up a single point." Such implausible statements were at odds with the manifest result: no noticeable price increase for farmers. Frustrated strikers called Adjutant General Ralph Immell, who commanded the state's militia force, a "military dictator" and insisted that he was "personally responsible for all injuries and deaths." Despite their apparent failure to win substantive gains, farmers showered Walter Singler with praise, hailing him as a war hero and praising his steadfastness in the face of state pressure. State senators, meanwhile, bickered over the militia's role, some insisting that it had provoked farmer violence and others crediting it with barely averting a full-scale revolution.[43]

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[42] "State Milk Strike Called Off; 5,000 Farmers March on City," *Capital Times* (Madison, Wis.), 19 May 1933, pp. 1-2; "Farm Boy Shot in Milk Strike," *Capital Times* (Madison, Wis.), 17 May 1933, p. 1.

[43] "Hits 'Military Dictatorship' of General Immell," *Capital Times* (Madison, Wis.), 19 May 1933, pp. 1, 5; "State Milk Strike Called Off; 5,000 Farmers March on City," *Capital Times* (Madison, Wis.), 19 May 1933, pp. 5.

Unlike the first two, the third strike came suddenly for most Wisconsin farmers. The WCMP did not plan a withholding action in the fall of 1933.[44] With little warning, the national Farmers Holiday association on October 20 called for a general farm strike beginning the following day. WCMP officials seemed to be caught completely off guard but nevertheless urged their members to support the strike. Milk Pool members needed little encouragement; Singler described them as "straining on the leash." Like the WCMP in previous strikes, the Holiday association encouraged its members merely to withhold their own farm commodities and not to picket or blockade "unless necessary." But even on the first day of the strike, national Holiday president Milo Reno acknowledged that his membership had split over the efficacy of a non-coercive strike.[45]

In Wisconsin, this third strike proceeded on roughly the same course as the second one. The strike opened with pickets blocking roads in an attempt to prevent milk shipments. Such tactics largely succeeded, especially in the central and northeastern parts of the state. As in previous strikes, violence broke out along picket lines and at distribution and processing plants. Even Singler acknowledged that farmers felt uneasy and might lash out.

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[44] To the extent that I can determine, the WCMP was not planning any strike in the fall or early winter of 1933. Organizational records (or lack thereof) seem to support this contention, as does the fact that Wisconsin newspapers, which had covered previous strike planning in detail, printed nothing about any potential strike in the days and weeks leading up to the third strike. Prior to the third strike, there had been a short and ill-fated milk strike in the Chicago metropolitan area. See "So. Wisconsin Counties Join in Milk Strike," *Capital Times* (Madison, Wis.), 13 September 1933, p. 1.

[45] "Call National Farm Strike," *Capital Times* (Madison, Wis.), 20 October 1933, p. 1; "Badger Groups May Join; Will Start Saturday," *Capital Times* (Madison, Wis.), 20 October 1933, p. 1; "Badger Groups May Join; Will Start Saturday," *Capital Times* (Madison, Wis.), 20 October 1933, p. 1; "Farm Strike Faces Snag," *Capital Times* (Madison, Wis.), 21 October 1933, p. 1.

Another WCMP official, frustrated with the growing disorder, worried that "We are unable to hold the farmers back." Near the end of the thirteen-day strike, a state Borden representative said that his plants were receiving only ten to fifteen percent of their normal supplies.[46]

The governor responded to the strike by again dividing the state regionally—this time along county lines. He pledged to honor the strike in counties where a majority of farmers favored the withholding action, but vowed to open milk plants in counties where a majority opposed the strike. Once pickets had begun to clash with other farmers, plant operators and local police, he again called out national guard troops to restore the peace, although some state officials wondered aloud whether even a militia would be able to reassert control.[47]

A massive showdown never materialized. Two weeks after declaring the strike, the national Farmers Holiday association withdrew its support, and Wisconsin's state-level Holiday chapter quickly but reluctantly followed suit. The reasons for this third reversal are more mysterious. The strike had achieved far less support nationally than it had in Wisconsin, but even national Holiday leader Milo Reno wondered aloud whether the decision to end the strike had been well-reasoned. One indication of how splintered the Holiday association was the fact that several state associations continued to press forward with the strike. Not until November 23 did the national Farmers Holiday association officially

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[46] "Farm Strike Pickets Halt 2 Dane County Milk Trucks," *Capital Times* (Madison, Wis.), 23 October 1933, p. 1; "Reports from Strike Fronts in Wisconsin," *Capital Times* (Madison, Wis.), 24 October 1933, p. 1; "Singler to Check Strike Sentiment in State Tour," *Capital Times* (Madison, Wis.), 22 October 1933, p. 1; "Milk Pool May Not Join State Farmer Strike," *Capital Times* (Madison, Wis.), 24 October 1933, p. 4; "Picket Army Moves on City," *Capital Times* (Madison, Wis.), 30 October 1933, p. 1.

[47] "State Situation Now 'Terrible,' Crowley's Word," *Capital Times* (Madison, Wis.), 3 November 1933, p. 1.

announce the complete nationwide cessation of Holiday strikes. Though many WCMP members urged a continuation, much support fell away once Holiday support wavered. By the time Milk Pool leaders had time to formally poll the membership about its wishes, few pickets remained on Wisconsin's roads. Singler announced an indefinite postponement of the strike. This time, the Pool did not even win the right to negotiate a symbolic settlement with state authorities.[48]

An overall assessment of the strikes' success reveals little lasting success. Four years after the strike, the University of Wisconsin College of Agriculture's dean studied the long-term impact of the strike and concluded: "At no time is there any clear evidence that any of these three strikes caused any rise in the price" of cheese or butter. Looking more closely at the month to month fluid milk prices, one can see several slight improvements in the price farmers received. April and June both saw slight advances in hundredweight fluid prices; by July the average price had reached $1.15, up from roughly $1.00 in January. But even those apparent gains proved illusory for farmers. Over the three months in question, grain prices more than doubled, and the rising costs of milk production quickly ate up potential profits.[49] By the end of the year, farmers were in no better shape than before the strikes.

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[48] "Holiday Association Calls Off Strike; State Milk Pool Goes Ahead," *Capital Times* (Madison, Wis.), 1 November 1933, p. 1; "Dane Farmers Disgruntled; Truce Only, Claim," *Capital Times* (Madison, Wis.), 1 November 1933, p. 1; "Holiday Association Calls Truce in Farmer Strike," *Capital Times* (Madison, Wis.), 23 November 1933, p. 6; "Quartet is Caught on Milk Truck," *Capital Times* (Madison, Wis.), 10 November 1933, p. 1; "Farm Strike to Be Called Off, Singler Hints," *Capital Times* (Madison, Wis.), 18 November 1933, p. 1; "Call Off State Farm Strike," *Capital Times* (Madison, Wis.), 19 November 1933, p. 1.

[49] Chris L. Christensen, *Business Analysis of the WCMP*, 21 May 1937. Found in the William Kirsch Papers, State Historical Society of Wisconsin, Madison, Wisconsin, Box 5; "Butter, Cheese Price Rise Boosts Milk Checks 4 Thousands of Farmers," *Capital Times* (Madison, Wis.), 22 April 1933, p. 1; "Butter Soars to Two-Year Peak," *Capital Times*

These strikes neither improved nor worsened the economic conditions of Wisconsin farmers during 1933, so why are they historically important? Farmers faced two of the major problems associated with America's industrialization. As small-scale owners of capital, they faced daunting competition from increasingly centralized processors and distributors. And as semi-skilled laborers, they faced the specialization pressures and wage competition of an increasingly global marketplace. Farmers during the strikes also used a particular form of economic organization—the cooperative—which is important to our understanding of both rural political developments and economic mass movements. Grangers first popularized the concept of farm cooperatives among rural Americans in the late nineteenth century, and while their influence was felt more heavily in grain and livestock states, Wisconsinites joined in significant numbers. By the time the rest of the nation had caught up with agriculture's depression, farmer-owned cooperatives dotted the landscape and catered to almost every possible economic service, from seeds to fertilizer to machinery to credit to household consumables like groceries and appliances. They also played a significant social role in rural communities, organizing picnics, bringing in speakers, holding fairs, and sponsoring dances.

Cooperatives are curious economic institutions, for they challenge some basic tenets of capitalism while reinforcing others. Co-ops are non-profit groups which in most cases make economic decisions democratically—not on the basis of shares owned or equity invested but on a one-member one-vote principle. At the same time, co-ops and their

(Madison, Wis.), 27 June 1933, p. 1; "Plan 1 Cent Milk Price Boost Here," *Capital Times* (Madison, Wis.), 9 July 1933, p. 1; "Chicago Milk Strike Looms in Price War," *Capital Times* (Madison, Wis.), 13 July 1933, p. 3.

members by and large take for granted the legitimacy of private property ownership and seek simply to marshall sufficient economic resources to exert market power on a par with other corporately-organized powers. In the milk strikes of 1933, Wisconsin milk farmers appeared to try to have it both ways. They talked like proponents of proprietary capitalism, arguing for cost of production and reasonable profits on the basis of their capital investments, not their considerable labor expenditures. At the same time, striking farmers behaved like organized labor—recruiting members, organizing local chapters, cajoling neighbors, blocking roadways, and sabotaging the industrial process that facilitated their trade. Chapters three and four will explore how striking participants, contemporary observers, and historians since have interpreted this apparent disjuncture.

Chapter 3: The Puzzle of Words and Actions

Any exploration of the events and historical importance of the 1933 milk strikes must grapple with the categories of capital and labor. Were dairy farmers primarily small capitalists or rural laborers? One could argue either side plausibly. Farmers talked the talk of proprietary capitalism, arguing for cost of production and reasonable profits on the basis of their capital investments. At the same time, striking farmers walked the walk of organized labor—recruiting members, organizing local chapters, cajoling neighbors, blocking roadways, and sabotaging the industrial process which facilitated their trade.

Even at the time of the strikes, participants and observers were divided in their interpretations. Some suggested that farmers acted primarily as capitalists and took on potentially subversive actions only as a matter of desperate necessity. Cooperative leaders insisted that the times had forced farmers to undertake drastic measures in an attempt to save capitalism, not subvert it. Such men spoke hopefully of cooperatives as an "integral part of America's capitalistic system." Proponents of this view of farmer motivations argued that the strikes encouraged a more stable form of capitalism by attacking market imbalances that had left small producers with no noticeable market power. While some Farmers Holiday members tried to distance themselves from what they called "monied interests," they still called for a milk price that guaranteed at least their cost of production.[50] That this cost of production need not even include a profit is one barometer of just how desperate farmers' requests had become.

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[50] "Call National Farm Strike," *Capital Times* (Madison, Wis.), 20 October 1933, p. 1.

Some contemporary observers agreed with this interpretation of farmers as fundamentally conservative. Newspaper supporters like Madison's *Capital Times* likened striking farmers to powerful corporations seeking economic assistance from the government. "The wonder isn't so much that the farmer is now willing to use questionable methods," wrote the *Times*. "The wonder is that the farmer has not rebelled more strenuously than he has." One future Wisconsin farm leader told of his surprise at seeing so many conservative neighbors on the strike's front lines. He explained their presence by noting that farmers had become "discouraged" and "despondent," and that they then saw no other alternatives. A president of a dairy company summed up such views: "The average farmer is a sensible conscientious business man who does not believe in strikes nor violence."[51]

Many state officials seemed to take this view as well. Governor Schmedeman, even after the violent clashes of the second milk strike, called farmers "a peaceful and law-abiding citizenry," driven by a need to "bring before the people the nature of your plight." Dane County's district attorney echoed those sentiments, saying that "when the economic situation of any class or group of citizens becomes sufficiently desperate there is no telling just what will happen."[52] That public officials in charge of enforcing the state's laws so easily apologized for striker violence suggests substantial sympathy for a conservative interpretation of farmer actions.

