

Scene on Radio

A New Deal (Season 4, Episode 6) Transcript

<http://www.sceneonradio.org/s4-e6-a-new-deal/>

Clifford Burke, Terkel Archive: Listen. Truthfully, the average Negro don't know such a thing as depression, because from the day he was born, he was born in depression. As far as a job was concerned, the best he could get would be a job, like I say, driving team or working in a coal yard, working in some factory. If he was in a factory he was the janitor or the porter, which didn't pay much. So you can understand very clearly why no such thing as a depression really meant too much to him.

(Music)

John Biewen: Clifford Burke, then a retired transit worker from Chicago, spoke with the radio broadcaster Studs Terkel around 1970. Burke said, looking back, the people who really couldn't cope with the Great Depression were white folks.

Clifford Burke: You take a fella had a job, say, paying him sixty dollars a week, and here I'm making twenty. Now, if I go home and take some beans or anything home, my wife, she'll fix that. We'll set down, we'll eat it. It isn't exactly what we want, but we'll eat it. But this white fella that's been making this big money and he go bring this home (laughing), his wife isn't gonna accept this. Why did these fellas, all these big wheels, why did they kill themselves? The American white man has been superior so long, he couldn't stand the idea of being defeated, see? And when I say defeated, he couldn't stand the idea of having to go on relief like the Negro had to go.

Elsa Ponselle: You see, that was the difference in the Depression. It wasn't only not me but it was not you and it was not my friends and everybody else.

John Biewen: Elsa Ponselle. She tells Terkel the Depression wasn't about a few suffering people feeling marginalized. Almost everyone felt the effects, even the few who were truly comfortable.

Elsa Ponselle: And the rich had the instinct of self-preservation. They didn't throw that, the fact that they had money, around, if you remember.

We heard about how they didn't have the fancy debutante parties because after all it was not the thing to do.

Studs Terkel: They were more discreet about it.

Elsa Ponselle: Indeed! They were so goddamn scared they'd have a revolution. They damn near did, too, didn't they. (laughs)

(Music)

John Biewen: Hey, Chenjerai.

Chenjerai: Hey, John.

John Biewen: So, we are moving into the 20th century now, getting closer to our present day. I just wanna say, though, that despite what some people might think, I personally do not have memories of the Great Depression.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: (Laughs.) You didn't live through that, huh?

John Biewen: I am older than you, I think a decade or so, but I'm not fifty years older. Let's be clear.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: Right, yeah. I mean, I feel you, man. Things are changing for me, too, now. I'm getting a couple gray hairs. When I talk about labor struggles, you know, in the early twentieth century, I think my students think I'm giving a first-hand account. Like, why are you so excited? Were you there?

John Biewen: And I say that because I think it's really hard for those of us who did not live through the Great Depression to wrap our minds around what it was like, just how deep the desperation was and how widespread, how many people were suffering.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: Yeah. We lived through the Great Recession that really hit in 2008, and that caused a lot of pain. People lost jobs, a lot of wealth got stolen, a lot of people haven't recovered from that. But it still doesn't feel as extreme as the Great Depression.

John Biewen: I don't think it really comes close. Just one comparison: In 2009, the unemployment rate hit a high of ten percent and then started to drop again. That seemed pretty rough. Well, in the Thirties, the national unemployment rate was well over double that, and there were cities where the unemployment rate was eighty or ninety percent, right? Just basically nobody has a job. And besides the unemployment, there were, a lot of people who did have work had their hours

Commented [1]: big breath, maybe too big

Commented [2]: Yes. Gone!

cut or their wages cut, and people couldn't make ends meet. And it lasted for close to a decade.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: I mean, there was hardly any safety net back then, either. Government support for poor people has always been weak in the U.S. compared to other rich countries, but when the depression hit, it was almost nonexistent. There was no unemployment insurance, no food stamps, no real support for farmers.

