WAR PROSPERITY AND HUNGER: THE NEW YORK FOOD RIOTS OF 1917

By WILLIAM FRIEBURGER

On the morning of February 19, 1917, the women of the Brownsville section of Brooklyn, New York came out to do their usual food shopping. But this was to be no ordinary shopping day, for what the women found when they reached the shopping area surprised and horrified them. Food prices, rising steadily for several months, had taken another sudden leap. Frustration, anger, and fear for the welfare of their families resulted in an eruption of extraordinary violence. Thousands of women in Brownsville and later, Williamsburg, overturned pushcarts, set produce on fire, and fought police for hours.

While incidents of rioting and violence are certainly not rare in the history of this country, the food riots of 1917, which quickly spread to working class neighborhoods in other cities, are of special interest in that they were a protest against hunger at a time when American capitalism was reaping vast profits from the World War then raging in Europe. Since food and other necessities could be sold at high prices to the Europeans, American consumers were faced with a disastrous rise in the cost of living. As early as November 12, 1916, an alarming article in the New York Times noted that flour, selling for $10 per barrel, was “higher today than at any time since the Civil War, when immediately after the conflict it brought $15.” Potatoes, according to the Times, had increased in price during the previous month by more than 100%, selling now for more than $2 per bushel, with housewives paying 75 to 80 cents a peck. The rising costs of virtually all food items were astonishing:
New records in American produce prices have also been reached for cabbages, turnips, carrots, and several other of the common vegetables. . . . Cheese has never been so high in America before. The best grades of full cream American cheese is [sic] 100 per cent higher than a year ago. Prices by the pound range from 30 to 35 cents, as against 18 to 20 cents at this time last year. . . . Butter is likely to go up to 50 cents a pound for the best grades in the city before Christmas.¹

Various prominent Americans had their own explanations for this price spiral, so devastating for the working masses in cities like New York, Boston, and Philadelphia. President Woodrow Wilson, recently victorious in his quest for reelection, blamed "the middleman." Speaking to a convention of the National Grange on November 14, Wilson said

We ought to raise such big crops that circumstances like the present can never recur, when men can make as if the supply was so short that the middleman could charge for it whas he pleased. It will not do to be so niggardly to the rest of the world in respect to its food supply.²

George Perkins, the New York financier and backer of Theodore Roosevelt's 1912 Presidential campaign, scoffed at Wilson's remedy of more farm production, arguing instead that more government intervention in the economy was needed. Perkins asserted that

The fundamental trouble is that we have not at Washington or Albany or New York City, or anywhere else, the right kind of market departments, whose business it is to study the question of food supply, food distribution, and food consumption in an intelligent, business-like manner, and bring about such reforms in the method of food distribution as would bring about beneficial results to both the producer and consumer. Until such market departments are established the high cost of living is going to be an ever-burning question.³

Naturally, suspicions existed in the minds of many people that speculators were taking full advantage of the situation to drive prices up even further. On November 19 the Federal Trade

² New York Times, Nov. 15, 1916, 1. The Times noted that "the President did not mention recent petitions to him to declare an embargo on the exportation of foodstuffs from the United States, and he did not refer even indirectly to the outcome of the Presidential election. His address was interrupted frequently by applause from the farmers attending the fiftieth anniversary of the grange."
Commission admitted that it had received “numerous suggestions” that it investigate the problem of food prices and it also admitted that “these high prices may be due to the existence of unlawful combinations among dealers.” But the Commission argued that such combinations would fall under the purview of the Sherman Anti-Trust Act, and any investigation would thus be the job of the Department of Justice. The public was assured that the Justice Department had already “instituted a searching investigation throughout the country.”

Prices continued to rise throughout the fall and winter of 1916-1917. In New York, the late February price surge was the last straw for many people. On the 19th angry women found onions selling for 15 to 18 cents per pound, an increase of 3 to 5 cents. Potatoes were selling at an extraordinary 5 to 7 cents per pound. Chicken was a luxury that went for 32 cents per pound.

The rioting apparently started on Belmont Avenue in Brownsville at 10 am, when a woman who didn’t have enough cash to cover her purchases overturned a pushcart. As the peddler protested and attempted to chase after her hundreds of women surged in upon the hapless businessman. The same thing soon happened to many of his fellows. In Brownsville and, later, in Williamsburg, “stands and carts were torn to pieces, and while

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4 New York Times, Nov. 19, 1916, I, 8. That same page of the Times contained this piece of news: Federal agents today seized the books of two large cold storage warehouse companies, for use in the investigation into the high cost of living. The records were taken to the office of the United States District Attorney, and will be given to the Federal Grand Jury which meets next Monday. According to the economist Edward C. Kirkland, food prices went up 82 percent in the two and a half years preceding the entry of the U.S. into the War. See his A History of American Economic Life (New York, 1969), 475. Barger and Landsberg, in their study of American agriculture between 1899 and 1939, give the following statistics: the price farmers received for eggs was 20.5 cents per dozen in 1914, 19.4 cents in 1915, 22.1 cents in 1916 and 31.8 cents in 1917. Chickens brought 47.9 cents per head in 1914, 44.8 cents in 1915, 51.3 cents in 1916, and 64.2 cents in 1917. Potatoes brought 55.9 cents per bushel in 1914, 68.1 cents in 1915, 152.8 cents in 1916 and 125.5 cents in 1917. See Harold Barger and Hans H. Landsberg, American Agriculture, 1899-1939 (New York, 1942), 332-352. Benjamin H. Hibbard gives some interesting figures for the production and exportation of potatoes. According to him, 359,721,000 bushels of potatoes were produced in 1915 and 2,135,000 of these bushels were exported. In 1916 286,953,000 bushels were produced and 4,018,000 were exported. In 1917 442,536,000 bushels were produced and 2,489,000 were exported. From 1910 to 1914 an average of 360,772,000 bushels had been produced each year and an average of 1,699,000 had been exported. See Benjamin H. Hibbard, Effects of the Great War Upon Agriculture in the United States (New York, 1919), 51-52.

their proprietors were hustled aside, kerosene was poured over the debris and the torch applied."  