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[51] "What the Farmers Must Face," *Capital Times* (Madison, Wis.), 12 May 1933, p. 19; Swanton interview, 21 March 1975, Tape 7, Side 1; "Say Strike Demands Would Boost Price of Milk 37%," *Capital Times* (Madison, Wis.), 16 April 1933, p. 1.

[52] "Hits 'Military Dictatorship' of General Immell," *Capital Times* (Madison, Wis.), 19 May 1933, p. 5; "Risser Warns Farmers Must Have Aid Soon," *Capital Times* (Madison, Wis.), 8 November 1933, p. 5.

On the other hand, others argued that most farmers were pursuing a truly radical agenda and used conservative rhetoric tactically only to consolidate the broadest possible coalition among some of their relatively conservative neighbors. Such a view tended to see farmer actions as part and parcel of Depression-era industrial labor activities and often linked such farm groups—either by evidence, association, or casual smear—with Communism, Bolshevism, and the like.

Certainly some critics in the dairy industry viewed striking farmers—or at least their leaders—this way. *Hoard's Dairyman*'s editors warned that WCMP leaders simply cloaked their "complex" and "mysterious" radicalism in more comfortable rhetoric. Critics in the field were more explicit. The Milwaukee Milk Producers Cooperative spokespeople simply claimed that Singler was little more than a dictator. One farmer accused Singler of "preaching Bolshevism and practicing communism;" another suggested that he purchase at one-way ticket for Russia if he disliked the American economic system.[53] Other critics red-baited even more brazenly. *Milwaukee Journal* editors warned, with no apparent evidence, that the strikes included hundreds if not thousands of communist agitators and unemployed workers from the city. They warned that the Milk Pool "had turned into a Frankenstein no longer in the control of strike leaders," replicating Hollywood conflation of anti-Communist rants with science fiction monsters. The WCMP needed vigilance, cautioned the *Journal*, to avoid "infiltration of professional trouble makers." Other

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[53] "Cooperation," *Hoard's Dairyman*, 25 January 1933, p. 28. *Hoard's* was a milk industry trade publication. "Milk Strike Spreading as Crisis Nears," *Milwaukee Journal*, 19 February 1933, p. 1; "People's Forum," *Green Bay Press-Gazette*, 28 February 1933, p. 4; "People's Forum," *Green Bay Press-Gazette*, 21 February 1933, p. 6.

newspaper reporters watched closely for communist leaders who might be associating with leaders of the strike movement at various informational membership meetings around the state.[54]

Like the historical disagreement, the historiographical discussion about how to position striking farmers in the class hierarchy rests on the assumption that cooperatively-organized farmers functioned as either capital or labor. I will argue that the milk strikes provide a test case to illustrate precisely why this interpretative assumption cannot be substantiated. The fact that most striking farmers advocated their position based on their ownership of capital makes sense, given the number of problems they shared with other small business owners. At the same time, the fact that most strikers acted like organized labor suggests that farmers also faced a host of problems much like those of industrial laborers. We can see further evidence for this hybridized economic plight in the cooperative economic structures that farmers created, in the reception they received from law enforcement officials, and even in the ways contemporary participants and observers could not easily distinguish between capital and labor.

I. Talking the Talk

To be sure, striking farmers' rhetoric represented themselves as small capitalists. To hear these farmers tell it, the strike was merely an attempt to force a realignment of the economic balance which had been disturbed by chain stores and dairy conglomerates like

[54] "Strike is Out of Hand, Is Fear, as Reds Enter, *Milwaukee Journal*, 22 February 1933, p. 1; "Where This Milk Strike Is Wrong," *Milwaukee Journal*, 22 February 1933, p. 6; "Sheriff Gets Order to Halt All Picketing," *Fond du Lac* (Wis.) *Commonwealth Reporter*, 23 February 1933, p. 3.

Borden. These actions, so the rhetoric went, were necessary simply to right the ship of capitalism now that it had run aground on this rocky shoal of depression.

This rhetoric focused primarily on farmers' right to recover "cost of production," a claim that implicitly defined farmers as owners of capital entitled to its just returns. Singler said plainly that the first strike was "a method by which we can bring to farmers a price that is at least cost of production." Indeed, the charter of the Wisconsin Co-operative Milk Pool called for the organization to use any means necessary to achieve a fair price for milk, defined as one that yielded at least the "cost of production determined from time to time."[55] Farmers continued to make cost of production central to their demands in the second strike, but added two other demands: mortgage refinancing and currency inflation. Like cost of production, mortgage refinancing and currency inflation were intended to ameliorate problems associated with farmers' ownership of capital assets.[56] At times when it supported the WCMP, the Farmers Holiday movement promoted the same basic agenda: "cost of production" for all commodities. In fact, by the time state agricultural groups gathered in

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[55] "Mass Meeting for Farmers Monday Night," *Appleton* (Wis.) *Post-Crescent*, 10 February 1933, p. 4; Articles of Organization of the Wisconsin Co-operative Milk Pool, No. W4764, Wisconsin Secretary of State, Corporation Division, Incorporation Papers of Defunct Domestic Corporations, Series 2/4/2, in Archives Division, State Historical Society of Wisconsin. As cited in Hoglund, "Wisconsin Dairy Farmers on Strike," p. 27.

[56] "Name Farm Strike 'Minute Men'," *Capital Times* (Madison, Wis.), 12 April 1933, p. 1. Interestingly, while "cost of production" was one of the two major demands of the third strike, the other was a ban on imports of foreign dairy products. Protectionism, while in most cases associated with protecting labor, can in this case be interpreted as benefiting farmers as both labor and capital. After all, less competition benefited dairy farmers in two ways. It boosted dairy product prices (higher price for work output) and increased the corresponding value of farm assets (cows, machinery).

Marshfield in October of 1933, farmers' "right" to cost of production was one of the very few things on which all parties agreed.[57]

In promoting the strike, some strikers extended that claim to include a "reasonable profit," again portraying farmers primarily as owners of capital entitled to fair returns, rather than as laborers entitled to just wages for their work. Farmers writing in support of the strike urged consumers to consider how little prices had dropped in comparison to the decline in commodity prices that farmers received. This disparity, proponents argued, had eroded farmers' right to a profit. In fact, the motto on the Milk Pool's first batch of stationery expressed this demand: "Put Wisconsin Cheese and Dairy Products on the Nation's Table at Cost of Production Plus a Reasonable Profit."[58]

Strike leaders stressed an economic analysis, moreover, that focused on the price-setting function of farmers as businessmen. Singler repeatedly framed the issue this way: "The only answer to the milk situation is for the producers to put a price tag on their milk, and if the dealers won't pay it—don't give them the milk. The farmers own the milk."

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[57] "National Farm Strike May 13," *Capital Times* (Madison, Wis.), 4 May 1933, p. 1; "Reno Defends Calling Off of Farmer Strike," *Capital Times* (Madison, Wis.), 5 July 1933, p. 2; "Meeting of the Various General Farm Organizations of Wisconsin Held at Marshfield, Wisconsin on October 3, 1933," WCMP Records, Box 1, Folder 10, 3 October 1933, p. 3.

Congress, despite heavy pressure from the farm lobby, had voted down an amendment guaranteeing farmers at least their "cost of production" during the May 1933 passage of the Agricultural Adjustment Act. Hoglund, "Wisconsin Dairy Farmers on Strike," p. 34. So strong was farmer support for the amendment that Roosevelt was forced to consider its inclusion in the new National Recovery Act code in the fall of the same year. "Farm Code to Demand Cost of Production," *Capital Times* (Madison, Wis.), 11 October 1933, p. 16. After again flirting with that idea, Roosevelt's administration eventually shelved the idea in late October 1933. "Singler to Check Strike Sentiment in State Tour," *Capital Times* (Madison, Wis.), 22 October 1933, p. 3.

[58] "People's Forum," *Green Bay Press-Gazette*, 28 February 1933, p. 4; Sample stationery, WCMP Records, Box 2, Folder 2.

In an open letter to "our fellow citizens of Wisconsin" during the first strike, the Milk Pool encouraged people to think of the strike from a different angle. While the action could be called a strike, it was in theory no more of a strike than the everyday actions of all merchants. Those small businesspeople simply set a price for their own products. If the consumer failed to pay that price, the product was not for sale.[59] Such a conceptualization of strike actions clearly required an understanding of farmers primarily as the owners of capital who were free to exercise the prerogatives all small businesspeople enjoyed.

Furthermore, farmers bemoaned their inability to retain a larger percentage of the consumer price. One farmer insisted that farmers did not want pity but merely their fair share of the consumer price. Often such complaints led to suggestions that farmers should pool their resources and expand vertically into the more mechanized processing and delivery functions of the milk market. The disparity between what consumers paid for milk products and what farmers received for raw milk upset many farmers. Farmers sought practical ways that they could expand their share of consumer dollars, and some floated vertical integration as a possible means of extracting those additional revenues.[60]

WCMP spokesmen frequently danced around this key question: Did the farmer strike mirror contemporary labor strikes in American industry? Some strike leaders reiterated that the withholding action was not a strike but simply a pricing action. Others pleaded for understanding, arguing that the strike was "an exceptional measure" due to extraordinarily

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[59] "Another Milk Order is Near," *Milwaukee Journal*, 3 February 1933, p. 6; "Letter "To our fellow Citizens in Wisconsin," WCMP Records, Box 3, Folder 5, undated (certainly from February of 1933 given the content), p. 1.

[60] "Farmers Face Bankruptcy in Low Milk Price," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 13 February 1933, p. 1; "From the People," *Milwaukee Journal*, 15 February 1933, p. 8.

bad circumstances. One reassured potentially nervous citizens that farmers would conduct themselves "business like and win the confidence of business men." Several times, leaders promised that only bona fide milk producers would be allowed on the picket lines, that no "outsiders or Reds" would be welcome.[61]

But the rhetoric with which striking farmers justified their actions did more than simply call on conservative notions of the propriety of capital; they specifically and categorically eschewed economic and political radicalism while attempting to gain broad farmer support. At WCMP meetings, speakers directed some of their harshest denunciations not at Borden but at Bolshevism. Near the end of the first strike, one such speaker delivered "a dramatic denunciation of communism, and a pledge of allegiance to American principles... [which] brought ringing cheers and thunderous applause from all parts of the house." The next speaker upped the ante, setting a match to a piece of communist literature. "This is what we think of communism," he boomed. "I burn it beneath our flag, the stars and stripes."[62]

Such demonstrations served a purpose; they built support among potential farmer allies and deflected potential criticism from opponents. With massive labor unrest across the country, critics of the Milk Pool needed little ammunition to paint the Pool red. Supporters of the strike seemed well aware of this problem and worried aloud that "the radical labor element will make this a wide open revolt." Seizing any opportunity to discredit the WCMP,

[61] "Labor Federation Backs Milk Strike of State Farmers," *Green Bay Press-Gazette*, 13 February 1933, p. 1; "Better Price for Milk Only Goal of Strike," *Appleton* (Wis.) *Post Crescent*, 9 February 1933, p. 5; "Committee to Order Milk Strike at Once Upon Singler's Call," *Appleton* (Wis.) *Post Crescent*, 8 February 1933, p. 1; "Strike is Out of Hand, Is Fear, as Reds Enter," *Milwaukee Journal*, 22 February 1933, p. 1.