John Biewen: Banks were allowed to fail and there was no federal deposit insurance so people lost the money that they'd put in the bank. I mean, millions of people lost everything. And there were lots of people literally out living in cardboard boxes or shanties, in these Hooverilles, as they were called, standing in lines for food, just trying to survive.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: Whew. Yeah.

John Biewen: So, everybody gets it, right? It was bad. Here's just one more clip – this is Peggy Terry, she was a migrant farm worker, talking decades later with Studs Terkel.

Peggy Terry: And it's really hard to talk about the Depression because, what can you say except you were hungry? When it's hard to make that sound like anything?

Chenjerai Kumanyika: You know, in Episode Four we talked about how crises like the Civil War create openings for people who have transformative ideas. And hearing this, I just think, man, when people are hungry for food, they also get hungry for real change that's gonna last. So by the time we get to the Great Depression, people have been arguing for profound change for a while. And now, people who might be called radicals are actually finding audiences much more receptive because of that desperation. So you already had people like Lucy Parsons, Du Bois, Hubert Harrison, just Black folks who are openly critical of capitalism. But now you also have artists like Claude McKay, Langston Hughes, Paul Robeson, Louise Thompson Patterson. They're all making the case that for America to achieve democracy, power and resources are gonna have to be changed in fundamental ways. You even had socialists like Norman Thomas who brought their case directly into the white house.

John Biewen: There was a lot of energy out there like that. And then, but shockingly, the most powerful people in the country, for the most part, were not feeling that. Right? They tended to say--even those who were in favor of really

doing something, would argue, naw, we need a pragmatic approach. We sure don't want or need a revolution of any sort.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: See but this is what I'm saying. It's like, you're in the Great Depression and people are arguing against revolution. We're used to talking about these political fights as just different philosophies. Left and right. Or center or something.

John Biewen: Right. Fighting it out in the 'marketplace of ideas.'

Chenjerai Kumanyika: Yeah. And what bothers me is, it's like no matter how reactionary the idea is, that somehow we need all these ideas because somehow they're all in service of democracy. But what if that's not right? When we look at these periods of crisis and transition like the Great Depression, how do we really cut through and see who was really working in service of democracy, versus who was just using the language of democracy to get back to business as usual?

(MUSIC: Theme)

John Biewen: From the Center for Documentary Studies at Duke University, this is Season 4 of *Scene on Radio*. Episode 6 in our series exploring democracy in the U.S., past and present. We call the series, *The Land That Never Has Been*

Yet. I'm John Biewen. You were just hearing from my friend and colleague Dr. Chenjerai Kumanyika. He teaches Journalism and Media Studies at Rutgers University. He's an organizer, a podcaster, and an artist. Chenjerai will be back later in the episode to help me make sense of things.

This time out, the New Deal. What was its impact on democracy in the U.S.? How did it change the role of government, and the ability of regular people to have a say in their lives, as citizens and especially as workers? And what did the New Deal *not* achieve, democracy-wise?

Franklin Delano Roosevelt: My friends of the Democratic National Convention of 1932....

John Biewen: When he accepts the nomination that summer in Chicago, Franklin Delano Roosevelt utters a phrase that will stick.

Franklin Delano Roosevelt: I pledge myself to a new deal for the American people. ...

John Biewen: As he wraps up his speech, Roosevelt builds to this crescendo:

Franklin Delano Roosevelt: This is more than a political campaign. It is a call to arms. Give me your help not to win votes alone, but to win in this crusade to restore America to its own people! (applause)

(Music)

John Biewen: By restoring America to its own people, Roosevelt did *not* mean returning the land to Native Americans. I know, you knew that, but just had to point it out. That November, FDR wins in a landslide, retiring the Republican president, Herbert Hoover, after one term.

Three grim years have passed since the stock market crash of 1929. In fact, as Roosevelt takes office in March 1933, the bottom is dropping out like never before.

Eric Rauchway: The economy is in a catastrophic state. It's a worldwide depression that's afflicted not only the United States, but essentially the whole of the industrialized world and to a considerable degree some of the developing world as well.