Police reserves from the Brownsville and Liberty Avenue stations battled an estimated 1000 rioters in Brownsville for two hours before order was restored. But at 4 am violence broke out again, this time in the Williamsburg tenement district bounded by Grand, South Third, and Roebling Streets and Marcy Avenue. A woman here refused to pay the new prices, and when the peddlers refused to sell her food, she put her shoulder to one of the carts and overturned it:

Other women followed her example. Some pitched into the pushcart merchants themselves and sent them flying. A number of the peddlers left their carts where they stood and the hungry women who wouldn't buy helped themselves. One strong housewife scooted out of a tenement with a pail of kerosene in her hand. She shoved a pushcart man away and sprinkled the oil over his onions—retail price 20 cents a pound.  

The *New York Sun* reported that "in every block where the women made an attack they won a victory" while the *Tribune* stated that

A dozen policemen were powerless before the women of Williamsburg. While a single cart remained on its wheels or a stand flaunted its onions and potatoes they rushed madly through the streets shunting the patrolmen to one side.

Police reserves from the Bedford Avenue station battled the Williamsburg rioters for forty minutes before the disturbance was quelled. Surprisingly, the New York Police, never famous for gentleness or sympathy for rioters, made no arrests. Officer Gillen, who led the reserves from the Bedford station, explained later "I just didn't have the heart to do it. They were just crazy with hunger, and I don't see how I could blame them."

The peddlers, horrified by the attacks made upon them, considered themselves to be the victims of skyrocketing wholesale prices. Anxious to explain their position to their customers, they held a public meeting that night at the New Plaza Hotel at Grand and Havemeyer Streets. One of their number, Abraham Zerring,

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explained to an overflow crowd that onions were selling for as high as $15 a bag and potatoes at $10 a bag at the Bushwick Terminal of the Long Island Railroad. According to the Times, "several of the peddlers told of their small earnings, and one of them, Henry Eiser, asserted that his profits for the week had been but 75 cents."

Not surprisingly, trouble occurred again on the following day. About 400 women from the East Side, many of them carrying babies, marched from Rutgers Square to City Hall shouting "We want food for our children." At about 11 am they reached the Mayor's office and demanded to see him. His Honor, however, was not in, and at 12:30 he was due at a luncheon of the Merchants' Association. This was hardly the type of news that would mollify such a crowd. The women pressed against the locked gates of City Hall and cries of "We want food" and "Give us bread" filled the air. Apparently no one at City Hall spoke Yiddish, so Lieutenant William Kennel, the Mayor's bodyguard, addressed them in German. He informed them that the Mayor would meet a committee of their own choosing on the following day. The women either failed to understand him or disliked what he said, however, because shouting began again. Mrs. Ida Harris, president of the Mothers' Vigilance Committee, replied with this statement:

We do not want to make trouble. We are good Americans and we simply want the Mayor to make the prices go down. If there is a law fixing prices, we want him to enforce it, and if there isn't, we appeal to him to get one. We are starving—our children are starving. But we don't want any riot. We want to soften the hearts of the millionaires who are getting richer because of the higher prices. We are not an organization. We haven't got any politics. We are just mothers, and we want food for our children. Won't you give us food?\(^\text{11}\)

\(^{10}\) New York Sun, Feb. 20, 1917, 1, 6; New York Times, Feb. 20, 1917, 1, 6; New York Tribune, Feb. 20, 1917, 1. The meeting was at one point interrupted by this pathetic incident: "While the excitement was at its height a woman appeared in the meeting room, followed by five little children, and forced her way to the speaker's platform. She cried out that her husband earned but $8 a week as a tailor's helper and that she was unable to buy enough food for her babies. Then she exhibited the children to the crowd as proof of her assertion that they did not get enough to eat. At this point the woman became so excited that Dr. A.H. Freidman was called. He gave her a sedative and friends took her home." Freidman was appointed by the meeting to head a committee that was to meet with the Mayor and demand drastic action to end the food crisis.

\(^{11}\) New York Times, Feb. 21, 1917, 1, 7; New York Sun, Feb. 21, 1917, 1, 6; New
Finally, Mrs. Harris, a well known anarchist named "Sweet Marie" Ganz, and three others were allowed to enter the building, where their names were taken down for the meeting with Mayor Mitchel. But when they went outside trouble started again; several speakers, including Marie Ganz, harangued the crowd. The police suddenly seized her; and Ganz after being dragged back into the building and downstairs to Traffic Squad headquarters by four husky patrolmen, was arrested for disorderly conduct on the orders of Inspector Dwyer. Violence erupted when she was brought outside to be placed in a patrol wagon. The *New York Evening Journal* reported that

Again and again the women charged upon the police. Uniforms were ripped, faces of the patrolmen scratched and buttons torn from their clothing.\(^{12}\)

The disturbance was finally suppressed and Marie Ganz was the only person arrested. That same day she was arraigned before Magistrate Wylie in the Tombs Court. An attorney named Thomas J. Sullivan volunteered to defend her and she was released with a suspended sentence.\(^{13}\)

That night pandemonium broke out at the Forward Hall as 10,000 people showed up for a meeting to protest food prices. A *New York Times* reporter, finding it curious that the crowd blamed "capitalism" for the food crisis, related that

It was not a reasoning crowd. The hall was packed soon after 7 o'clock, and it was after 9 o'clock before a speaker could make himself heard. With the hall already filled to suffocation, there was another rush of women, many of them mothers with children, as the iron gates, which had been closed, went down under the human weight against them. For two hours more it was bedlam let loose. Speaker after speaker tried to soothe the throng, but it was only after voices were gone and lungs were weary that there was a semblance of order.\(^{14}\)

Louis Shaffer of the National Aid League, Mrs. Sarah Erdman, and William Karlin urged organization rather than rioting upon the crowd. Plans were made for a demonstration through

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\(^{12}\) *New York Evening Journal*, Feb. 21, 1917, 1, 2.