[62] "2,000 Farmers Vote to Join Pool Program," *Green Bay Press-Gazette*, 20 February 1933, p. 3.

opponents in the Milwaukee pool envisioned a scenario in which "Socialists [were] out in the country tearing down old ties between farmer and farmer." Some newspapers encouraged even greater anti-Communist vigilance, urging the Milk Pool to "purge their organization of even the suspected taint of Communism."[63]

Even as the Milk Pool defended itself against charges of radicalism, it cleverly used the very specter of radical chaos in its attempt to garner support. In its 1932 petition to the president and Congress, the WCMP declared farmers to be the bedrock of American private enterprise. "If this foundation [farmer-owned land] is changed to one of feudalistic tendency," the executive board wrote, "we will be borne by the world's social and Economic undertow and cross-currents, upon the rock (at present apparently the only alternative) of socialism." The radical apparition loomed large in pro-strike rhetoric. Throughout the strike, leaders warned that communism was "lurking just around the corner." Occasionally the threat behind the call for support was made explicit. "Communism," cautioned one such speaker in February 1933, "may creep into the ranks of the dairy farmer if the milk strike fails because of lack of support by the business men of the state and country." Still others compared the WCMP to the forces of the North at the dawn of the Civil War. In a similar interpretation of historical processes, one WCMP official insisted that farmers, not soldiers, had won the first world war: "They fed the world while their sons were dying for a country

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[63] "Road Clear of Pickets as Strike Ends," *Milwaukee Journal*, 23 February 1933, p. 3; "That Milk Strike," *Fond du Lac* (Wis.) *Commonwealth Reporter*, 25 February 1933, p. 4. The Milwaukee Journal, always a critic of the strikes, even chided the WCMP for scheduling their strike on "red" Labor Day. "Singler Moves for New Strike," *Milwaukee Journal*, 24 February 1933, p. 1.

that now refuses to aid them in their crisis."[64] Rather than simply deflecting charges of radicalism, strikers turned such attacks back against doubters by predicting dire consequences for society if their strike failed.

To be sure, some farmers flirted with more inflammatory pronouncements during the strikes, but for the most part these statements defended the basic relationships of proprietary capitalism and did not undermine the normative value of property ownership. Some farmers pointed angrily at firms like Borden, which controlled many of the creameries and processing plants in Wisconsin. In doing so, however, they objected not to Borden's ownership of various subsidiaries *per se*, but to the scale of its holdings and its seemingly mountainous profits. Singler warned that such corporations enjoyed an "inside track" in their ability to "appeal to government and invoke the power of the state," a power that small farmers clearly lacked. At other times, Milk Pool leaders worried about how the press might be influenced by "Big Interests." Such leaders sought to curb the worst excesses associated with massive oligopolies, but did not challenge the relations among various groups of farmers, workers, and owners of productive capital.[65]

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[64] "A Declaration and Petition," WCMP Records, Box 2, Folder 1, 11 November 1932, p. 1; "County Milk Pool Members Approve Proposed Strike," *Appleton* (Wis.) *Post-Crescent*, 8 February 1933, p. 2; "'Minute Men' Go on Duty Today," *Appleton* (Wis.) *Post-Crescent*, 16 February 1933, p. 4; "Farmers' (sic) Won World War Can Insure World Peace—Gilberts," *Capital Times* (Madison, Wis.), 9 May 1933, p. 1.

[65] Clipped newspaper column from the *Sheboygan Press*, undated (1933). Found in WCMP Records, Box 3, Folder 5; "Milk Pool to Back No More Strikes," *Capital Times* (Madison, Wis.), 21 May 1933, p. 2; "Resolution," WCMP Records, Box 1, Folder 2, 16 May 1933, p. 3. Needless to say, I envision each of these three groups (farmers, workers, and owners) overlapping with the other two.

How might farmers counteract such disproportionate and corrupting influence? Some farmers saw potential allies in other small capitalists—city merchants and small business owners. One farmer suggested closer economic ties and assistance, reasoning that neither group was "doing as well as it might." Even the most violent rhetoric usually promoted relatively conservative ends. One leader insisted that farmers needed to "hit [people] over the head." But such actions, said the speaker, were necessary only to alert people to the desperate economic plight of the state's farmers, and not as the opening salvo of a farmer-led uprising.[66]

Some of these proposed alliances with merchants and small businessmen seem to reflect nineteenth-century notions of what constituted the "producer class."[67] A spokesman for a supportive agricultural organization called farmers and industrial workers the only true producers; all others were "parasites, living off these two." A state labor leader chimed in that such middlemen were the "strangling consumptive power of both." Such statements, however, were few and far between. And nearly without exception, pronouncements of this type came from people outside of the Milk Pool. While certain members of the WCMP may well have viewed the strikes as an entré to more sweeping economic revolution, such

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[66] "Farmers Vote to Back Strike Plan," *Appleton* (Wis.) *Post-Crescent*, 31 January 1933, p. 4; "Pool Leaders Vote State Milk Strike," *Milwaukee Journal*, 8 February 1933, p. 1.

[67] "Both Labor and farmers Exploited by Organized Greed, Institute Told," *Capital Times* (Madison, Wis.), 17 November 1933, p. 5.

See the Hattam's and McMath's discussion of producer rhetoric in chapter one. Note that one big reason for Hattam's conclusion of the importance of producer ideology was the widespread explicit use of the producer versus non-producer rhetoric by the workingmen themselves. She juxtaposes that prevalence with the dearth of discussion about labor versus capital. Here, as we will see later, we seem to have the reverse: much discussion of labor and capital and almost no discussion of producers versus non-producers.

potentially radical views were rarely expressed on an individual level, and never by strike leaders.[68]

When WCMP leaders did push the potentially incendiary hot buttons of producerism and class consciousness, they toned down the volume considerably. For instance, one spokesperson talked about farmers as part of the producer class, but simply described that role as that of the "basic producer with whom any permanent recovery must originate." Pool leaders were more likely to suggest that cooperatives offered an alternative form of capitalist economic organization through which small economic actors—be they farmers, workers, or merchants—could consolidate economic power within the extant structure of property ownership. Several meetings between farm leaders and labor officials produced proposals for jointly-run cooperatives which would include both farmers and consumers in an effort to reverse ever-increasing costs associated with middlemen.[69] While certainly an intriguing form of business organization, even farmer cooperatives did not fundamentally challenge the rights of capital.

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[68] One of the very rare cases where a farmer publicly called for a more radical agenda happened just before the first strike after a Singler speech in Medford. The farmer wrote in a letter to the *Medford Star-News* editor that "Singler would have made a bigger hit with me if he had put more stress on the hell-raising possibilities of his organization." Reprinted in "Editorial Column," *The Waupun* (Wis.) *Leader-News*, 2 February 1933, p. 10. Such publicly-expressed views were by far the exception.

[69] "2,000 Farmers Vote to Join Pool Program," *Green Bay Press-Gazette*, 20 February 1933, p. 3; "Both Labor and farmers Exploited by Organized Greed, Institute Told," *Capital Times* (Madison, Wis.), 17 November 1933, p. 5. To be sure, some farmers sought cooperatives as a more radical redefinition of economic relationships. For one example of this peripheral view, see "Voice of the People," *Capital Times* (Madison, Wis.), 14 May 1933, p. 18.

Viewed over the long haul, Milk Pool leaders consistently toed a party line of rhetorical conservatism. In a pre-strike planning meeting, co-op leaders put together a list of "Suggested Publicity" to organize support both for and among dairy farmers. Of the ten phrases coined and approved, four stressed the importance of farmers to the broader stability of the economy, four plead for cost of production, two mentioned reasonable profits, and two stressed farmers' right to price merchandise just like any store owner.[70] To be sure, leaders intended such ideas to garner widespread support among farmers and citizenry and presumably struck a less strident tone to increase the organization's common-denominator appeal. But with few exceptions, strike leaders stuck to such language throughout 1933, despite massive resistance by state and local militia, vacillating allies, and substantial support from liberal and even radical political groups. The executive board headed into the strike insistent that farmers constituted "the foundation upon which the whole modern structure of private ownership of property rests. . .."[71] None of the events of 1933 moved Milk Pool advocates from that position.

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[70] "Suggested Publicity," WCMP Records, Box 3, Folder 5, undated (certainly first half of 1933 given content). In fact, only one of the ten slogans in any way hinted of potential unrest. That one—"You must help restore FARM BUYING POWER for your own PROTECTION" (emphasis in original)—suggested not fundamental economic changes, but merely portended chaos if more conservative steps were not taken. For a marked contrast, compare this language with proposals made by the Farm-Labor party in Minnesota at the very same time, through which some people, the governor included, hinted broadly at state confiscation of wealth. See "Gov. Olson Threatens to Seize Minnesota Wealth," *Capital Times* (Madison, Wis.), 13 April 1933, p. 1.

[71] "A Declaration and Petition," WCMP Records, Box 2, Folder 1, 11 November 1932, p. 1.

Such rhetoric accurately reflects many aspects of dairy farmers' economic position, for such farmers faced many of the same capitalization problems as small businesspeople. Unlike most wage earners, farmers needed a multitude of capital-intensive tools to ply their trade: sufficient acreage, a farm house, cattle, silos, and a milking shed, to list only the most obvious. Through the late nineteenth-century industrialization of the dairying process, dairy farmers transformed their trade into an even more mechanized and capital intensive process. No longer could a farmer simply milk his or her own cows and bottle it for consumption. By the 1930s, one needed pumps, holding tanks, chillers and cream separators to do the job efficiently enough to be competitive.[72]

The scale of capital required for dairying was one of primary factors which drove farmer actions. According to farmers, the massive proliferation of cooperatives during the 1920s and 1930s was due to co-ops' ability to consolidate capital. Faced with a financial crunch during the Depression, farmers often fashioned workable dairying tools and facilities out of old industrial machinery and factories. Governor Schmedeman recognized both farmers' capital needs and their political pressure by repeatedly suggesting a change in the tax code's treatment of property, which by failing to differentiate between productive property and property holdings penalized farmers.[73]

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[72] See the earlier footnotes referencing Eric Lampard's description of the industrialization of the dairy process.

[73] R. A. Peterson, Address delivered to the American Institute of Co-operation, Wisconsin. Wisconsin Department of Agriculture and Markets, *Marketing Problems and Possibilities of Producers Supplying Condenseries* (Madison, Wis., July 1931), p. 4; Postcard from Walter Singler to all WCMP board members (and all members?), WCMP Records, Box 2, Folder 2, 20 November 1933; Swanton interview, 14 March 1975, Tape 6, Side 1, Part 2; Schmedeman, "Wisconsin's Problems," in Wisconsin. *Presented by Governor Schmedeman at the President's Conference of Governors, 3/6/33*, pp. 1, 16.