John Biewen: Historian Eric Rauchway of the University of California-Davis. He's written several books on the Depression and the New Deal. Rauchway says

Hoover had run as a pro-business Republican, and his administration took only meager steps to address the economic collapse. Mostly, Hoover urged people not to panic, and he looked for the solution in private enterprise. He called on corporations to buck up, to avoid cutting wages or laying people off.

Eric Rauchway: Hoover's instincts were to marshal the good will and cooperative impulse and what he understood to be the self-interest of American businesspeople, to try to pull together and meet the crisis on their own. [Pause.] Yeah, this didn't work.

John Biewen: By electing FDR, the American people sent a clear message: Promises from the business community weren't gonna cut it this time. They wanted government to do more, and a lot of them wanted real, lasting change: more political and economic equality. Actually, Americans had been saying that for a few decades. Let's back up a little.

(MUSIC)

John Biewen: Historians call the period from the 1890s to the 1920s the Progressive Era, a time when candidates could win elections by responding to the strong public pressure for reform. Leaders like Theodore Roosevelt, FDR's

older fifth cousin, who was Governor of New York, then president from 1901 to 1909.

Eric Rauchway: The Republican Party for the first decade or so of the 20th century is the national home of what becomes known as progressivism, and stands for, not overthrowing the capitalist order or the industrialist order, but regulating it in some semblance of the public interest. And of course there's a big row, or in fact there are a series of rows, over what the public interest might be. But there is this generalized notion, for which Theodore Roosevelt is an articulate spokesperson, that the economy ought to be bent to serve ordinary citizens.

John Biewen: Eric says the "progressive" label was so popular that just about everybody claimed it in one way or another: from the socialist activist and labor organizer Eugene Debs to quite conservative presidents like William Taft and Woodrow Wilson. Alongside the push for progress and reform, the early twentieth century was also a time of rampant and violent white supremacy, eugenics, nationalism, and colonialism. Not to mention the Prohibition of intoxicating liquors, passed in 1920. All were championed by people who called themselves progressive.

Eric Rauchway: There's a lot of vying for the progressive label in that period.

John Biewen: But the era did bring real innovations, political and economic: Election of the U.S. Senate by the people instead of state legislatures – that was the 17th Amendment, ratified in 1913. And after the extreme inequality of the Gilded Age, there was pressure to have corporations and rich people contribute more to society. One answer was the income tax, in 1913. And the first antitrust and anti-monopoly laws to stop corporations from gouging consumers. In the first couple decades of the twentieth century, the labor movement fought for and mostly achieved an 8-hour work day and worker's compensation laws. Then, in 1920, woman suffrage, the 19th Amendment, a victory for women (well, mostly white women) after generations of fighting. By the end of the teens, though, World War One had brought not only terrible carnage but also economic growth in the U.S. With the end of the war, says Rauchway, leaders of the Republican Party basically looked at each other and said, enough progressivism.

Eric Rauchway: So by the time you get to the national elections in 1920, the Republican Party has brought its progressives to heel or at least made them know that they're not particularly welcome in their party. There is a lowering of taxes. There's a withdrawing from regulation of business.

There's a cracking down on labor unions. And in general, the adoption of what we would fairly well recognize as anti-progressive politics.

(Music)

John Biewen: People felt those changes: a return to growing inequality, workers stripped of some of the leverage they'd had a decade earlier. So there were pent-up demands for change even *before* the Great Depression hit. When it did....

Studs Terkel: What did you sense about the ordinary guy, the guy on the street....

John Biewen: Studs Terkel, around 1970, in a conversation with a physician, Dr. Lewis Andreas, who had this memory from the early Thirties in Chicago.

Lewis Andreas: You probably remember a very ominous march down Michigan Avenue one day, a very silent, straggling march, you know, of the unemployed. Nobody said anything, they were just a dark mass of people flowing down that street. And I think in their minds then was, the point will be reached where we're not gonna take this. I remember....

Studs Terkel: The silence....

Lewis Andreas: I remember it particularly because of the silence. This was a glum march. There was no waving of banners, no enthusiasm, but an undercurrent of desperation and I would say maybe of uncrystallized intent to do something about it if all this didn't stop.