\(^{13}\) *New York Tribune*, Feb. 21, 1917, 1, 2.

Wall Street and Fifth Avenue and for a mass gathering in front of the offices of J.P. Morgan and Co. A delegation was appointed to demand that the Board of Estimate appropriate a million dollars to distribute food at cost and appeals were sent to President Wilson, Governor Whitman, and Mayor Mitchel.\textsuperscript{15}

On the following day about a dozen people were admitted to the Mayor’s office, described by the socialist \textit{New York Call} as "the throne room." Mitchel told the delegation, which included Marie Ganz, that the city had no legal authority to appropriate food for the hungry, but promised that a thorough examination of conditions would be carried out. When Marie Ganz offered to personally take the investigators to the homes of families she knew to be suffering, Mitchel told the anarchist leader that he would be glad to take her up on her offer.\textsuperscript{16}

Food riots soon began to take place in other East Coast cities. Philadelphia, already seething with labor strife, exploded on February 21, when the mothers and daughters of strikers at the Franklin Sugar Refinery marched through the streets to demand that the company make a just settlement. The women, led by 32 year old Florence Shadle, who carried a baby in her arms, cried out that they were starving as they marched to the Refinery. Police, rushed to the scene from City Hall, were confronted by

\textsuperscript{15} \textit{Ibid.}

\textsuperscript{16} \textit{New York Call}, Feb. 22, 1917, 1-2. Commissioner of Charities John A. Kingsbury was ordered by Mitchel to carry out a study of the condition of the poor of the city, resulting from the high cost of living. Kingsbury worked fast; his \textit{Preliminary Report for The Mayor in Relation to The Effect of the High Cost of Food from The Commissioner of Public Charities} was ready by February 23. The report was a six page typewritten summary of a survey of the Lower East Side, Williamsburg, and Brownsville which had been carried out by the staff of the Department of Public Charities. Kingsbury found that conditions in these working class neighborhoods were threatening but not yet desperate. Of 1472 families who were interviewed, only 22 said they were suffering from actual privation. According to the Commissioner, conditions of actual starvation did not exist but a majority of the families interviewed were beginning to feel the effect of the price rise and only a very small proportion of the families were able to cope with the situation with no deprivation or inconvenience at all.

Kingsbury personally interviewed the heads of the city's leading relief agencies, as well as the Provident Loan Association and the Metropolitan Life Insurance Company. Again, he believed that the situation was not too alarming, finding that fewer people were taking out loans on small amounts of personal property than in 1916 and that "more people are buying insurance today than a year ago. . . . The records of the savings banks patronized by the people of those sections of the City from which the cry of destitution has been loudest, seem to indicate that in spite of the rising cost of living there is more money available for savings today than a year ago. . . . The records of the large private relief societies show no increase in the number of persons seeking help as compared with a year ago."
the strikers, who apparently thought that they were going to attack the women's demonstration. Fighting began, and it grew worse when the officers attempted to escort some Negro strike-breakers into the refinery. After the police and the strike-breakers were showered with rocks, the police opened fire on the crowd and 30 year old Maniquenas Detkoboc fell dead in the street.\textsuperscript{17}

On that same day women of the working class neighborhoods in south Philadelphia began a boycott of stores and food stands. At several meetings indignant women declared that they would "live on bread and water rather than pay the prices demanded."\textsuperscript{18}

More violence broke out in Philadelphia the following day, the press reporting these incidents:

Food riots and strike outbreaks in the zone bounded by Mayamen-sing Avenue, the Delaware River, Christian Street and Snyder Avenue today resulted in the shooting of one man, Harry Stein, the trampling of an aged woman by a mob, and the arrest of four men and two women, charged with inciting to riot. The zone was virtually under martial law during the day, picketed by an army of policemen.\textsuperscript{19}

Hundreds of women, angered by higher prices for fish and onions, attacked pushcarts and shops on Philadelphia's Seventh Street. Fish was hurled from stands and kerosene sprinkled on foodstuffs as the women cried "It is robbery! Robbery! Robbery!"\textsuperscript{20}

While all this was going on, the Mayor of Philadelphia, T.B. Smith, was vacationing in Florida. One of the leaders of the food protests, Mrs. Hugh F. Munro of North Fifth Street, better known as "Mother Munro," sent him the following telegram:

The workingmen's wives of Kensington Street met at my house last evening and made an urgent appeal for aid to save their families from starvation. It is a social problem too large for one person to handle except you, and as the official head of our city we appeal to you to return immediately to aid the people who placed you at our head.\textsuperscript{21}

\textsuperscript{18} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{20} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{21} Ibid.
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By now rioting had broken out in Boston, too. On February 22nd 300 people in that city's West End section sacked a grocery and provision store. Police reserves suppressed the riot, which had taken place after an open-air meeting called by the West End Mothers Club. 22

Ominous signs also began to appear that the food crisis was spreading to the cotton South. On February 23 the New York Times reported that

An appeal for help came today from Alabama and Mississippi where it was reported that over a large area there had been for weeks only 6 per cent of the usual allotment of railroad cars for the movement into the region of food products such as flour, groceries, and cured meats. The appeal stated that 40,000 people on the Mobile and Ohio system were "near starvation," living on a very narrow diet, mainly consisting of sweet potatoes and the few vegetables carried on locally. 23

Articles in the New York press painted a grim picture of the privation afflicting many people. On February 25 the Times carried an article describing the situation on the East Side. One mother quoted in this piece was Mrs. Elisabeth Broslin of 124 Broome Street. Apparently the sole provider for her four children, Mrs. Broslin paid $6.50 a month rent and earned $1.25 a day house cleaning, when she was able to find work. She told the Times

