

# **Labor History: Coxey's Army**

*By Ed Leavy*

Jacob Coxey seemed an unlikely person to be a revolutionary. He was a business owner, not a labor leader; he owned a small quarry in Massillon, Ohio. Dressed in a suit and wearing glasses, he looked like a typical member of the Chamber of Commerce. Coxey, however, passionately cared about the lives of the working class. During the Panic of 1893, working people were devastated by the collapse of the economy, while industrialists such as Rockefeller and Carnegie continued to thrive and used the depression as an excuse to break unions. Unemployment reached 18%, and at a time when the government provided no social services there was widespread homelessness and begging. Rather than addressing the economic inequities that created the unemployment, newspapers instead focused their outrage on the homeless themselves; headlines such as "War on Tramps" were commonplace.

Coxey believed the problems created by the Panic could be resolved through monetary reform – he was so adamant on the subject that he named his son Legal Tender – and public works programs that would improve the nation's infrastructure while putting people to work. He had lobbied Congress about this idea for several years, but as economic conditions continued to get worse, he decided to take a more dramatic action. He announced that he planned to walk from Ohio to Washington DC with "100,000 fellow citizens" to petition Congress to demand a works program. His hope for 100,000 people to join him on his 400 mile walk proved unrealistic; he began his journey in mid-March, 1894 with fewer than 1000. Journalist Ray Stannard Baker decided to cover the march, and his articles were far more positive than were articles in papers that did not have reporters with the "army" and tended to concentrate on the unkempt nature of the "hoboes" who joined Coxey. Rather than dismiss them as "tramps and vagabonds," Baker instead portrayed them as "genuine farmers and workingmen" who simply wanted to again earn a living. His sympathetic articles encouraged other people to join the march. As they walked through towns, they were often greeted by the citizens and given cheers and food for their travels. Though they at times they had to walk through foot-high snow, their numbers actually increased, and Coxey's Army entered Washington D.C. on April 30th.

The reception Coxey and his army received must have been far different from what he hoped for. Washington was not excited to have 2000 unemployed men show up on their streets. Baker wrote that "the police seemed to lose their heads completely, as they dashed into the crowd on horses and slashed out with their clubs... Coxey's eventful march from Massillon to the marble steps of the national Capitol closed today in riot and bloodshed." When Coxey and the men stepped onto the Capitol lawn, they were arrested for trespassing. Coxey handed reporters a copy of the speech he planned to give before going to jail. No public works bill was passed. Congressmen criticized Coxey; one said that the march was a failure because "unemployment was an act of God." Much of the press joined in the attack, saying Coxey was guilty of propagating "the most dangerous lesson indeed that can be taught to the American people – the lesson of dependence on the Federal government." The whole endeavor seemed to be a failure.

The march caught the imagination of many of the forgotten American workforce, however, and "armies" modeled after Coxey's army sprung up throughout the country, especially in the West. Businesses and the government sought to disband these groups, and violent incidents occurred repeatedly. Coxey continued to push for public works projects, and in 1944 – 50 years after his march, and after New Deal public works programs helped workers throughout the Depression – Coxey was invited to give the speech on the Capitol steps that he had not been allowed to deliver half a century earlier. His words are as true, and as necessary, now as they were then:

“Upon these steps where we stand has been spread a carpet for the royal feet of a foreign princess, the cost of whose lavish entertainment was taken from the public Treasury without the consent or the approval of the people. Up these steps the lobbyists of trusts and corporations have passed unchallenged on their way to committee rooms, access to which we, the representatives of the toiling wealth-producers, have been denied. We stand here to-day in behalf of millions of toilers whose petitions have been buried in committee rooms, whose prayers have been unresponded to, and whose opportunities for honest, remunerative, productive labor have been taken from them by unjust legislation, which protects idlers, speculators, and gamblers: we come to remind the Congress here assembled of the declaration of a United States Senator, ‘that for a quarter of a century the rich have been growing richer, the poor poorer, and that by the close of the present century the middle class will have disappeared as the struggle for existence becomes fierce and relentless.’”

*Information for this article was taken from There is Power in a Union by Philip Dray and Bully Pulpit by Doris Kearns Goodwin. The excerpt from his speech (which is well worth reading in its entirety) was found on the website “History Matters”*