John Biewen: A leader of the Federation of Labor, Edward McGrady, told a [Congressional committee in 1932](#) that if the government didn't take bold action to respond to the Depression, the problem would not be saving the hungry. Instead, he said, "the cry next winter will be to save this government of the United States."

So by the time Roosevelt took office, he had a clear mandate. He famously launched a flurry of programs with three- and four-letter acronyms -- the TVA, CWA, PWA and WPA, the CCC. Subsidies for farmers, public works programs that would eventually put millions of people to work, bank restrictions and deposit insurance to protect people's money. A little later, the Social Security system and cash welfare for needy families. And major new labor laws, guaranteeing workers the right to bargain collectively, and providing federal oversight to protect workers' right to organize.

Fireside Chat, 4/28/35. Radio announcer: Ladies and gentlemen, the president of the United States.

Roosevelt: My friends, since my annual message to the Congress on January fourth last....

John Biewen: In radio broadcasts billed as Fireside Chats, Roosevelt spoke to the American people in frank detail, giving updates, making clear he was trying things, not all of which would work—explaining his plans and the philosophy behind them.

FDR, 9/30/34: In our efforts for recovery we have avoided on the one hand the theory that business should and must be taken over into an all-embracing government. We have avoided on the other hand the equally untenable theory that it is an interference with liberty to offer reasonable help when private enterprise is in need of help. The course we have followed fits the American practice of government—a practice of taking action step by step, of regulating only to meet concrete needs—a practice of courageous recognition of change.

Eric Rauchway: His impulses, probably, at least at the outset of his political career, were orthodox. That is to say, he didn't have any fairly radical ideas about how society should be constructed....

John Biewen: Roosevelt's dramatic expansion of government, in response to the Depression, got him called socialist by some business leaders. But he'd been born into wealth – money his ancestors made as merchants, and investors in things like real estate, coal, and railroads. His wife Eleanor, who was also a distant cousin, had a bigger trust fund than he did. But Rauchway says FDR was deeply read in history and economics, and he seems to have been guided by a sincere personal ethic.

Eric Rauchway: He was deeply Christian. He was Episcopalian, and he took that very seriously throughout his life as far as we can tell. He strewed throughout his speeches references to the scriptures, and there's probably, as far as we can say that there is such a thing, a moral core to Roosevelt's politics.

FDR, 1932 nomination speech: My program...is based upon this simple moral principle: The welfare and the soundness of a nation depends first upon what the great mass of the people wish and need, and secondly, whether or not they are getting it. What do the people of America want more than anything else? In my mind, two things: Work. Work, with all the moral and spiritual values that go with work. (Applause) ... And, with work, a reasonable measure of security. Security for themselves and for their wives and children. Work and security. These are more than words.

They're more than facts. They're the spiritual values, the true goal towards which our efforts of reconstruction should lead.

John Biewen: You can still get an argument about who Roosevelt was: A traitor to his class, a closet socialist attacking American capitalism. Or, just the opposite, a loyal plutocrat, doing just enough for the suffering, pitchfork-wielding people during a grave crisis to save the system that benefited him and his rich friends. Or neither.

Eric Rauchway: There's not a lot of insight into his inmost self. So when you ask about his motives and his inner thoughts, it's very difficult to get hold of that.

John Biewen: Anyway, what matters more than Roosevelt's deepest thinking is the pressure he faced, from all sides -- corporate leaders and pro-business politicians on the right, organized labor and masses of suffering poor people on the left. And FDR had people with more progressive instincts close by -- people like his agriculture secretary, Henry Wallace, and his wife, Eleanor. She traveled the country visiting needy people and championing housing programs. She met with African American leaders, wrote a daily syndicated newspaper column, and broadcast her own radio show.

Eleanor Roosevelt, UN speech: Our guest today has been described as one of the fifty greatest women in American history. She is Mrs. Mary McLeod Bethune.