I have estimated that I have $4 a week upon which to feed and clothe myself and my children. It is hard work, but the greatest fear

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22 Boston Herald, Feb. 23, 1917, 1, 5; New York Times, Feb. 23, 1917, 3. The meeting in Boston also adopted resolutions banning social workers from the homes of members. Although full scale rioting seems to have been, for the most part, confined to the East Coast, strong discontent existed in the Midwest as well. Cincinnati, located much closer to the nation's agricultural heartland than Boston and New York, experienced a boycott of kosher meat markets in what the press called "Cincinnati's ghetto." See the Cincinnati Enquirer, Feb. 23, 1917, 12. The Enquirer also reported that, after a meeting with members of the Housewives' Co-Operative League, the mayor of the city had announced that an investigation of food prices would be made. According to the paper, Mrs. J.W. Ellis of the League "charged certain dealers were holding large quantities of food products, potatoes in particular, in anticipation of an advance in prices."

23 New York Times, Feb. 23, 1917, 3. The Times reported that "while the Railway Car Commission and the Interstate Commerce Commission are striving to prevent the failure of food supplies in any part of the country, the expectation was expressed today by persons in touch with the Commerce Commission that sporadic scarcity would continue. . . . The food riots in New York and Philadelphia, it is expected, will be repeated, and similar outbreaks in other large cities are probable. Interstate Commerce officials say, because the causes of the food shortage cannot be removed off-hand."
I have is that my children will not have sufficient nourishment and they would not, except for the kindness of those who have been very good to me. Fish is a luxury with us, and I have not had meat for so long that I have forgotten when. I can recall, however, that the Sisters gave us a chicken for Christmas. If you have ever been very poor you will know what it meant to us. We even hated to see the bones go after they had furnished substance to the soup. For breakfast we have bread and coffee. For the coffee I pay 19 cents a pound. We cannot save for clothing. This dress I have worn for five years, and the shoes were made for a man, but I picked them up at a bargain.\textsuperscript{24}

Rev. Mother Marianna of Jesus, the head of the Madonna Day Nursery on Cherry Street, was quoted by the \textit{Times} as saying

It must be remembered that there is not only food to be bought, but there must be wood and coal and clothing, and the many other things that are necessary for life, not to say comfort. Not long ago these families could obtain meat at least once a week, usually on Sunday. Now meat is beyond their means and bread and rice are being used to keep them going. Many laborers formerly ate an onion sandwich for lunch, but now onions are prohibited and cheese is used sparingly. If food goes up much higher there will be real want down here.\textsuperscript{25}

The \textit{Call} quoted Deputy Charities Commissioner Doherty as saying there had been an “appalling rise in infant mortality” on the East Side. Relying on reports from social workers who had been sent into low income areas at the Mayor’s order, Doherty stated that

Where milk is being given to babies it is being diluted until it is little better than water. The people are buying “loose” milk—the cheapest that can be bought—usually one or two cents worth at a time. Tea they have found to be cheaper because a small quantity will last a week. Water is added to the same tea leaves day by day, until the elements of tea have been entirely blotted out.\textsuperscript{26}

Violence continued to break out in New York through February and into March. Serious demonstrations against the price

\textsuperscript{25} \textit{Ibid.}. The \textit{Times} went on to say that “Mrs. Broslin explained that though condensed milk had gone up, it was really cheaper for the very poor, because it was sweetened and so sugar could be dispensed with. In twenty families it was said that bread, tea, coffee and rice were the main articles of the table, and only in one case was potatoes mentioned, and that was by a woman near the $10 a week class.”
\textsuperscript{26} \textit{New York Call}, Feb. 23, 1917, 1.
of poultry took place on Friday, February 22. The *New York Times*, explaining that Friday was the day "on which the Jewish people usually purchase fowls for the Sabbath," reported that since the previous Wednesday a boycott of onions and potatoes had practically driven those items from the market on the East Side. When the butcher shops opened on Friday shoppers found that poultry had suddenly risen from 20 or 22 cents per pound to 28, 30, and even 32 cents. The reaction was what might have been expected:

Immediately they showed their resentment. So far as could be learned, there was no meeting, no formal resolution, but simply a widespread outburst decreeing that no poultry should be bought. The pickets who were out to enforce the onion and potato boycott turned their attention to poultry, and the hundreds of women who refused to purchase at the prevailing prices joined them. Whenever a woman, basket or bag on arm, approached a poultry market there were dozens to tell her that she must not buy fowl of any kind. If she ignored the warning and emerged with a chicken she was seized, as was the chicken, which was torn limb from limb. . . . Several hundred women in the chicken market at Stanton Street and the East River becamefrenzied by the sight of a crate of chickens, and set upon it. The crate was destroyed, the chickens were seized and dismembered, and the crowd poured through the street, waving the heads and wings and mutilated bodies of chickens.27

A couple of days later an even more spectacular outbreak occurred when about 5000 people, after leaving a protest rally at Madison Square, marched upon the Waldorf-Astoria Hotel, demanding food. According to the *Call*, "ninety per cent of the crazed throng were women and children." Although there were only a halfdozen arrests and the same number of reported injuries, the anger that the crowd felt toward the hotel's occupants was more than obvious:

Motor cars were turned back and their occupants threatened with death. One motorist, Chauncey Wehman of 1441 Broadway, was mobbed and beaten by a crowd of women, who, following the lead of Samuel Soloman, 227 East 99th street, leaped into Wehman's car, crying: "Yah, yah! You ride in comfort while we walk and starve. Soon your wife will be with us, crying for bread!" They drove their fists into Wehman's face and dragged him from the steering

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wheel. Responding to his cries for help, 20 policemen crashed their way through the horde around the car and saved him.\textsuperscript{28}

