

BLANK PAY DAYS
By: A CHICAGO HIGH-SCHOOL TEACHER
July 1, 1933

[Page 16] I shall never forget that first blank pay day of the Chicago school-teachers. Pay day with us, in normal times, occurred once a month. In a year there would be ten of them; none during the vacation months of July and August. On a morning when I was to receive a salary check I commonly awoke with a freshness I did not feel on ordinary days. I would know, happily, that it was the beginning of a part of my economic cycle in which I could relax some of my rules of thrift. So, with plans for a few dinners in town, to be followed by concerts or lectures, I would reach school in a glow from pleasant restrained excitement. Pay day! ...

[The author explains how, after not receiving a pay check in four months, she moved from her own apartment into an apartment she shared with her brother, her sister-in-law, their two children, and her sick mother to help save on expenses.]

[Page 68] Plenty of other families have had to double up [by moving in with friends and/or family members], to get along without conveniences and aids which they had come to look upon as necessities. Across the street from where I live there is a tiny apartment occupied by six persons instead of three. The father, mother and unmarried son have received the daughter, her husband and child. ... Thousands of these family mergers have occurred. I suppose these account for the vast number of vacant apartments. I suppose the vacant apartments in a measure account for the unpaid tax bills. I know the unpaid tax bills are the reason my brother and I abandoned one of the two apartments we formerly occupied. Here the thing begins to resemble a circle vicious enough to be muzzled.

Lest someone accuse me unjustly of putting too much emphasis on the troubles of school-teachers, I want to point out that five days in each week I am in intimate contact with about 350 high-school students. They come swarming into my room thirty and forty at a time. They stay for the best part of an hour and then make way for another group. It is part of my job to understand them. If a girl in my class begins to grow thin and turns an ever paler face toward me, more than human sympathy requires me to know why. It is my job. If a boy—a normally well behaved and sensitive lad of fifteen—is transformed into an ill-tempered daydreamer, I can sometimes read the answer in the patches on his clothing. In these stern years when I look searchingly into the eyes of a student, often it is as revealing as if I had peered through the window of a Chicago home.

Sometimes I actually go to those homes. In my division there are forty-odd pupils. Naturally, I am closest to those in this group. Lately, in tracing the cause of one girl's absence, I went to talk with her elder sister. "No carfare," she explained. "A lot of students and teachers walk farther than Grace would have to," [the teacher replied.] ...

That young woman had to fight with her pride to confess as much as that. I had to fight back my tears. Happily, I mustered enough tact to make it possible for the absent girl to report to school earlier in the day, when, with funds provided by the teachers, a simple breakfast is fed to students who would otherwise attend their classes with empty stomachs.

In my school, about one-third of the students are the offspring of parents born in America. The rest are the sons and daughters of immigrants—Germans, Swedes, Irish, Poles, Italians and an occasional Mexican. There are two or three Negroes in each class. I do not wish to exaggerate the amount of suffering among them. Actually, most of them are comfortably sheltered, adequately fed and warmly dressed.

Two of the youngsters in my division are from homes where there is no wage earner. They are subsisting on the Illinois equivalent of the dole—family relief. We have lost about a fifth of our student body, youngsters who

were obliged to go to work or to remain at home to take over household [page 69] chores of some other member of the family who had to go out to work. When we discovered that some were dropping out of school because they did not have shoes or stockings, we teachers began to bring for secret distribution what garments we could round up among our friends. ...

[page 70] I have been singularly fortunate in disposing of all my tax-anticipation warrants at par. The Board of Education, about eight times in the last two years, has paid us with warrants. ... Then brokerage establishments were opened in La Salle Street where this paper was traded in actively. Prices fluctuated widely. Altogether there are hundreds of varieties of tax warrants now outstanding in Cook County. ... [I]n the stores and shops all over Chicago, this paper was being bartered by teachers frantic to get hold of a little cash. ... Some teachers have hung on to the warrants, and then, in sudden emergencies, have taken absurdly low prices for them. ... I have disposed of mine at par by paying the rent with them. The landlord uses them to pay his tax bill. ...

Some weeks ago, when I was eating my midday sandwich and apple in the chemical laboratory, one of the younger teachers came bustling in. "You'll march in the protest parade Saturday, won't you?" There was no doubt in her voice. "No," I said, "I won't march." "Why not?" She was mightily indignant and glared at me. ...

"Well," I said, "I am afraid of mob psychology. I do not propose to act like an incorrigible child because I have been treated unfairly by my employer." She slammed the door and I heard her whispering to another of the younger teachers when I left the building.

Plenty of other teachers did march. I'm not sure now that, if they march again, I may not march with them. ...