John Biewen: A reflection of Eleanor's unabashed progressivism, here's a broadcast she did with the Black educator and civil rights leader Mary McLeod Bethune in 1949.

Mary McLeod Bethune: We now seek to create, or the creation of, still greater areas of cooperation between the women of all the races of mankind for the preservation of universal peace and justice.

Eleanor Roosevelt: Thank you Mary McLeod Bethune. None of us certainly can say that as yet we have perfect democracy, nor even the democracy that Abraham Lincoln and others of our great men envisioned. But I for one am proud that our country could produce a Mrs. Bethune.

John Biewen: One thing is clear about Franklin Roosevelt and his goals for the New Deal, says Eric Rauchway. FDR came to believe that a real shift in economic and political power was needed in American society. And that led to genuine hostility between him and many corporate and conservative leaders.

Eric Rauchway: Roosevelt was going to see that wages went up.

Roosevelt was going to see that workers could unionize. Roosevelt was going to do things not only in the interest of the people who had always had wealth and power, put them back where they were, but also kind of shift the balance a bit in favor of those who had not had wealth and power and influence before. And the more that became clear, the more the more conservative elements of American life turned against him. And Roosevelt's response was to say, no, I really do mean this (laughs). I really am going to keep pushing in this direction. It's hard to say, you know, whether he would necessarily have done quite the same when he started out in '33 as he ended up doing, by the time you get to '36, when he famously or infamously says, you know, those folks hate me and I welcome their hatred.

FDR, 1936 renomination speech: These economic royalists complain that we seek to overthrow the institutions of America. What they really complain of is that we seek to take away their power. [Audience cheers]

(Music)

John Biewen: Roosevelt was determined to give at least *some* more power to people who didn't have it. But America's hierarchies were many, and they were

stubborn. One president in the 1930s, even one as powerful and popular as FDR, would not, or could not, dismantle them all.

[BREAK]

John Biewen: The New Deal helped some people of every shade and background, but it didn't help people equally.

Cybelle Fox: It's definitely left in place, the racial hierarchy is left in place during the New Deal.

My name is Cybelle Fox. I'm a professor of sociology at the University of California, Berkeley. I wrote a book called *Three Worlds of Relief*, which examines the incorporation of Blacks, Mexican-Americans and immigrant, European immigrants, into the early American social welfare system, essentially from the Progressive Era to the New Deal.

John Biewen: Cybelle Fox studied the very distinct experiences of those three groups, as they sought the help that so many people needed. In the 1920s and 30s, much more than today, these big demographic groups mostly lived in

different geographies, and political and labor conditions. Seventy percent of Black Americans lived in the South in 1930, most working on farms and plantations in the Jim Crow debt peonage system. The vast majority of Mexican-Americans, and resident Mexican immigrants, lived in the southwest. They also worked in agriculture but as migrants, not tied to a single employer. Most new arrivals from Europe landed in northeastern and midwestern industrial cities. Especially before the New Deal, Fox says, it helped a lot to be European when seeking relief. Any kind of European, including those, like Poles, Greeks, and Italians, who were not considered the right kind of white by WASP-y or Nordic Americans.

Cybelle Fox: Southern and eastern European immigrants definitely suffered from racial discrimination on the basis of the fact that they were Italian or southern Italian. Jews, of course, suffered anti-Semitism and race-based discrimination. But when whiteness was at issue, they were nearly always included within the context of white. And that matters for the story, in part because social workers in the United States during this period imagined them as capable of assimilation, of turning into Americans, if not in the first generation, then in the second generation.

John Biewen: Cybelle says white relief workers went out of their way to offer help to these immigrants, regardless of their immigration status.

Cybelle Fox: So even though public opinion was against them, they still had wide access to the social safety net.

John Biewen: Things were different, she found, for Mexican immigrants and even Mexican Americans—especially during the early Hoover years of the Depression, in places like California, Arizona, and Colorado.