As thousands of women beat on the door of the hotel on 33rd and 34th Streets, shouting for bread, the chief of the Waldorf-Astoria detectives, Joseph Smith, stationed his men at all doors and reenforced them with other hotel employees. When the police, led by an Inspector named Bolan, two captains, and a lieutenant arrived from three different police stations, violence became worse. Nineteen year-old Isabella Serkin of East 100th Street, according to a reporter, began an assault on one of the revolving doors of the 33d street side of the hotel. She is slight of stature, else she would have crashed the glass in the door. As she beat upon the barricade wildly, she called upon the crowd at her back to come with her, that she was going to get inside. Policeman Jordon, breaking through the crowd, reached the girl and tried to haul her away from the door. She turned upon Jordon and dug her fingernails into his face. She tore six deep gashes down his cheeks, and then, flinging herself upon him with all the fury of the amazons of the French revolution riots, she staggered him backward.\textsuperscript{29}

The rioting at the hotel lasted from 5:15 P.M. until about 7. According to the \textit{Call}, about two dozen children were lost during the fighting, and it was “impossible to enumerate or tabulate the number of persons injured.” Women and children were trampled by horses' hoofs as mounted policemen drove through the crowd, some using their clubs. Perhaps the most horrifying incident was this:

At least 100 women and some children were run down by an automobile. The driver, fearing injury at the hands of the mob, put on high speed and went pell mell through the crowded street. In the wake of the car were women and children bleeding and weeping. Many were hatless and hysterical.\textsuperscript{30}

On Friday, March 1, occurred what the \textit{Call} described as “the worst rioting throughout the city since the food agitations began.” Almost a hundred people were arrested as pickets wearing buttons of a group called the Anti-High Price League attempted to enforce a boycott of groceries and butcher shops. On the East

\textsuperscript{28} \textit{New York Call}, Feb. 25, 1917, 1, 2.
\textsuperscript{29} \textit{Ibid}.
\textsuperscript{30} \textit{Ibid}.
Side, in the Bronx, and in other sections incidents like the following were common:

A man who bought a chicken at Wesech's poultry market in Wales Avenue was pursued by 200 women into a saloon two blocks away. After the crowd had threatened to wreck the place, the proprietor induced the man to throw his purchase to the mob, who destroyed it.  

The food riots, of course, took place at a time when nationalist enthusiasm was being whipped up in the United States by advocates of American entry into World War I. Political radicals and "hyphenated Americans" were becoming increasingly suspect as people who had no great enthusiasm for helping the British Empire defend western civilization. Inevitably, accusations were made that the food riots were the work of German agents, perhaps working in cooperation with professional socialist or anarchist agitators. On February 22, for example, the New York Times reported that "federal officials" had discovered that the riots "were planned by representatives of the Central Powers and put into execution by means of money distributed through a New York bank." The Central Powers, according to this theory, were hoping that the food riots would lead to "an embargo on shipments of food to the allies."  

Public authorities in New York realized that the food disturbances could not be written off as the work of agitators. Hundreds of thousands of New Yorkers were clearly faced with the spectre of outright hunger, and unless the authorities appeared to be taking energetic action of some sort it was likely that the violence would continue. On February 24 it was announced that a food supply committee, appointed by Mayor Mitchel with George W. Perkins as chairman, would begin a campaign to convince the public that rice could be used as a substitute for higher priced foods. Advising consumers not to pay more than six cents per pound for rice, the committee revealed that it was holding 4,000,000 pounds of it in reserve and planned to sell it at current prices if increased demand threatened to shoot up the price in the coming weeks. Refusing to name the people who had paid for this rice supply, Perkins merely stated that "mem-

31 New York Call, Mar. 2, 1917, 1, 2.
32 New York Sun, Feb. 22, 1917, 1.
bers of the committee and some of their friends” had bought it. He denied that he himself had put up the money.\textsuperscript{33}

In another development, Joseph Hartigan, the Commissioner of Weights and Measures, asked “public spirited citizens” to subscribe $100,000 so that he could buy white potatoes, red onions and sweet potatoes from “new market sources.” These foodstuffs could be sold in the city within twelve days at 25\% below current rates. The subscribers, Hartigan assured the public, would get all their money back. Meanwhile, the Board of Estimate passed a proposed amendment to the city Charter which would give the Board the power to appropriate city funds to buy food and sell it at cost during emergencies. Such an amendment would have to be approved by the State Legislature.\textsuperscript{34}

At the state level the Democratic leader of the Assembly, Joseph H. Callahan, pushed the idea of terminal markets, introducing a bill for a state bond issue, not to exceed $25,000,000, to pay for them. Governor Whitman, calling the food crisis “the most serious perhaps in the history of the State,” thought that passage of State Senator Wicks’ Food and Market bill would help. Warning that the situation would grow worse before it grew better, the Governor vowed that he would “take any steps that may be necessary to bring relief to the famine-stricken poor in New York City and other communities where there is any widespread suffering.”\textsuperscript{35}

Wicks himself urged that the “moral influences in the State” be mobilized in support of his bill; he believed that the bill, which provided for the establishment of a State Department of Agriculture, would enable elected leaders to go after the “wizardry of trading in New York City” and get at “the evils at the root of the situation.” But others were less enthusiastic; Tammany opposed the bill because it would provide too much Republican patronage while some politicians claimed that they opposed it on idealistic grounds. One legislator, not named by the \textit{Times}, was quoted by the paper as saying that an emergency clause in

\textsuperscript{33} \textit{New York Sun}, Feb. 24, 1917, 1.