In several ways, dairying had become more like a non-food industry than its agricultural equivalents. Fresh fluid milk differed from feed grains, which could be stored for months on end without appreciable spoilage. But the convertibility of fluid milk into relatively non-perishable commodities, especially cheese, made the dairy industry very much different than its fresh produce counterparts.[74] Even more important, the dairy "season" lasted all year round, unlike that of other agricultural commodities. Dairy production rose and fell cyclically throughout the year, but the fact that farmers generated both income and expenses year-round made the dairy process more akin to industrial production than to cyclical crop harvesting.[75] Dairy was always in season. As historian Eric Lampard suggested, dairying "shared both the tribulations of agriculture and the triumphs of manufacture: it epitomized industrial revolution."[76]

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[74] The obvious counter-argument here might be the canning process, which allowed producers of fresh fruits and vegetables to "convert" those products into non-perishables. However, a key difference remains: canned vegetables had to be marketed heavily and were in any case viewed as second-rate when compared to fresh produce. The same cannot be said of butter and cheese, which because they did not attempt to substitute for otherwise unavailable products, remained top shelf, so to speak. In the dairy industry, only condensed and powdered milk shared those characteristics of canned produce. To illustrate my point, notice what has ensconced Wisconsin's reputation as a dairy state: milk, butter, and cheese.

[75] This document traced production figures, averaging the pounds of milk per cow over the course of a five-year period. Daily output for cows was lowest in December (13 pounds per day) and highest in June and July (23 pounds). See Wisconsin Department of Agriculture, *Wisconsin Dairy Statistics: Crop Reporting Service Supplement No. 1 to Bulletin No. 200*, p. 13. In fact, some cooperatives pioneered techniques through which farmers could grapple with the problems of dairy's cyclical production. They attempted to build up cheese surpluses when milk was pouring in while cutting back on cheese production during lulls. This helped to keep fluid milk prices at much more even levels than one might have expected over the course of the average calendar year. See Swanton interview, 14 March 1975, Tape 6, Side 1, Part 2.

[76] Lampard, *The Rise of the Dairy Industry in Wisconsin: A Study in Agricultural Change*, p. 292.

Striking farmers used rhetoric to attract more strikers, win public support, and defend themselves from attacks and accusations, and such rhetoric seemed not only to accept the basic economic structure, but to attempt to reinforce it. That rhetoric was far from empty. Dairy farmers faced many of the same problems as their small business counterparts in various trades and industries These farmers needed sufficient capital to acquire property, maintain their herds, build facilities, invest in equipment, maintain and modernize machinery, and occasionally pay employees—all to remain competitive. Dairy farmers spent considerable money and effort to acquire these necessities, and conservative pronouncements about property ownership no doubt resonated well among fellow farmers and knowledgeable observers.

II. Walking the Walk

Even though striking farmers may have characterized their fight as strengthening the position of property owners, their tactics borrowed explicitly from industrial labor unions and in doing so directly challenged the rights of propertied classes. Despite massive logistical obstacles, the WCMP ran the 1933 strikes like classic industrial union strikes—organizing and mobilizing its membership, intimidating "scabs" and industry managers, shutting off the flow of raw materials, physically attacking the industrial process, and seeking broad community support for such measures.[77]

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[77] For those unfamiliar with labor tactics or skeptical of how much the milk strikes mimicked such actions, let me briefly describe elements of eight of the more prominent strikes in the years immediately preceding the dairy strikes. In the New England telephone operators strike of 1919, strikers attacked strike breakers, including physical and verbal assaults on male and female strike breakers, law enforcement officials, and security guards. In the bituminous coal strike of 1927, strikers beat up numerous strike breakers, blacks in

True to its origin, the Wisconsin Cooperative Milk Pool gained most of its membership through massive community organizing meetings during which Pool leaders and local farmers debated potential solutions to the problems facing farmers. In the fall and early winter of 1932, members of the co-op's board criss-crossed the state in search of farmer support. Most staff itineraries included one community meeting each day, and Walter Singler's travelogue included an average of just better than two community meetings per day, including weekends. Such meetings drew not only Milk Pool supporters but also skeptics and opponents. WCMP leaders sought out difficult venues as a means to broaden the appeal of the organization and its chosen tactics. Such meetings continued throughout the strikes as the Pool's primary means of disseminating information. At those meetings, the WCMP mobilized pickets, discussed tactical issues, and debated the various strike resolutions reached with state government officials and collaborating farm organizations.[78]

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particular. Employers responded by guarding their work camps and facilities day and night. In the New Bedford textile strike of 1928, union leaders pressed forward with a massive organization of the least-well-off workers, and during the strike massive numbers of pickets (20,000) successfully blocked the workplace. In the Gastonia strike of 1929, whole families picketed and successfully prevented strike breakers for getting to work. The Imperial Valley farmworkers strike of 1930 was preceded by a massive organizational campaign consisting primarily of informational mass meetings. The Harlan County miners' strike of 1931 saw heavy leafleting, frequent organizational meetings, and employer blacklisting. Despite union appeals against violence, strikers sabotaged several company buildings with fire and dynamite. In the Davidson-Wilder coal strike of 1932-33, strikers destroyed a railroad bridge to interfere with transportation routes. In the Hormel strike of 1933, strikers who had paid a mere one dollar to join the union broke into the plant and roughed up replacement workers and executives. For brief accounts of each of these strikes, see, in order, Ronald Filippelli, ed., *Labor Conflict in the United States: An Encyclopedia* (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1990), pp. 341-344, 50-54, 339-341, 195-199, 255-256, 223-226, 149-150, 246-248

[78] "Field Notes / Meeting Postings," WCMP Records, Box 1, Folder 5, various dates; See also many different lists of Singler's speaking engagements, WCMP Records, Box 2, Folder 1, various dates; "Singler Talks to Arpin Farmers," *Marshfield* (Wis.) *Journal*, 9 March 1933, p. 1; Segerstroms' interview, 29 September 1976, Tape 2, Side 2' "2,500

Strike organizers did not limit themselves to public fora; much support was won through door to door campaigning. Organizers maintained that only through careful county by county canvassing could the strike ever "spread like wildfire" throughout the countryside. Some county units formed "flying squadrons" to monitor more carefully the strike activities of friends and foes. Whatever the form taken, the co-op relied on neighborly communication to spread information about strike dates, picket locations, and potential scabs. In less-well-organized counties, co-op agents were paid for signing up additional members. Such work proved relatively easy, since membership fees were only one dollar and farmers felt they had so little to lose.[79] The zeal with which organizers pleaded their cause was in some cases extraordinary. One WCMP official conferred on those efforts all the importance of religious prosyletization.

> It is the duty of every member of the Wisconsin Co-operative Milk Pool to go out and preach the gospel to his neighbor who perhaps doesn't understand what this Organization is trying to do. In this connection, I have to refer to historical background; we have to go back to the time of Christ. Christ has not endured because of Himself alone, but because of the apostles that went out and preached the gospel after Christ was no longer on this earth. And that is the obligation every member has on his shoulders. It wasn't sufficient that you signed the contract of the Wisconsin Milk Pool; it is no longer sufficient that you bring your milk and do what they ask you to do. You must go out of your way and sell your ideas—the principles of your Organization—to the member who doesn't understand it; to your next-door neighbor who doesn't understand it, and bring in a good word. . .[80]

Farmers Gather Here for Pool Meet," *Green Bay Press-Gazette*, 18 February 1933, p. 1.

[79] "Agree to Strike After May 1st," *Marshfield* (Wis.) *Journal*, 2 March 1933, p. 1; "Chieftains of Milk Strikers Seek Recruits," *Green Bay Press-Gazette*, 14 February 1933, p. 1; "Milk Pickets Fire on Truck Driver, Claim," *Fond du Lac* (Wis.) *Commonwealth Reporter*, 17 February 1933, p. 3; "Better Price for Milk Only Goal of Strike," *Appleton* (Wis.) *Post-Crescent*, 9 February 1933, p. 5; Executive Committee meeting minutes, WCMP Records, Box 1, Folder 3, 11 November 1932; Segerstroms' interview, 29 September 1976, Tape 3, Side 1.

[80] Anthony R. Sanna, Speech notes for address to the State Milk Pool picnic in Juneau,

Like labor organizing, this door to door campaign depended primarily on the persuasion of neighbors, family and friends. Farmers found other peaceful means of canvassing their communities. Some strikers jotted down the numbers on the sides of milk cans as they passed by pickets, hoping to track down and talk to the individual farmers responsible for shipping scab milk. The Milk Pool deployed teams of "minute-men" charged with using every available means of peaceful persuasion. The Pool sold window stickers to small merchants for a nominal fee, allowing striking farmers to quickly ascertain whether store owners supported the strike. In some communities, this type of peaceful persuasion was sufficient to gain the support of essentially all dairy farmers.[81]

Families played a key supportive roles in the strike, perhaps even more than in typical industrial strikes. In most cases, farm family members over the age of ten already worked to produce milk. Their contribution increased as the strike forced parents to spend significant time away from home, principally at meetings and on picket lines. Cows needed consistent twice-a-day milkings whether the milk was sold or not—their productivity declined rapidly without such attention—so the work of dairying continued even during the dairy strike. Many farm women, who already contributed a sizable portion of their days to the dairying process, redoubled their milking efforts to keep the herd productive. While a few women

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Wisconsin, WCMP Records, Box 3, Folder 5, 19 August 1934, p. 8.

[81] "Leaders Say Milk Strike Will Spread," *Green Bay Press-Gazette*, 15 February 1933, p. 1; "Chieftains of Milk Strikers Seek Recruits," *Green Bay Press-Gazette*, 14 February 1933, p. 1; "Rush to Seek Support for Milk Holiday," *Appleton* (Wis.) *Post-Crescent*, 14 February 1933, p. 15; "'Minute Men' Go on Duty Today," *Appleton* (Wis.) *Post-Crescent*, 16 February 1933, p. 4; Interview with Roy R. Meier by Dale E. Trelevan, *Wisconsin Agriculturalists Oral History Project*, State Historical Society of Wisconsin, Madison, Wisconsin, Interview held on 22 March 1979, Audiocassette, Tape 3, Side 1 (hereafter, Meier interview).

worked the picket lines alongside dairymen, photographs of various groups of pickets suggest that such actions were the exception.[82]

What did striking farmers do with their excess milk? Striking farm family members—mostly women—spent additional time trying to convert the fluid milk into less perishable products like butter or ice cream, a conversion previously handled by distributors and processing plants. Others simply fed the excess to their livestock, primarily to hogs. Some tried to churn as much cream as possible into butter or ice cream, which could be stored for much longer periods than raw milk. But the sheer volume of milk produced on most farms made churning difficult, and some women converted their washing machines into industrial size churns. One woman said that after she gave her washing machine a good cleaning, "the butter 'came' in no time after the power had been turned on." In addition to their vastly expanded on-the-farm duties, families supported strikers both by running supplies (logs, nails, food, warm beverages) to the picket lines.[83]

The effectiveness of pickets often hinged on veiled and not-so-veiled threats of property destruction or bodily harm. Veiled threats occasionally came in the form of artfully vague pronouncements from WCMP leaders. While ordering strikers to make "no forcible attempt" to impede milk transportation, one leader still encouraged pickets to be vigilant in "keeping farmers in line." Many threats from individual farmers were considerably less

[82] "Hot Coffee (With Cream) Served to Pickets," *Green Bay Press-Gazette*, 21 February 1933, p. 12.