Cybelle Fox: What would happen essentially is Mexicans would, like everyone else, were kind of in desperate need of assistance during the early years of the Great Depression. They would go to the, you know, Los Angeles Department of Charities. And instead of offering them food or cash assistance, as they would do with white Americans or even European immigrants, they would offer them a train ticket instead to Mexico.

John Biewen: In the early Depression years, Los Angeles charity officials called in the federal immigration service to expel Mexican people applying for relief. Cybelle says up to half of those pressured onto trains for Mexico were U.S. Citizens, children of immigrants born in the U.S.

Cybelle Fox: And they didn't really care very much about their citizenship or even legal status. They just wanted them gone. They saw them as racially unassimilable, and overly dependent on relief.

John Biewen: Before the New Deal, it was not unusual for Mexican workers in the southwest to get sporadic help from local relief agencies and charities, usually between picking seasons. But that was never the case for Black people in the southeast. The southern landowners who employed Black families to work their farms made sure of that.

Cybelle Fox: Yeah, Southern planters saw relief both before the Great Depression, but also afterwards, as a threat to their system of race relations in the South, but also to their labor supply. They felt like if other forms of assistance were available to Black Americans that they would not stay working as tenant farmers or sharecroppers. And so both before the Great Depression and during it, they did whatever they could to try to make sure that benefits were lower than could be provided by working as tenant farmers or sharecroppers, but also that Black Americans would be excluded from any of these benefits wherever they had the power to do so. And southern planters had a lot of political power.

(Music)

John Biewen: So, Black people in the South got almost no help before Roosevelt ramped up the New Deal. Afterwards?

Cybelle Fox: You know, there was kind of a great promise actually with the election of FDR. The early federal relief efforts all had nondiscrimination clauses. And so relief administrators, federal relief administrators were not supposed to discriminate on the basis of race or color status, or also citizenship, nationality and religion.

John Biewen: If the federal government had lived up to that promise, that would have been a radical change. But the Roosevelt Administration exerted only so much control over the programs. Members of Congress insisted that most of the New Deal programs be administered at the local level.

1930s U.S. Government film: (Jaunty music), Announcer: In all these construction projects, local labor is employed, and wherever possible the raw materials are obtained from quarries in the immediate vicinity. How big is the WPA road program? In its first eighteen months of operation, the mileage end-to-end would have stretched five times around the earth.

John Biewen: The New Deal's public works programs famously put millions of men to work in the 1930s, allowing them to feed themselves and their families. Tens of thousands of Black men got those jobs – for example, five percent of the men employed by the CCC, the Civilian Conservation Corps, were Black. They worked in segregated crews. This was better than the near-total exclusion of Black people from social welfare programs before the New Deal. But Fox says if the system were fair, Black men would have gotten a lot more than five percent of the jobs.

Cybelle Fox: They represented ten percent of the nation. So just to be, you know, kind of represented equally in terms of population numbers, but since their need would have been so much greater, they should have been, you know, 15 or 20 percent of CCC workers. But they're really excluded from access to the most generous kind of pieces of the early social welfare system.

John Biewen: The New Dealers also took some steps to change the way the U.S. government had treated Native Americans. The federal public works programs hired some Native people, and built roads, schools, and hospitals on reservations. In 1934, Congress passed the Indian Reorganization Act, known as the "Indian New Deal." That law began to reverse the federal policy of forced

assimilation, giving back to tribes more control over their natural and cultural resources.

FDR, radio broadcast, August 1935: We can never insure one hundred percent of the population against one hundred percent of the hazards and vicissitudes of life, but we have tried to frame a law which will give some measure of protection to the average citizen, and to his family, against the loss of a job and against poverty-stricken old age.

Cybelle Fox: The birth of the American social welfare system is really—the modern American social welfare system really starts in 1935, with the passage of the Social Security Act.

John Biewen: Maybe the single biggest legacy of the New Deal is the old-age insurance provided by Social Security. It would be paid for with workers' contributions, and a tax on employers. Poverty was rampant among older Americans, and Social Security would go a long way toward solving that. But the program did not include everyone at first. Black and Latino people were excluded disproportionately.