\textsuperscript{34} \textit{Ibid.} State Senator Charles W. Wicks of Oneida had earlier introduced a bill that would create a State Department of Agriculture, Foods, and Markets. The bill was favored by Governor Whitman, who reportedly hoped to make George Perkins the head of the new department. See the \textit{New York Times}, Feb. 16, 1917, 13.

the bill would enable the State Food and Markets Commission to
commandeer food anywhere in the State . . . . to take over cold stor-
age plants and administer them on behalf of the Senate in the interest
of distribution along lines that would quickly relieve a stringency in
food. I think that under this clause the dictatorship in force in Ger-
many could be duplicated here, always providing that the emergency
exists.36

At the national level the food riots called forth warnings that
actual revolution was possible. Senator Borah found a parallel
between the New York situation and the march of the French
women upon the Palace of Versailles in 1789. He charged that
monopolistic combines had forced up food prices 50% higher
than they needed to be even in wartime and that millions of
dollars had been made by speculators. Senator George Norris
declared that unless a remedy was found for the problem of some
living in luxury while others suffered from hunger "ultimately
there will be a revolution." After reading from a press dispatch
an account of a food riot in New York, Norris stated that

These women were moved by hunger and by the love of their chil-
dren—their babies were crying for bread in the great city of New
York, the great metropolis of the country, at a time when we are
told we are enjoying the greatest prosperity in the history of the na-
tion . . . . a member of this body told me yesterday that just a few
days ago a friend of his in the city of New York . . . . told him
that in the great hotels, the high priced hotels of New York City it
was impossible to get a room. That only illustrates that there are
two classes, the one away down and the other away up.37

Other senators, such as Works of California and Thomas of
Colorado, linked the food crisis up with President Wilson's Pre-
paredness campaign, pointing to the contrast between massive
appropriations for armaments and virtual inaction on hunger.
Wilson himself demanded that Congress grant an appropriation
for the Federal Trade Commission to conduct a sweeping inves-
tigation of the rise in food prices.38

Not surprisingly, the analysis of the food crisis made by Con-
gressman Meyer London, who represented the East Side's 12th
District in the House of Representatives, differed greatly from
that of most of his fellow Congressmen. London, the only So-

36 Ibid.
38 Ibid.
cialist in Congress, had been elected to the House in 1914 and reelected in 1916, running both times on a strongly anti-capitalist platform.\textsuperscript{39} His district was a stronghold of radicalism and militant unionism, and his vehement attacks on food speculation probably did not disappoint the people who had voted for him. Yet, London argued that responsibility for the food crisis rested not just with individual profiteers but with capitalism itself. He told the House: “When women and children cry for bread you cannot designate it a riot. It is an outcry to heaven for relief.”\textsuperscript{40}

London submitted a bill which would have created a commission with the task of recommending legislation “for the taking over by the Federal Government of the control of food, and to authorize the President to prohibit under certain conditions the exportation of food.” The commission, to be known as the Federal Food Commission, would be made up of the Secretary of Agriculture, the Secretary of Commerce and the Secretary of Labor. Among its tasks would be the preparation of legislation enabling the Government to

regulate the transportation, marketing, preservation, and distribution of food, and to acquire and maintain, build and construct, equip, manage, own, and control all such buildings, plants, structures, warehouses, granaries, abattoirs, and each and every thing or things incidental to, or connected with, or necessary to the exercise by the Government of complete control over the supply and distribution of food.\textsuperscript{41}

London took part in a House debate on February 24 on the causes of the food crisis. Remarking that he could get some effective legislation passed if he had a dozen Socialists with him in the House, London said:

All sorts of reasons are being assigned in explanation of the present emergency. These reasons are mutually conflicting and mutually destructive. Some claim that there is a shortage of foods; others that there is an abundance of food, but a shortage of transportation facilities. Some claim that an embargo would cure the situation; others that an embargo would aggravate it. All, however, admit that they

\textsuperscript{39} William Frieburger, "The Lone Socialist Vote: A Political Study of Meyer London" (unpublished PhD diss. Univ. of Cincinnati, 1980), chs. 6, 8.

\textsuperscript{40} \textit{U.S. Congressional Record}, 64th Congress, 2nd Session, Vol. 55, 3813; Frieburger, 200.

\textsuperscript{41} \textit{U.S. Congressional Record}, 64th Congress, 2nd Session, Vol. 55, 3813; Frieburger, 201.
do not know what to do. . . . I find what is really lacking is an ordinary knowledge of economic laws and a lack of social conscience.\textsuperscript{42}

Interrupted by Congressman Gordon of Ohio, who asked him if he proposed merely to “take these foodstuffs from those that have them and give them to those who have not got them,” London replied:

I have credited the gentleman from Ohio with more wisdom than that. Your old political platforms, with their numerous planks, offer no hint of a solution. Nothing illustrates more convincingly the complete economic and moral bankruptcy of the present system of individualistic or capitalistic ownership than the shortage of food in our richest cities and in the most prosperous period in the history of the country. . . . Rich as never before—and bread riots! Surfeited with gold—and bread riots! Such is capitalism. Such is the rule of private capital over human society.\textsuperscript{43}

Asserting that world inflationary trends had been apparent for the previous ten years, London argued that the American economy was faced with a new kind of crisis; after experiencing financial crises and industrial crises in the past, it was now going through a “prosperity crisis”—“the legitimate outcome of individualism run mad.” This was still another in the long line of cyclical crises which had afflicted American capitalism in 1819, 1837, 1857, 1873, 1893 and 1907. When London argued that, since anti-trust legislation had failed to end profiteering in the packing industry it was time “to take control of the packing industry for the people, and run it on behalf of the people,” Congressman Hamilton of Michigan interrupted to ask “What is the gentleman’s remedy to the food crisis?” London answered:

Coming down to the immediate situation, I refuse to admit that there is no possibility of relief . . . let us immediately appropriate $5,000,000 and authorize a commission to purchase food, establish food-distribution centers, and to sell food at reasonable prices directly to the consumers or to the State or municipal governments . . . I am sure that is not a theory from cloudland.\textsuperscript{44}