[83] "Tons of Milk Dumped From Trucks as Strikers Patrol Highways," *Appleton* (Wis.) *Post-Crescent*, 18 February 1933, p. 4; Meier interview, 22 March 1979, Tape 3, Side 1; "More Ice Cream," *Milwaukee Journal*, 18 February 1933, p. 1; "Women Churn Strike Cream in Washing Machines at Oneida," *Green Bay Press-Gazette*, 21 February 1933, p. 1; For another reference, see Dueholm interview, 19 December 1978, Tape 14, Side 1.

subtle. Groups of pickets threatened truckers shipping milk as they passed on rural highways, warning of violence if they attempted to ship milk again. Newspapers unsupportive of the strike routinely received bomb threats. One group of farmers simply painted "Do not ship any milk today" on a neighbor's barn. One defiant farmer interrupted a Milk Pool meeting to challenge the assembled throng, claiming that he had "several sons and plenty of guns, and nobody is going to tell me where or how I sell my milk." The chairman of the meeting banged his gavel sharply and shouted back, "Don't be too sure of that, my friend," to the raucous cheers of the crowd.[84] While many communities experienced little violence, the threat of such actions always lurked just below the surface.

But inflamed family passions worked both ways. Like the well-worn Civil War image of brother fighting against brother, the lore of the milk strikes includes its share of familial discord. One farmer remembered, "There was a lot of strife. There was a lot of neighborhood strife. Not only neighborhood, but there were a lot of family splits." "The son was on the Milk Pool side, and probably the father was on the other side. Or vice versa." "[Sometimes] the father and son completely parted company and never spoke to each other ever after that. . . just split the families completely apart."[85]

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[84] "Farm Strike May Be Averted," *Capital Times* (Madison, Wis.), 17 April 1933, p. 6; "Fear Violence at Waunakee in Milk Strike," *Capital Times* (Madison, Wis.), 14 May 1933, p. 1; "1 Killed, 3 Near Death in Milk Strike; Company G Ordered Out," *Capital Times* (Madison, Wis.), 18 May 1933, pp. 1, 6; "Waukesha Drops Deputies; Roads Left to Milk Strikers," *Milwaukee Journal*, 21 February 1933, p. 2; "Chieftains of Milk Strikers Seek Recruits," *Green Bay Press-Gazette*, 14 February 1933, p. 1.

[85] Interview with Percy S. Hardiman by Dale E. Trelevan, *Wisconsin Agriculturalists Oral History Project*, State Historical Society of Wisconsin, Madison, Wisconsin, Interview held on 3 August 1976, Audiocassette, Tape 3, Side 1 (hereafter, Hardiman interview).

Like industrial strikers, dairy farmers were not content simply to withhold their own labor from the market. They too sought to disrupt physically the distribution process. The most widely used and most effective method of disrupting that process was the use of pickets on major public highways. In a typical scenario, farmers pounded nails and spikes through spare planks of wood or railroad ties and then lay them sharp side up in the middle of the road to convince drivers to stop. Pickets posted at strategic checkpoints stopped all dairy vehicles and inspected them for milk cans.[86] Interestingly, strikers would not make exceptions for milk shipped by cooperatively-organized farmers, since any passing milk weakened the effectiveness of the strike. When one co-op driver protested that the Milk Pool should let him through, he was told to "shut your mouth and get back in the cab! We don't care whose milk it is!" Most often, however, striking farmers left the drivers of milk trucks alone; the only major concern was stemming the flow of milk. When strikers created such impediments during all three strikes, they proved largely effective. Most farmers declined to ship their milk, and most drivers declined to make deliveries. Occasionally, groups of pickets roamed rural highways even after the Milk Pool wished them disbanded. During the

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[86] Interview with Jean Stillman Long by Dale E. Trelevan, *Wisconsin Agriculturalists Oral History Project*, State Historical Society of Wisconsin, Madison, Wisconsin, Interview held on 20 August 1974, Audiocassette, Tape 2, Side 2; "Milk Strikers Surround Milwaukee," *Milwaukee Journal*, 20 February 1933, pp. 1-2; "Leaders Say Milk Strike Will Spread," *Green Bay Press-Gazette*, 15 February 1933, p. 1. This was an enormous undertaking, but the timing of the strikes was propitious. As one farmer recalled, while the major highways were in good shape, the condition of most ancillary roads was fairly primitive. She remembered, "We didn't have any decent roads until the Democrats got in and Roosevelt got in and the W.P.A., they started working on the roads. We had such bad roads going from here, down this way, that we got stuck in the spring of the year going to town, 'cause it was just mud and dirt, and ruts." See Segerstroms' interview, 29 September 1976, Tape 1, Side 2, Part 1.

third strike in particular, pickets took to the highways despite WCMP officials' explicit promise to avoid such actions, and they remained on the highways after the official strike had ended.[87]

Many farmers opposed to the strike sought alternative means of transporting their milk. Some clever non-participants attempted to circumvent the pickets by hauling very small loads of milk in passenger cars, often just one or two milk cans at a time.[88] But strikers quickly adapted to those tactics and broadened their searches to include all types of vehicles and all storage compartments therein. Others simply sought obscure backroads on which to travel, or veered off the road and drove through ravines and corn fields. Still others fought back either by arming hired guards to ride with loads of milk or by threatening pickets with firearms. Some dairies began to organize rail shipments of milk, urging farmers to load the milk at a distant station and ship it directly into metropolitan areas. Strikers quickly responded by attacking trains at loading stations and various junctions en route. In Madison, where the notably inaccessible geography of the city contributed to a nearly airtight blockade, some shippers began smuggling milk across Lake Mendota by boat.[89] Pickets soon patrolled the lakes.

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[87] "Milk Strikers Surround Milwaukee," *Milwaukee Journal*, 20 February 1933, p. 1; "Farmers are Spilling Milk on Roadsides," *Green Bay Press-Gazette*, 17 February 1933, p. 1; "Milk Embargo 95 Pct. Effective Here Today," *Green Bay Press-Gazette*, 21 February 1933, p. 1; "Milk Pool May Not Join State Farmer Strike," *Capital Times* (Madison, Wis.), 24 October 1933, p. 1; "Masked Farm Strike Pickets Dumping Milk," *Capital Times* (Madison, Wis.), 17 November 1933, p. 14.

[88] "Milk Embargo 95 Pct. Effective Here Today," *Green Bay Press-Gazette*, 21 February 1933, p. 1.

[89] "Strike Growing, Milk Poured on Roads," *Milwaukee Journal*, 18 February 1933, p. 1; "Picketing Pick-Ups," *Milwaukee Journal*, 22 February 1933, p. 2; "Picket Army Moves on City," *Capital Times* (Madison, Wis.), 30 October 1933, p. 1; "Woman Evades Pickets,"

When pickets successfully stopped milk trucks, searched for smuggled shipments in passenger cars, or caught up with vehicles attempting to avoid search and seizure, they concerned themselves primarily with destroying the product. Usually strikers simply dumped the milk out. Over the course of the three strikes, according to newspaper estimates, strikers dumped tens of millions of gallons of milk into roadside ditches, ravines, sewers, creeks and rivers.[90] Sometimes farmers used gasoline or kerosene to ruin milk shipments by simply adding a little bit to each tank or can. Not only did such actions ruin the given batch of milk, but the scent and taste of petroleum products proved exceedingly difficult to remove from the milk tanks and cans. Some farmers took an even more blunt approach; one man simply walked over to his neighbor's farm with shotgun in hand and blasted a few holes in the bulk milk tank.[91]

As has already been demonstrated, farmers were willing to go to great lengths to curb milk shipments. They proved equally willing to disrupt the processing stages of the dairy

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Appleton (Wis.) *Post-Crescent*, 27 February 1933, p. 1;"1 Killed, 3 Near Death in Milk Strike; Company G Ordered Out," *Capital Times* (Madison, Wis.), 18 May 1933, p. 1; "Threaten Pickets with Violence at Appleton," *Capital Times* (Madison, Wis.), 30 October 1933, p. 1; "Prominent Local Farmer Murdered in Milk Strike," *Capital Times* (Madison, Wis.), 28 October 1933, p. 1; "Waukesha Drops Deputies; Roads Left to Milk Strikers," *Milwaukee Journal*, 21 February 1933, p. 1; "Milk Trucking Stops; Railroads Supply City," *Milwaukee Journal*, 22 February 1933, p. 1; "Speakers are Booed," *Green Bay Press-Gazette*, 22 February 1933, p. 2; "Boat-Load of Milk is Smuggled in Over Mendota," *Capital Times* (Madison, Wis.), 31 October 1933, p. 1.

[90] Newspapers filled their papers with accounts of milk dumping. A representative sample are provided here, but literally ever day of the strike brought stories like these. "Strike Growing, Milk Poured on Roads," *Milwaukee Journal*, 18 February 1933, p. 1; "Farmers are Spilling Milk on Roadsides," *Green Bay Press-Gazette*, 17 February 1933, p. 1; "Singler Seeks 'Dictatorship'," *Capital Times* (Madison, Wis.), 14 May 1933, p. 1; "Strikers Dumping Milk in County," *Capital Times* (Madison, Wis.), 26 October 1933, p. 1.

[91] "Milk Embargo 95 Pct. Effective Here Today," *Green Bay Press-Gazette*, 21 February 1933, p. 12; Hardiman interview, 3 August 1976, Tape 3, Side 1.

industry. At first, strikers attempted to physically block access to creameries by forming human blockades and brandishing clubs and firearms. Where that failed, striking farmers occasionally threatened to sabotage milk shipments with kerosene or even to blow up the factories themselves. A fair number of farmers acted on such threats. Strikers frequently broke into dairy plants to dump kerosene into holding tanks, heating tanks, and cheese-making vats. Since they were breaking and entering, most groups of farmers found it more efficient to despoil the milk, but some took the time to lug it back out of the factory and dump it. Other farmers carried out even more destructive threats, using dynamite to blow up a factory near Appleton. Such intimidation rarely won concessions from owners. In a handful of cases, creameries did begin to pay the demanded hundredweight price for milk. More frequently, however, plant owners faced with potential disruption simply stopped receiving milk and shut down processing temporarily.[92]

Predictably, many more creameries and processing plants fought back. Some encouraged farmers to continue to ship milk by providing additional perks for those who did. One Milwaukee area dealer offered a banquet of free food to those willing to cross the picket

[92] Interview with Floyd B. Lucia by Dale E. Trelevan, *Wisconsin Agriculturalists Oral History Project*, State Historical Society of Wisconsin, Madison, Wisconsin, Interview held on 15 January 1975, Audiocassette, Tape 2, Part 1, Side 1; "Strikers Dump Milk on Many County Roads Today," *Green Bay Press-Gazette*, 20 February 1933, p. 2; Dueholm interview, 19 December 1978, Tape 14, Side 1; "Farmers Beginning to Organize Here to Combat Milk Strike," *Appleton* (Wis.) *Post-Crescent*, 20 February 1933, p. 1; "Waukesha Drops Deputies; Roads Left to Milk Strikers," *Milwaukee Journal*, 21 February 1933, p. 2; "Farm Holiday Association May Rejoin Strike; Threaten to Bomb Deerfield Creamery," *Capital Times* (Madison, Wis.), 15 May 1933, p. 4; "Milk Embargo 95 Pct. Effective Here Today," *Green Bay Press-Gazette*, 21 February 1933, p. 1; "Dynamite Blast Damages Wisconsin Cheese Plant," *Capital Times* (Madison, Wis.), 31 October 1933, p. 1; "500 Farmers Force Price Demands at Baraboo," *Capital Times* (Madison, Wis.), 6 November 1933, p. 1; Segerstroms' interview, 29 September 1976, Tape 3, Side 1.