Just before the spring vacation, a group of pupils clustered around my desk. They had some plan under way. Then one, in the whisper of a conspirator, asked me a question. I shook my head from side to side. "You mean we must not?" His voice suggested he could not believe his ears. "You don't want us to strike?" "I'm here at my desk. Isn't that your answer?" Then I smiled and ordered them to hustle back to their seats and get to work. I believe that three-quarters of the teachers I know feel the same way.

Text excerpted by Adam Mertz, History Department, University of Illinois at Chicago.

From: Anonymous, "Blank Pay Days by a Chicago High-School Teacher," *The Saturday Evening Post*, July 1, 1933, 16-17 and 68-70.

DOCUMENT 8.2

Historical Era

**THE GREAT DEPRESSION
AND WORLD WAR II
(1929-1945)**Document Title: **BLANK PAY DAYS**Document Type: **magazine/newspaper article****BRIEF DESCRIPTION:**

This document is excerpted from an article written by a Chicago school teacher about how the Great Depression was affecting her work and personal life; published 1933 in *The Saturday Evening Post*.

Document Selection and Teaching Guide by:

Adam Mertz, History Department, University of Illinois at Chicago

SOURCING THE SOURCE

An anonymous Chicago high school teacher—listed simply as “A Chicago High-School Teacher”—wrote this article for *The Saturday Evening Post*, a weekly magazine that many people across the country regularly read, featuring fiction and non-fiction, cartoons and illustrations. In fact, many of Norman Rockwell’s famous illustrations—ones depicting aspects of American society—appeared in *The Saturday Evening Post*. So although this is only the perspective of one anonymous Chicago public school teacher, her thoughts **reached a national audience**, as she explained the challenges that she, her family, her co-workers, and her students faced in Depression-era Chicago.

UNDERSTANDING THE SOURCE **Historical Context:**

As the Great Depression continued, unemployment rose and income fell for many people across the country. Because of this reduced income, most Americans could not afford to pay their taxes, which meant municipalities and states lacked enough funds to run government programs. Since public schools often represented the largest expense for municipalities, politicians across the country—often urged by business organizations—cut school budgets in attempts to save other government programs or just avoid full bankruptcy. “The cuts in the Chicago public school system,” explains historian John F. Lyons, “were particularly severe.” “The Board of Education, under the control of Chicago politicians,” Lyons continues, “had long overspent as it practiced widespread patronage in the granting of contracts for school construction and equipment. Approximately 90% of the funding for the Chicago public schools came from an unequally distributed property tax. Due to declining revenue brought on by the Depression, an investigation of the tax system that delayed tax collection, and pressure from sections of the business community to cut taxes, the Chicago Board of Education curtailed public education expenditures in the early 1930s.”¹ As part of the budget cuts, Chicago’s Board of Education laid off teachers, shortened the school year, cut teacher pay or paid teachers late, and reduced or cancelled education-related services. These measures obviously hurt teachers, but they also harmed students and whole communities.

¹ John F. Lyons, “Regional Variations in Union Activism of American Public Schoolteachers” in *Education and the Great Depression: Lessons from a Global History*, E. Thomas Ewing and David Hicks, eds. (New York: Peter Lang, 2006), 23.

The practice of paying teachers in “tax-anticipation warrants” offers one example of how policies toward teachers connected with their communities—and the whole city. Because the Board of Education had little actual money, it sometimes paid teachers in scrip—basically a voucher or an “IOU”—called “tax-anticipation warrants” (or simply “warrants”), since they represented the money the Board of Education anticipated it would receive after Chicago citizens could once again afford to pay their taxes. As the author of this document states, the Board of Education paid Chicago teachers in tax-anticipation warrants eight times in the past two years. In other words, 40 percent of their payment in two years was scrip—not to mention all the other times the teachers received reduced payments or late payments within those two years. Teachers had to pay rent with the scrip or sell it to banks, businesses, or individuals; upon selling the scrip, teachers often received less than the scrip’s worth. The author of the document explains some of this process. Many other Chicago institutions also paid their workers in their own scrip. When the individuals, businesses, banks, and landlords used the scrip to pay for their own taxes, the Chicago city government became flooded with these worthless warrants, completing the cycle and worsening the problem. In short, while those who gave scrip as payment intended this practice as a helpful measure when they were short on cash, it often had negative consequences.

“The sufferings of the Great Depression,” Lyons explains, “changed the political views of many public schoolteachers.”² As a result, many teachers began to believe that engaging in protests and strikes would be the only way to improve their pay and working conditions, which would also improve their students’ learning environment. In fact, thousands of teachers and students in Chicago public schools went on strike on April 5, 1933 to demonstrate their anger at teachers not receiving pay for several months. But many teachers felt that teachers should not engage in protests and strikes because it was improper behavior. Indeed, since the vast majority of public school teachers were women, these teachers—and women in general—were expected to stay out of politics and selflessly serve the public. So when teachers began to engage in protests and other union activity, many opponents criticized these teachers for acting in an inappropriate, “manly” way. The expectations about teachers, therefore, represented significant obstacles.