When Representative Mondell of Wyoming asked London

\textsuperscript{42} \textit{U.S. Congressional Record}, 64th Congress, 2nd Session, Vol. 55, 4184; Friebur-\textsuperscript{43} \textit{U.S. Congressional Record}, 64th Congress, 2nd Session, Vol. 55, 4184; Friebur-\textsuperscript{44} \textit{U.S. Congressional Record}, 64th Congress, 2nd Session, Vol. 55, 4184; Friebur-
where his proposed commission would buy food and how he would provide for the food to be bought at reasonable prices, London explained that the commission would buy food at the cheapest possible prices available in the country and sell it to consumers at low cost. But if this experiment failed more drastic measures would have to be used:

then we will have to take the next step and that is to take possession of the foodstuffs and pay the owners a price which the Government will determine under condemnation proceedings.45

On March 12 an article by London entitled “The Government as Grocer” appeared in The Independent magazine. Here he bluntly asserted that “Capitalism has failed. It is the Socialist’s complaint that it is always a failure.” Stating that he was “not enthusiastic” about a food embargo and in fact regarded it as “immoral,” London nevertheless asserted that

The question is: Shall we permit the unrestricted exportation of food when it is bound to have the immediate effect of making the prices of foodstuffs inaccessible to the masses.46

Again raising the issue of nationalization of the food industry, London warned his readers:

We cannot trust the so-called law of supply and demand, which has never had much meaning as applied to human society . . . and which has no meaning at all now. We cannot permit the situation to be controlled by individual greed or by the greed of individual capitalist groups . . . should the commission find itself unable to obtain food at reasonable prices, it would have to come to the government and present the difficulty, and whether it wants to or not, Congress will be forced to take the next step, which would be to provide some form of permanent control of food production and distribution.47

In New York, food riots continued to break out with frightening regularity in market areas. March 1 saw what the Call de-

45 U.S. Congressional Record, 64th Congress, 2nd Session, Vol. 55, 4184; Frieburger, 205.
46 Meyer London, “The Government As Grocer,” The Independent, Mar. 12, 1917, 451; Frieburger, 206. London also remarked that “It requires a lot of self-control to listen to those wise-aces from the agricultural states upbraiding the dwellers of the tenement houses of the large cities for refusing to come to the country and hear the ‘lowing of the cow, the clucking of the hen,’ and, as one eloquent orator expressed it, ‘the grunting of the swine,’ Oh! The grunting of the swine!”
47 Ibid.
scribed as "the worst rioting throughout the city since the food agitations began." Nearly a hundred people were arrested, scores of grocery establishments were attacked, and the Hebrew Retail Grocers League informed the Mayor that the East Side was in a "state of rebellion." Another of George Perkins' ideas—the sale of smelts to retailers at four and a half cents per pound and to the public at six cents per pound—appears to have resulted in a fiasco. Although the Food Committee sent 14,000 pounds of smelt into the city on motor trucks, angry East Side shoppers "who suspected Wall Street and did not want smelts, anyhow, mauled the sellers and returned some of the fish to their native element through open manholes." 48

Both merchants and customers were goaded into fury by the horrifying spectacle of food prices soaring out of control. On March 3 the Call reported the prosecution of a Water Street butcher who was charged with "stabbing the baby daughter of a Mrs. Moskowitz during an East Side food riot." The charges were being pressed by the Anti-High Price League. On that same day a warrant was to be issued "for the arrest of another butcher, charged with stabbing an old woman while she was picketing his store." 49

Suggestions by public officials that families should cope with the food crisis by eating rice and other cheaper foods did not go over well with many hungry New Yorkers. Dr. Haven Emerson, head of the New York City Health Department, provoked an angry response from 2000 East Siders on March 3 when, speaking at Clinton Hall, he apparently told them "to use milk instead of eggs and rice rather than potatoes and not to intrude their European habits into the United States." Angry muttering by the crowd caused the nervous official to reach for his hat, and the Call, with humorous exaggeration, suggested that despite Emerson's substitutes for eggs and potatoes, he had no substitute for nerve and "was in the act of breaking all sprint records from Clinton Hall . . . after human beings began to demand human food." Actually, Emerson remained while the crowd was calmed by other speakers. At the same meeting the Socialist leader Jacob Panken denounced "well-fed theorists" who presumed to

48 New York Call, Mar. 2, 1917, 1, 2.
49 New York Call, Mar. 3, 1917, 3.
tell the "supporters of the nation" what to eat. City-owned food
markets, in Pankens' view, were a much better solution.50

Advice from the Perkins Committee, the Health Department,
and other public bodies that low income New Yorkers should
cope with the food prices by changing their diets stirred up fierce
resentment in working class neighborhoods. A leaflet entitled
"Facts About Rice," issued by the Perkins Committee and dis-
tributed in the public schools, caused indignation when it was
brought home and the Call reported that many members of the
Mothers' Anti-High Price League were planning to lodge pro-
tests with the Mayor's Office, the Board of Education, the Board
of Health, and other city agencies.51

The Call answered those who gave diet advice to "the poor"
in an editorial entitled "Cheap and Nasty Advice" on March 9.
While granting that there was "waste and poor selection of foods,
to be sure, among the workers," and "much ignorance of proper
cooking," the editorial asserted that "advice on these points would
be inoffensive if it were not so nauseously making a virtue of
necessity." According to the socialist paper,

If the workers could buy sufficient good food...if the money they
could save by more careful buying and preparing of food, could be
devoted to other natural gratifications, such as music, pictures, the
theatre, educational improvement, etc., the advice would be in order.
But, as given, it is nothing less than a shriek to continuously live on
less, on cheaper food stuffs, and, if taken, would, after all, have not
the slightest effect in lowering food prices; on the contrary, it would
tend to make dearer the very things so recommended as cheap, with-
out sensibly reducing the prices of the other things.52