lines. At another plant, women employees armed with iron pipes beat back a crowd of picketers. In another community, the local telephone switchboard operator roused employees to their plant's defense with a secretly-coded sequence of phone rings. Owners frequently hired armed guards to protect their property and keep the milk flowing, and often demanded heightened police protection from municipalities, counties, and the state.[93]

To no one's surprise, then, striking farmers often clashed violently with non-participant farmers and milk truck drivers while attempting to stop shipments. Pickets took special umbrage against those who attempted to run the gauntlet of picket lines in defiance of the strike. One such driver was pulled from his car and beaten while pickets physically lifted his car and turned it around. But the violence of these confrontations varied in both intensity and purpose. Sometimes farmers simply smashed the windows of passing cars instead of trying to blockade the roadways. After one beating, farmers professed no personal animosity toward the bloodied driver and helped him to reload his just-dumped milk cans. Such variance in the way combatants conducted themselves is understandable, given that the strike pitted neighboring farmers against each other on the front lines.[94]

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[93] Interview with B. L. Blochowiak by Dale E. Trelevan, *Wisconsin Agriculturalists Oral History Project*, State Historical Society of Wisconsin, Madison, Wisconsin, Interview held in 1977, Audiocassette, Tape 2, Side 1; "Farmers Beginning to Organize Here to Combat Milk Strike," *Appleton* (Wis.) *Post-Crescent*, 20 February 1933, p. 1; "Call County Milk Truce Parley," *Capital Times* (Madison, Wis.), 31 October 1933, p. 1; "Strikers Dump Milk on Many County Roads Today," *Green Bay Press-Gazette*, 20 February 1933, p. 1; "Milk Embargo 95 Pct. Effective Here Today," *Green Bay Press-Gazette*, 21 February 1933, p. 1; "Milk Dealers in 6 Counties Serve Notice," *Fond du Lac* (Wis.) *Commonwealth Reporter*, 21 February 1933, p. 3.

[94] "New London Police Chief, Milk Strike Pickets in Battle," *Green Bay Press-Gazette*, 18 February 1933, p. 1; "Tons of Milk Dumped From Trucks as Strikers Patrol Highways," *Appleton* (Wis.) *Post-Crescent*, 18 February 1933, p. 1; "Milk Dealer's Car Ditched; Plans to Appeal for Militia," *Milwaukee Journal* (Final edition), 20 February 1933, p. 1; "Strikers

Strikers seemed considerably less inhibited when confronting milk industry employees, creamery and condensery owners, and law enforcement officials. As mentioned earlier, employees at some milk plants defended their facilities against the assault of striking farmers. Across the state, strikers fought pitched battles against various municipal, county and state police forces. In some districts, police even rode on the sideboards of milk trucks in an attempt to break through picket lines. When police showed up at milk plants and highway blockades, full scale riots often broke out. On the outskirts of Milwaukee, police used tear gas bombs to disperse a crowd of 100 farmers intent on despoiling milk. Another farmer recalled that in another outlying district, ". . . smoke bombs, tear gas was used, a lot of people were bludgeoned in the head with sticks. I can remember the morning. . . when the state National Guard rolled in with five truck loads of troops, and lined the main street from end to end with bayonets fixed and ammunition in their guns."[95] An eyewitness source for the *Capital Times* might well have been keeping his war-reporting skills honed during the interregnum:

> In downtown Appleton 1000 strikers battled with 200 troops and 300 special deputies. An eye witness described the scene to *The Capital Times* over the telephone: "The strikers came in a long caravan of cars and trucks, riding peaceably, apparently

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Dump Milk on Many County Roads Today," *Green Bay Press-Gazette*, 20 February 1933, p. 2; Interview with Norville Ellefson by Dale E. Trelevan, *Wisconsin Agriculturalists Oral History Project*, State Historical Society of Wisconsin, Madison, Wisconsin, Interview held on 16-17 January 1975, Audiocassette, Tape 4, Side 1.

[95] "Farmers Beginning to Organize Here to Combat Milk Strike," *Appleton* (Wis.) *Post-Crescent*, 20 February 1933, p. 4; Interview with Melvin Sprecher by Dale E. Trelevan, *Wisconsin Agriculturalists Oral History Project*, State Historical Society of Wisconsin, Madison, Wisconsin, Interview held on 9 August 1976, Audiocassette, Tape 3, Side 2; "Report Agreement Reached Calling Off Milk Strike," *Green Bay Press-Gazette*, 22 February 1933, p. 1; "Strikers Dump Milk on Many County Roads Today," *Green Bay Press-Gazette*, 20 February 1933, p. 1; Hardiman interview, 3 August 1976, Tape 3, Side 1.

> merely to show their strength in Outagamie county. The group was led by Norville H__ler (illegible), of Chiocton (sic), Outagamie milk pool general. The cars proceeded down College ave., Appleton's main street, past the armory with its machine gun barricade. About 200 troops, in full uniform, were loaded into trucks to follow the parade. As the caravan passed through the business district and reached the outskirts of town, it was met by about 300 deputies. There had been some shouting, but no actual violence until someone—none seems to know whether it was striker or trooper—threw a gas bomb. Strikers leaped from trucks and cars and sailed in the deputies under a veritable hail of gas bombs. The air for blocks around was permeated with the fumes. No shots were fired, but troops and deputies waded into the melee with clubs and gun butts. The gas barrage had, however, apparently been too much for the strikers, many of whom leaped from their cars and trucks and ran across fields. They were pursued by troops and deputies. Some of the strikers' cars sped toward Calumet county lines. They, too, were pursued by troops. Although the battle lasted but a few moments, it was furious—many being injured. None was taken to the hospital treatment. The arrested strikers were lodged in the Outagamie County jail without charge.[96]

Farmers became so well-accustomed to the use of tear gas that in later confrontations they would purposely press forward at angles which forced police to face upwind, thus negating much of the tear gas advantage.[97]

While striking farmers sought symbolic support from small local merchants, they more aggressively pursued the tangible support of other farm commodity groups and labor unions. After the first strike failed to win significant concessions from milk dealers, Singler quickly advocated a multi-commodity strike to put greater upward pressure on farm prices across the board. While some farmers, especially those in the Farmers Holiday association,

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[96] "1 Killed, 3 Near Death in Milk Strike; Company G Ordered Out," *Capital Times* (Madison, Wis.), 18 May 1933, p. 1. For another description similar in sweep and tenor, see "Waukesha Drops Deputies; Roads Left to Milk Strikers," *Milwaukee Journal*, 21 February 1933, p. 2.

[97] "Strikers Battle Drivers; Dump Out Their Milk—Foil Deputies in Gas Attacks," *Capital Times* (Madison, Wis.), 17 May 1933, p. 6. The grainy photo which appears atop this particular article is one of the more stunning pictures from the strike.

showed interest in such measures, the Wisconsin Council of Agriculture, which included 22 different farm organizations and over 100,000 farmer members, decided against supporting the second strike. The differences among the various groups were the same as those that divided farmers generally. Not all were convinced that strikes best served their interests. Not all were willing to support farmers who produced other commodities. Not all experienced the same problems due to disparate regional loci. But the refusal of strike support drove the Farmers' Union to sever its ties to the Council and to publicly denounce the ability of the Council to adequately represent farmer interests. Even after the failed second strike, meetings among all the state's agricultural groups failed to produce a consensus for a general farm strike.[98]

The WCMP often failed to generate unanimous support among other commodity producers, but it sought and received substantial support from the state's labor organizations. Where possible, co-op leaders pitched their case directly to the workers of various unions. The Milk Pool regularly held meetings with labor at labor temples and union halls in an attempt to mobilize participation of workers. Singler pleaded his case to a Milwaukee meeting of the Federated Trades Council and won the support of its 95 affiliated unions and a promise to boycott non-strike milk. In return, the Pool encouraged its members to purchase only union-made articles. The Milk Pool also won the blessing of the state American

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[98] "Name Farm Strike 'Minute Men'," *Capital Times* (Madison, Wis.), 12 April 1933, p. 1; "Waukesha Drops Deputies; Roads Left to Milk Strikers," *Milwaukee Journal*, 21 February 1933, p. 2; "100,000 Farmers Abandon Strike," *Capital Times* (Madison, Wis.), 25 April 1933, p. 1; "Farmer Union Bolts 'Ag' Council on Strike Action," *Capital Times* (Madison, Wis.), 28 April 1933, p. 1; "7 Wisconsin Farm Bodies Fail to Merge," *Capital Times* (Madison, Wis.), 4 October 1933, p. 3.

Federation of Labor, which pledged "unqualified support" for the strike. "Labor unions have made the same struggle that you are making today," the state A.F. of L. president said. "You have gone through skirmishes which are not new to us." Of even greater import was his interpretation of the strike, which in his eyes pitted the forces of "dairy trusts and capital" against "labor and farmers." In all dealings with labor leaders and local unions, speakers from both sides seemed able to draw upon a popular conception of a natural economic alliance between worker and farmer. More than any other factor, this common-sense prescription for the nation's economic woes seems to explain why labor so quickly and consistently supported striking farmers.[99]

But the Milk Pool did more than simply seek political support from labor leaders; it also offered a number of proposals to unionize and cooperatize the process of milk distribution. Singler suggested a number of ways in which the distribution process might be completely unionized. While the details differed, most plans included union drivers collecting milk and bringing it to a cooperatively-owned processing plant staffed with more union workers. Elsewhere, union leaders promised to distribute milk to its members who did

[99] "Name Farm Strike 'Minute Men'," *Capital Times* (Madison, Wis.), 12 April 1933, p. 1; "3,500 Farmers in County to Strike," *Capital Times* (Madison, Wis.), 22 October 1933, p. 1; "Violence Feared as Strike Pickets Halt Milk Trucks," *Milwaukee Journal*, 16 February 1933, p. 2; "2,000 Farmers Vote to Join Pool Program," *Green Bay Press-Gazette*, 20 February 1933, p. 3. The boycott pledge was repeated in later strikes. See "Farm Holiday Assn. May Rejoin Strike; Threaten to Bomb Deerfield Creamery," *Capital Times* (Madison, Wis.), 15 May 1933, p. 4. Interestingly, some Milwaukee area dairy workers were attempting to unionize at the same time. Hardiman interview, 17 August 1976, Tape 5, Side 1; "Leaders Say Milk Strike Will Spread," *Green Bay Press-Gazette*, 15 February 1933, p. 3; "U.S. to Act in State Farm Strike," *Capital Times* (Madison, Wis.), 13 April 1933, p. 1; "Farmers cheer As Officials of State Are Flayed," *Capital Times* (Madison, Wis.), 2 June 1933, p. 12.