□ **Meaning and Significance of the Document**

While this document was not nearly as influential or famous as, say, Abraham Lincoln’s “Gettysburg Address,” this anonymous Chicago public school teacher’s thoughts and feelings reached a national audience through publication in the widely read *Saturday Evening Post*. The article was designed to inform readers across the country about the challenges that she, her family, her co-workers, and her students faced in Chicago as a result of the Depression and the budget cuts.

This document also shows how economic troubles, discontent, and worker organizing also occurred *outside* factories. While industrial conflict represents a key part of the Great Depression and the New Deal, all Americans had to deal with changes and frustrations in their various workplaces.

Decisions about how to address these frustrations involved serious individual and group considerations. Indeed, Chicago’s public school teachers wrestled with the idea of what it meant to be a “professional.” Should teachers come together to participate in protests and strikes to secure greater pay and control over their working conditions? Or should they avoid these behaviors because “professionals” don’t behave in that manner? The author of this document chose not to engage in protests or strikes. But compare her attitudes to the decisions of a different teacher contained in “Spasmodic Diary of a Chicago School-Teacher,” written by another anonymous Chicago public school teacher.

More broadly, in the article you can see various people—whether they are part of a government institution, a family, or acting as individuals—attempting solutions to the problems brought on by the Great Depression.

² Lyons, “Regional Variations in Union Activism of American Public Schoolteachers,” 24.

GLOSSARY

The dole: government money paid to people in need, often to unemployed people and/or people with disabilities.

Tax-anticipation warrants: basically a voucher or an “IOU,” also known as scrip. Because the Board of Education had little actual money, it sometimes paid teachers in these “tax-anticipation warrants” (or simply “warrants”), since they represented the money the Board of Education anticipated it would receive after Chicago citizens could once again afford to pay their taxes.

Incorrigible: can’t be corrected or changed

Patronage: a system in which politicians distribute money and/or jobs to loyal political supporters.

QUESTIONS -- DISCUSSION POINTS

Document-Specific

- On page 68, the author states “Here the thing begins to resemble a circle vicious enough to be muzzled.” What does she mean? How do her observation and her examples demonstrate the interconnections between taxes, rent, and unemployment in the city during the Great Depression?
- Why did the Board of Education—along with hundreds of other institutions around Chicago—issue tax-anticipation warrants? Was this practice effective? How did various people cope with this practice?
- Why does the author decide not to march in protest?

Historical Era

- How did the hardships of the Great Depression affect family and school life for both students and teachers?
- How did some teachers and students help support one another during these difficult times?
- How did the role of government change during the national crises of the Great Depression?

Labor and Working-Class History

- Why did working people form or join labor unions?
- What role(s) have women played in the labor movement?

CITATION & FAIR USE

An anonymous Chicago high school teacher, “Blank Pay Days,” *The Saturday Evening Post*, July 1, 1933, 16-17 and 68-70. [excerpt]

ADDITIONAL SOURCES

Lyons, John F. “Chicago Teachers Unite,” *Chicago History* (Spring 2004): 32-47.

Lyons, John F. *Teachers and Reform: Chicago Public Education, 1929-1970*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2008.

Lyons, John F. “Regional Variations in Union Activism of American Public Schoolteachers” in *Education and the Great Depression: Lessons from a Global History*, E. Thomas Ewing and David Hicks, eds. New York: Peter Lang, 2006.

CURRICULAR & PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT CONNECTIONS

Curricular Connections:

NCCHS US Era 8 [Standard 1](#): The causes of the **Great Depression and how it affected America society**, especially Standard 1B: **The student understands how American life changed during the 1930s.**

This document provides a window to view what everyday life was like for urban residents during the Great Depression, especially public school teachers and their students. It also provides some insight into how the Depression affected city politics and how various groups coped with problems brought about by the Depression.

Common Core Standards:

[CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.11-12.1](#) Cite specific textual evidence to support analysis of primary and secondary sources, connecting insights gained from specific details to an understanding of the text as a whole.

[CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.11-12.2](#) Determine the central ideas or information of a primary or secondary source; provide an accurate summary that makes clear the relationships among the key details and ideas.

[CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.11-12.3](#) Evaluate various explanations for actions or events and determine which explanation best accords with textual evidence, acknowledging where the text leaves matters uncertain.

[CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.11-12.5](#) Analyze in detail how a complex primary source is structured, including how key sentences, paragraphs, and larger portions of the text contribute to the whole.

[CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.11-12.6](#) Evaluate authors' differing points of view on the same historical event or issue by assessing the authors' claims, reasoning, and evidence.

[CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.11-12.8](#) Evaluate an author's premises, claims, and evidence by corroborating or challenging them with other information.