50 New York Call, Mar. 4, 1917, 1.
51 New York Call, Mar. 2, 1917, 5. The leaflet contained 18 recipes for rice dishes
which were claimed to be cheap and nutritious. The Call indignantly reported
that "The poor are being taught by the fathers of the city how to live economi-
cally.... The circular informs the workers that they work hard to earn a dollar
and urges them to use the information given to make their dollar go further.
And the information is to maintain the American standard of living and at the
same time greatly reduce the cost of living by eating rice, which, according to
the circular, contains more strength-giving material than potatoes, because po-
tatoes are three-quarters water, while rice has practically no water. If used with
cheese, peas, beans or lentils, says the circular, rice will make a most delicious
dish and will give you practically all the food your body needs." That same page
of the Call carried a "Henry Dibb" cartoon in which a society woman named
"Miss Grab-It-All" attempts to teach some tenement dwellers how to make soup
out of bones.
52 New York Call, Mar. 9, 1917, 6. Today's nutritionists would not, of course, rate
either the East Siders' potatoes or Perkins' rice as especially valuable foods. But
if the leaflet did praise rice as the basis of a diet that would give children "prac-
tically all the food" they would need, this was not even in accord with the ac-
After pointing out that French peasants and workers, held up as examples to Americans because they saved the smallest scraps from the stockpot, "have never been able to reach porterhouse steak on that account," it argued that

well do those who urge this policy upon "the poor" know all this. A man like George W. Perkins, who is now singing the praises of rice and "smelts," an inferior sort of fish that just now happens to be a trifle cheaper than other kinds, is by no means so ignorant as not to know it... If "the poor" could only reach the intellectual level of perceiving that the best in the way of good, both in quantity and variety, was none too good for them, and insist upon having it, we should have a quick end of this nauseating cant.  

The food crisis continued to cause conflict, even if accounts of it in the press began to be overshadowed by the approaching entry of this country into World War I. On March 19, for example, retail poultry dealers on the East Side and in some parts of Harlem suspended business and declared a boycott against poultry in the wholesale market because of high prices. According to the poultry dealers, the prices had been set by shippers and speculators in order to take advantage of a greater poultry demand during the Passover season.

On the following day it appeared that this boycott was a strong success. The Times reported that "almost no business was done in the West Washington Market between the men receiving poultry from the West and those who have announced that they will not buy..." On the 22nd it was reported that thirty poultry slaughter houses in the New York area would be closed, affecting some 3000 retailers and diminishing greatly the supply of poultry on sale.

The problem of skyrocketing food prices was never really

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53 New York Call, Mar. 9, 1917, 6.
“solved”; it was simply absorbed into the far more catastrophic crisis of American entry into the War. How to secure food at affordable prices became one worry among many to American families, perhaps a less serious worry than concern over a son or husband at the front or harassment by “patriots” if one happened to have the wrong national origins or the wrong political beliefs. During the period of this country’s participation in the conflict as a belligerent the nation’s food resources were, to some extent, under the control of Herbert Hoover, appointed Food Administrator by Woodrow Wilson shortly after the declaration of war. Hoover attempted to prevent food prices from getting completely out of control by the use of centralized purchasing by the Food Administration of all food bought for the Army, Navy, and the allies. Hoover, at first enthusiastic about the idea that unselfish commitment to the war effort would help to keep prices down, was by December 1917 asking Wilson for more price-fixing power. Disturbed by the fact that some business concerns made spectacular war profits, the Food Administrator called the abuse of voluntary food pricing agreements “great currents of injustice.”  

Meyer London, of course, did not succeed in nationalizing the American food industry. In June 1917 Congress was still wrestling with the problem of how to deal with food profiteering. London took the floor and, once again, denied that individual food speculators were the real cause of the food crisis, arguing that attacks on food speculation would be no more successful than the campaign to “bust the trusts” as long as the food industry was run as a profit making business and as long as “a small number, a small proportion of the people, have it within their power to dictate what the prices of the necessities of life shall be.” Pointing out that Congress had refused to heed his call

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56 David Burner, _Herbert Hoover: A Public Life_ (New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 1979), 104. By 1920 Hoover was writing that the War had revealed an “unnecessarily wide margin of cost that exists between producer and consumer.” Hoover was repelled by the idea of government coercion of businessmen even in wartime. David Hinshaw writes that he rejected such titles as “Food Controller” and even “Food Administrator” to show his belief in cooperation. See David Hinshaw, _Herbert Hoover: American Quaker_ (New York, 1950), 88-89.

This faith in “cooperation” with businessmen was firmly engrained in Hoover. Despite his admission that voluntary price agreements had not worked during World War I, he later attempted to deal with the Great Depression by persuading industrialists to pledge not to cut payrolls and production. These pledges were also broken.
for national food control six months earlier, London said that "it takes a formal declaration of war, it takes war, famine and pestilence before the Democrats and Republicans get any sense in their heads." This last statement set off a disturbance in the House chamber when people in the galleries began applauding. The chairman warned these people that they were "here by the indulgence of the House" and told them that demonstrations of approval or disapproval were "against the rules." London then said that he planned to vote for some weak food control legislation currently before the House, even though the legislation, in his view, favored rich farmers over poor farmers and was unfair to the consumer. The Socialist Representative then asked the House to consider the implications that food speculation raised about the nature of the American economic system as a whole:

If the food gambler and speculator are an evil during war, why are the food gambler and speculator a good thing in peace time? . . . For the great masses of people even peace means war . . . Theoretically free, the poor man whose wages were determined by the employer, whose rent is fixed by the landlord, and the price of whose food and clothing is decided by the financial interests, finds himself nobody's slave and still not a free man . . . My hope is that this assertion of a collective conscience, the assertion of the principle that the necessities of life must no longer be left to anarchy and general chaos, but must be taken under the collective control of the people, contains a promise of a more intelligent and more thoroughgoing legislation in the near future.57

London was speaking of a problem that has existed throughout American history—poverty in the midst of plenty. Such a situation has always seemed to be an affront both to the sense of justice and the power of reason of decent human beings like London and Norris.

57 U.S. Congressional Record, 65th Congress, 2nd Session, Vol. 58, 5295; Frieburger, 256-257.