not own cars, and thus could not purchase milk on the farm. Consumer leagues provided an entirely different mechanism through which to reverse the growing proportion of "middleman" costs. Some consumer leagues supported the strike, and agricultural leaders thought up ways that cooperatives and consumers leagues could work hand in hand. In Madison, such proposals came to fruition briefly when representatives of the Milk Pool, Farmers' Union, Farmers' Holiday association, and Madison Federation of Labor formed a short-lived cooperative that included farmers and workers as both producers and consumers.[100]

It seems clear, then, that most of the tactics used by WCMP members and sympathizers were essentially borrowed from labor. Farmers organized fellow workers, elected leaders, halted their own production, blocked the shipment of scab products, interfered with production efforts, sabotaged industry machinery, and sought broad public support for all of those actions. By September, the Milk Pool was organizing sit-ins on the steps of the capital, complete with a full lineup of speakers, songs, chants, and even children's theater re-creations of picket line tear-gassings. That striking farmers were treated like striking industrial workers is apparent enough from the descriptions of the conflicts. But one of the more telling junctures occurred between the second and third strikes, when the

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[100] "First Shot Fired, Milk Spilled in Strike," *Milwaukee Journal*, 17 February 1933, p. 3; "Violence Feared as Strike Pickets Halt Milk Trucks," *Milwaukee Journal*, 16 February 1933, p. 2; "U.S. Hurls Farm Strike Defy: Production Guarantee Plan Killed," *Capital Times* (Madison, Wis.), 9 May, 1933, p. 5; "Local Consumers League Starts 7-Day Milk Strike as Move to Aid Farmers," *Capital Times* (Madison, Wis.), 10 November 1933, p. 1; "Equity Society, Farmers Union Debate Merger," *Capital Times* (Madison, Wis.), 9 November 1933, p. 9; "Milk Battle Looms in New Co-op Plan," *Capital Times* (Madison, Wis.), 25 May 1933, pp. 1, 12; "New Retail Milk Co-op Organized," *Capital Times* (Madison, Wis.), 28 May 1933, pp. 1, 7.

governor was forced to officially recognize Walter Singler as the democratically-elected Milk Pool representative in all bargaining between the Pool and the state. Singler even credited the labor movement explicitly during one speech, suggesting that the picketing and blockading were "only what labor has taught us to do."[101]

Actions of the scale and style of organized labor accurately reflected the fact that dairy farmers selling their product faced much the same market as urban industrial laborers. Without question, nearly all dairy farmers were price takers; individually they had no substantial ability to affect the market price of milk. One Wisconsin Department of Agriculture official described the uniqueness of farmers' market position as "six million relatively small producers," a tenuous economic position much like that of semi-skilled labor. Few trade unionists faced so many equally-qualified competitors. Like striking industrial laborers, farmers faced blacklisting by milk dealers and processing plant owners during the strike if when they failed to produce the normal shipments of milk. Some were asked to sign contracts to ship milk in violation of state laws, and co-op milk truck drivers sympathetic to the strike were threatened with reprisals as well. The Milk Pool, while it was unable to negotiate much from state officials during the strikes, appealed earnestly to the governor and Attorney General to explicitly condemn blacklisting actions as part of each strike resolution.

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[101] "Singler Calls for Farmer March on State Capitol," *Capital Times* (Madison, Wis.), 16 September 1933, p. 1; "Singler, Milk Pool Win Victory," *Capital Times* (Madison, Wis.), 20 September 1933, p. 1; "Violence Feared as Strike Pickets Halt Milk Trucks," *Milwaukee Journal*, 16 February 1933, p. 1.

And like industrial firms who used lockouts to punish organizing workers, dairy distribution and processing plants could close their doors or refuse shipments at any time.[102]

Like industrial output, dairy productivity could be easily measured by the 1930s. Profit margins depended largely on increased productivity in percentage of cream and pounds of milk per head of cattle. Caught in the double bind of being both the farm manager and the laborer, farmers were responsible for either boosting productivity or losing their livelihood. They often discussed leakage and waste from different mechanization processes and brainstormed about how to prevent such losses.[103]

Like the output of unskilled and semi-skilled urban laborers, a single dairy farmer's product was virtually undifferentiable from and easily substitutable for that of any other farmer. Flexible condensery production best illustrates this point; dairy product manufacturers simply shifted both their purchasing patterns and production to cover shortages in any particular product. Thus, farmers rarely saw the benefits of temporary product shortages in, for example, cheese. In some ways, dairy farmers' position seemed even worse than that of trade union members because dairy farming lacked any barriers to entry or exit of the industry. Nearly any Wisconsinite could acquire either the capital or the loans to buy necessary farm implements.[104]

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[102] R. A. Peterson, Address delivered to the American Institute of Co-operation, p. 3; "Claim Certain Creameries To Defy State Strike Order," *Capital Times* (Madison, Wis.), 13 May 1933, p. 3; "4,000 Farmers at Rally to Hear Singler," *Green Bay Press-Gazette*, 25 February 1933, p. 3; Resolution from the WCMP Arbitration Committee, WCMP Records, Box 1, Folder 2, 18 May 1933, p. 2; "Singler Will Address Meet on Saturday," *Green Bay Press-Gazette*, 24 February 1933, p. 4.

[103] Swanton interview, 14 March 1975, Tape 6, Side 1, Part 2.

[104] R. A. Peterson, Address delivered to the American Institute of Co-operation, p. 6.

While many aspects of their respective work situations would have seemed completely alien to one another, dairy farmers and industrial workers faced many of the same daunting economic problems as they awoke each morning during the Depression. Waking near the crack of dawn, each worked long hours to produce something that perhaps no one could differentiate from their neighbor's. They each received money for their labors based on someone else's demand for their particular commodity and had little leverage to argue for more. Each had few incentives to produce better quality products and often worked within either an informal or formal piece rate system. Neither could prevent substitution of their work product for that of another unskilled worker, nor could they erect significant barriers to others entering their vocation. Little wonder, then, that when put in an economic pinch by plummeting wages, Wisconsin dairy farmers and industrial workers fought back in very similar ways.

Chapter 4: An Agricultural Hybrid

Put simply, dairy farmers shared the problems of both labor and capital. Previous efforts by participants, observers and historians to examine the causes, conduct and consequences of the strikes have relied awkwardly on the simple division of labor and capital. The answer to the question of why farmers talked like capitalists and acted like organized laborer, it seems, lies in the fallacy of the question—the fallacy of categorizing all economic actors as workers, capitalists, or petty bourgeoisie. I argue that cooperatively-organized dairy farmers were essentially a hybrid, that strike participants and observers occasionally recognized this subtlety, and that attempts to otherwise categorize them fail to address specific economic circumstances and actions. This interpretation explains the seemingly contradictory ways in which striking farmers strove to attract economic and political allies, how their words and actions were interpreted by state law enforcement officials, and even how striking farmers attempted to describe their own plight. Depression-era dairy farmers, through both their predicament and their responses, demonstrate this fallacy as well as any exercise in political abstraction. This hybridized economic status was demonstrated in a number of ways during the strikes.

Farmer cooperatives are one institutional example of how farmers straddled the line between capital and labor. In an attempt to consolidate "effective bargaining power" when they sold the fruits of their labors, farmers joined cooperatives in droves.[105] But while co-ops may have helped farmers sell their products at higher prices, they functioned more like

[105] Ibid, pp. 4-5.

industrial labor unions than small business associations or cartels. Unlike most cartels, cooperative associations consistently upheld a long tradition of open membership roles that dated back to the original cooperative in Britain.[106] That practice, while democratic in spirit, placed the burden of free riders squarely on the co-op.[107] If members had succeeded in pressing for higher milk prices during the 1933 strikes, those benefits would have extended to every farmer in the state, including the farmers that opposed the strike and those who shipped milk in defiance of it. While most farmers recognized this dilemma, some also argued that it could not be resolved. In doing so, they talked of co-ops as close cousins of labor unions and pushed for an open shop. Like most co-ops, the WCMP also ran on the one-member, one-vote principle, which ignored the volume of business done by individual members. And during the strike, the Milk Pool negotiated with labor unions and consumer groups to open jointly-run cooperatives in cities to distribute milk to consumers, a plan that suggests even greater blurring of traditional Marxist categorizations.[108]

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[106] For an excellent account of that first cooperative, see David J. Thompson, *Weavers of Dreams: Founders of the Modern Co-operative Movement* (Davis, CA: Regents of the University of California, 1994).

[107] The "free rider" effect refers to situations where those not participating in a pricing or labor action stand to benefit from its success. An example will further illustrate the concept. In right-to-work states, unions are forced to represent every member of their bargaining units, including non-members. Because such states forbid agreements between unions and employers which require all workers to become union members, non-members get a free ride. Likewise, had the 1933 milk strikes been successful, participants and non-participants in the strikes would have benefited equally from the boost in prices.

[108] Hardiman interview, 20 April 1978, Tape 13, Side 1. In fact, this particular farmer used the specific words "closed shop" to describe the potential dangers of an umbrella milk marketing cooperative. I do not have any specific source for the one-man, one-vote policy but am rather relying on the mountain of references made by co-op leaders in newspapers and in internal memos to the votes taken at meetings and by mailed ballots.

Indeed, cooperatively-organized farmers differed from small businesses in other important ways. Whereas early nineteenth-century farmers had provided agricultural products to local mining and timber operations, early twentieth-century dairy farmers did not sell directly to local consumers. They had few natural neighborhood niche markets and few regional markets, unlike neighborhood businesses that could count on local traffic and community affiliations to generate business. In other words, this was nearly a perfect commodity market, with regional importance only for highly perishable forms of milk. There was also little opportunity for innovation, since the parameters of what could be changed were narrow. While the University of Wisconsin Agricultural Extension service went to great lengths to disseminate information about increasing the quality of milk, the rewards for doing so were virtually nonexistent. One farmer's milk was quickly pooled with that of others on milk trucks, in holding tanks, in chillers, and finally at the processing plant.[109]

One could perhaps argue that a cooperative is little more than a particular form of a cartel. But early twentieth century co-ops like the WCMP neither looked nor acted like cartels.[110] For starters, the co-op lacked significant coercive or retributive powers against straying farmers—it could neither deny them access to markets nor flood the market with

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[109] For another excellent example of how that same process worked to make commodities anonymous in Chicago grain processing, see William Cronon, *Nature's Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1991), pp. 134-135.

[110] Comparisons to cartels may be more appropriate during later periods in dairy history. By the late 1970s and 1980s, cooperatively-organized milk marketing accounted for roughly 80 percent of milk production. Even so, the big players in this effort are largely federated cooperatives, which simply collect hundreds of smaller cooperatives, each of which competes both for additional members and markets.

products to punish for non-compliance. It also lacked members with sufficient market leverage to lead others into such a cartel arrangement—everyone might have benefited from an association, but farmers lacked a market leader among them. Unlike a cartel, the co-op did not attempt to limit the supply of milk in any way, either by attempting to regulate entry into the profession or by coercing members into limiting their own production. Instead, the Milk Pool sought simply to increase the market position of individual producers as they faced the larger, more powerful actors in the milk market—milk dealers, condenseries, processing plants, and chain stores.

Compared with industrial unions, marketing cooperatives differed substantially in institutional character. Rather than signing a collective contract to provide labor for a single employer, members signed individual contracts with varying lengths and clauses with a panoply of local processors. In addition to servicing a variety of potential "employers," the Milk Pool spread across parts of three states and had no obvious geographical center or boundaries.

Further evidence for the ambiguous position that farmers occupied can be seen in the varied and often ambivalent reactions of municipal and state law enforcement officials. Officials seemed to have a difficult time deciding whether to defend individuals' widely-recognized private property rights or to support what many felt was a just economic cause. Community consensus seemed to influence several police chiefs. One claimed that his actions were muted because ". . .the majority of the substantial farm population is solidly behind this strike."[111] Another summed up his trepidation about the strikes this way:

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[111] "Pickets Again Around City as Peace Fails," *Capital Times* (Madison, Wis.), p. 1.

> The one thing that impresses me particularly with reference to this entire farm movement is that it apparently has the backing of a large portion of the conservative farmers of the community, those who have been the bulwark and source of revenue through taxes that have kept our rural schools in existence and contributed in a large measure to the public revenue that has built up our state to its present position. . . The people who are for the most part participating in the farm movement are law abiding citizens and neither the sheriff nor I anticipate any serious trouble in this county. [112]

Nevertheless, many law enforcement officials opposed the various tactics used by strikers. Some permitted "peaceful picketing" but not the right of farmers to stop, search, or vandalize passing milk trucks. The Milwaukee sheriff claimed the "neutral" position of protecting life and property, and his deputies fought to keep the highways open. Other deputies roamed rural highways looking to break up picket lines. Sheriffs making the brashest anti-strike statements oftentimes oversaw districts with relatively little strike activity. In areas more favorable to the strike, several sheriffs battled strikers in hand to hand combat.[113]

On the other hand, some law enforcement officials supported and even encouraged strike actions. Some supported strikers' right to dump milk as long as no bodily violence occurred. Others defended the right of farmers to form a picket line and prevent milk trucks from passing. After talking with one sheriff, a Milk Pool leader reported to fellow pickets that the sheriff only wanted milk truck blockages and dumping to be "orderly." Another

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[112] "Risser Warns Farmers Must Have Aid Soon," *Capital Times* (Madison, Wis.), p. 5.

[113] "Milk Strike Moves Slowly on First Day," *Milwaukee Journal*, p. 1; "Milwaukee Will Act," *Capital Times* (Madison, Wis.), p. 1; "Violence Feared as Strike Pickets Halt Milk Trucks," *Milwaukee Journal*, 16 February 1933, p. 1; "Strike Growing, Milk Poured on Roads," *Milwaukee Journal*, 18 February 1933, p. 1; "Strikers Dump Milk on Many County Roads Today," *Green Bay Press-Gazette*, 20 February 1933, p. 2; "Officers' Guns Check Raid on Outagamie Co. Cheese Factory," *Green Bay Press-Gazette*, 21 February 1933, p. 12; "New London Police Chief, Milk Strike Pickets in Battle," *Green Bay Press-Gazette*, 18 February 1933, p. 1.

sheriff accompanied several milk trucks on daily runs, but when strikers stopped the trucks the sheriff "did not interfere" while the milk was dumped. Another city attorney asked only that strikers place their blockades at the edge of the city and dump their milk into a river to spare the city both jurisdictional responsibility and fetid spoilage. Near Green Bay, one team of district attorney and sheriff not only sanctioned strike actions, but disarmed the privately-hired guards who accompanied milk trucks.[114]

In some cases, municipal officials quarreled among themselves about what level of strike activity they should permit. Faced with widespread unemployment and scanty funding for municipal works programs, some communities hired jobless men as guards. Such men, frequently armed, rode on the sideboards of milk trucks in an effort to break the blockades. Other communities used the swelling numbers of jobless as a temporarily-deputized extension of the police force. Actions like these drew the ire of some city government officials, as well as rural populations supportive of the strike. The sheriff of Dane County refused to send out deputies as a precautionary measure. He argued that farmers would be able to conduct the strike without violence and that deputies should be called in only if that peace failed. In Waukesha, the sheriff hired thirty-one special deputies to quell the strike.

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[114] "Farmers are Spilling Milk on Roadsides," *Green Bay Press-Gazette*, 17 February 1933, p. 1. This did not include actual dumping of milk, said the sheriff and the district attorney. Later in the strike after farmers had dumped thousands of gallons of milk, this same sheriff and D.A. confronted pickets at several condenseries. See again "Officers' Guns Check Raid on Outagamie Co. Cheese Factory," *Green Bay Press-Gazette*, 21 February 1933, p. 12

"Dairy Trucks are Escorted by Deputies," *Fond du Lac* (Wis.) *Commonwealth Reporter*, 20 February 1933, p. 3; "New London Police Chief, Milk Strike Pickets in Battle," *Green Bay Press-Gazette*, 18 February 1933, p. 1; "Picketing Pick-Ups," *Milwaukee Journal*, 22 February 1933, p. 2; "4,000 Farmers at Rally to Hear Singler," *Green Bay Press-Gazette*, 25 February 1933, p. 1.

The city's chairman of the committee on public property opposed such actions, however, and vowed not to pay a penny of the county's bills for such deputies. They were quickly laid off. So diverse were the opinions of municipal officials and law enforcement officers that they called on the state Attorney General to issue a formal definition of picketing.[115] Across Wisconsin, farmers, law enforcement officials, and citizens argued and disagreed about not only whose rights should be defended, but just which rights those were.

In fact, a limited amount of evidence suggests that some of the participants in the 1933 strikes felt that dairy farmers, cooperatively-organized, straddled both sides of the line between capital and labor. Member farmers pressed the president and Congress for farm relief, referring to themselves as the "owner/tillers" of the soil. This unique position, they argued, made farmers the backbone of property ownership in the United States. But in most other industrial processes, the "owner" and "tiller" were different people; in the particular case of small farmers, they were the same.[116]

And sometimes farmers made this argument unintentionally through their own confusion about where to categorize themselves economically. The Milk Pool's lawyer talked repeatedly about how farmers and laborers made up 93 percent of the population, but consistently failed to explain the distinctions between the two groups when asked. Another

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[115] "Truce to May 1 in Milk Strike in Wisconsin," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 23 February 1933, p. 11; "Strikers Dump Milk on Many County Roads Today," *Green Bay Press-Gazette*, 20 February 1933, p. 1; Farm Strike Pickets Halt 2 Dane County Milk Trucks," *Capital Times* (Madison, Wis.), p. 1; "Waukesha Drops Deputies; Roads Left to Milk Strikers," *Milwaukee Journal*, 21 February 1933, p. 1; "About This Strike: You Can Join or Not, Nobody Can Stop You," *Capital Times* (Madison, Wis.), p. 1.

[116] "A Declaration and Petition," WCMP Records, Box 2, Folder 1, 11 November 1932, p. 1.

talked of the farmer as "a private enterprise capitalist, perhaps in a small sense—he didn't control a lot of capital. . .." From this man's perspective, even though cooperatives were more akin to labor unions than capitalist enterprises, they nevertheless "strengthened the private enterprise system." According to this formulation, farmers were basically capitalists engaged in labor organizing as a matter of necessity to reassert the primacy of capitalism. Milo Reno talked about farmers having a "common cause" with labor, but when asked what he meant by labor, he included "the little girl going to work as a typist and the man who used to carry a dinner pail; the farmer, the clerk, all those who serve." In this rendition, farmers apparently were simultaneously allied with labor and a part of labor. Reno had a difficult time with these categories; at another rally, he foresaw three possible outcomes of the current crisis: peasantry, menial slavery at the hands of industrialists, and independent farming. One farmer drew an even flimsier distinction, arguing that farmers should avoid profits precisely because they put farmers "in the same class with capitalists. . .."[117]

Milk Pool leaders grappled repeatedly with this very issue and illustrated in subtle ways that the distinction between capital and labor could not be coherently made. The aforementioned proposals for cooperatively-distributed milk and union-run distribution facilities indicate that the Milk Pool found its natural allies for capital investments not in entrepreneurs or investor-owned corporations, but in non-profit farmer coalitions and wage earning union laborers. Leaders even revised the motto on the Pool's own stationery to

[117] "5,000 Farmers Stage Parade; Cheer Singler," *Green Bay Press-Gazette*, 27 February 1933, p. 2; Swanton interview, 21 March 1975, Tape 6, Side 2, Part 2; "Strike Truce Halts Wisconsin Milk War," *Green Bay Press-Gazette*, 23 February 1933, p. 3; "Reno Will Seek Support of Labor," *Capital Times* (Madison, Wis.), 22 October 1933, p. 1; "Reno Defends Calling Off of Farmers Strike," *Capital Times* (Madison, Wis.), 5 July 1933, p. 2.

include consumers, changing it from 1932's "Put Wisconsin Cheese and Dairy Products on the Nation's Table at Cost of Production Plus a Reasonable Profit," to 1933's "Put Wisconsin Cheese and Dairy Products on the Nation's Table at a reasonable price to producer and consumer".[118]

The Milk Pool and its membership demonstrated just how squarely they sat on the fence between capital and labor when they consistently chose neither to sanction radical action nor to forbid it. We are left with statements like this one from Singler during the final strike. After admitting that many farmers had armed themselves and had stocked up on ammunition, he turned to reporters and suggested, "Maybe they're going duck hunting." When one state official called Singler, blaming him for the violence which had erupted across the state, Singler offered to send the official another copy of his signed statement opposing violence. "Don't send it to me," the official retorted. "Send it to your followers." Laughing, Singler said, "Well, I don't know how it will work out."[119]

Whatever the collective intent of its membership, the WCMP could not extricate itself from either its role as the consolidator of capitalists or its role as the organizer of laborers.

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[118] "Milk Battle Looms in New Co-op Plan," *Capital Times* (Madison, Wis.), 25 May 1933, p. 1; "Methods of State in Milk Strike Hit," *Capital Times* (Madison, Wis.), 20 May 1933, p. 1; "Milk Pool to Back No More Strikes: Singler," *Capital Times* (Madison, Wis.), pp. 1-2; Sample stationery, WCMP Records, Box 2, Folder 2; "Official Minutes of the Meeting of the Board of Directors of the Wisconsin Co-operative Milk Pool, Beaver Dam, Wis., June 2, 1933," *Wisconsin Dairymans News*, 2 June 1933, p. 3.

[119] "Singler to Check Strike Sentiment in State Tour," *Capital Times* (Madison, Wis.), p. 1; "State May Hold Singler Liable for Strike Violence," *Capital Times* (Madison, Wis.), p. 2. This conversation was illegally tapped by the state, and an administration source quickly disseminated to the press those parts damaging to the WCMP.

When the Works Project Administration expressed its inability to categorize farmers as either capital or labor, it did a better job of handling the question—albeit by leaving it unanswered—than most historians since. In the Wisconsin milk strikes of 1933, farmers demonstrated through a complex and often contradictory combination of words and actions that they were both. That strikers may have failed to pair neatly their rhetoric with their actions suggests the possibility that traditional economic classification models require revision. Close examination of the history of the milk strikes reveals that both farmers and contemporary observers recognized implicitly that small dairy farmers in the early twentieth century faced dual economic roles. Historians may try to resurrect and revise nineteenth-century producerist classifications or expand on traditional Marxist class categories. Either way, the Wisconsin milk strikes of 1933 suggest that such efforts can illuminate all discussions of the complex relationship between economic circumstances and political identity.

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