Cybelle Fox: This is not because there were race-based exclusions written into the law, but because there were occupational restrictions that

excluded agricultural and domestic workers from the benefits of Social Security and unemployment insurance. The effect was to exclude the majority of Blacks and Mexicans from access to these generous social insurance benefits.

John Biewen: So in 1940, about six in ten white Americans worked in jobs that made them eligible for Social Security, compared with only forty percent of Mexican-Americans and thirty-five percent of Black Americans. It's become conventional wisdom that racism was behind these exclusions, and that southern segregationists in Congress insisted that farm and domestic workers not be included in Social Security. But the evidence doesn't seem to support that claim, when it comes to the old-age insurance program itself. The two main architects of Roosevelt's New Deal Programs, Frances Perkins and Harry Hopkins, wanted to make Social Security universal from the start. But European countries had excluded domestic and farm workers from similar programs, based on the idea that those workers were harder to tax and administer. Roosevelt officials, including his Treasury Secretary, Henry Morgenthau, argued for doing the same as the Europeans, and Congress agreed without much debate. The effect was to exclude disproportionately more Black and brown people, though most of the people who were excluded from Social Security were white. The Act was amended to include domestic and agricultural workers in the 1950s.

(Music: In the Dark)

John Biewen: So a lot did not change as a result of the New Deal, but a lot did. And there's plenty of evidence that things did change because regular people took action beyond casting votes. The worry that people might rise up clearly moved Roosevelt and other government leaders. But activism by working people had an impact on corporate leadership, too. Here, a former General Motors worker, Bob Stinson, is telling Terkel about a major strike at a Chevrolet Plant in Flint, Michigan, in 1937. It was part of a historic 44-day sit-down strike at several GM facilities.

Bob Stinson: That was a knock-down, drag-out fight, between the tear gas that the police used and the nuts and bolts that the striker used, it was hell to pay. (Chuckles.) So that's what they called the battle of Bull Run. Finally they, the police left.

Studs Terkel: That was the beginning of UAW....

Bob Stinson: That's when Mr. Nugent [?] put his name to a piece of paper and said General Motors Corporation recognizes the UAW/CIO as the bargaining agent for the employees in those plants in which they have the majority.

Studs Terkel: Until that time, until that moment....

Bob Stinson: We were non-people. We didn't even exist.

(Music)

Studs Terkel: The Workers' Alliance, when people were evicted, what did they do?

Willy Jeffries: Put em back where they come out, if they wanted to. Put em back again where they come out!

Studs Terkel: Well can you describe some of those....

John Biewen: Willy Jeffries was a union official in Chicago. She told Terkel about a socialist organization made up mostly of Black and Polish people in the city. The group would spring into action when they heard a landlord had evicted someone during the Depression, had thrown their belongings out on the curb and turned off the gas and electricity.

Willy Jeffries: The men would connect those lights and go to the hardware, and get a piece of gas pipe, connect that stove back. Put the furniture in there and we'd arrange it back just how you had it, don't look like you been outdoors. Then you see, then, that landlord couldn't bother them again for ninety days.

Studs Terkel: That was it. I see.

Willy Jeffries: See, he couldn't bother them no more for ninety days. And then at the end of that ninety days, then he's glad to keep us in here.

Studs Terkel: Too much trouble!

Willy Jeffries: Yeah.

Studs Terkel: [Cackles]

(Music)

John Biewen: The most common narrative about the New Deal goes something like this: Roosevelt's multi-pronged response to the Great Depression held off the angriest potential responses from the American people, and saved the nation's

political and economic systems by reforming them—somewhat. Then came World War Two, with Roosevelt still in office. Even more than the New Deal, massive government spending to mobilize for the war ended the Great Depression and brought jobs and prosperity. Stir in a surge of patriotism behind the war effort, and by the time the war is won in 1945, the idea that American democracy, or American capitalism, were gravely threatened, feels like a distant memory. The American project of 1776, and 1876, lives on, more or less intact, but updated and modified.

(Music)

John Biewen: So, Chenjerai.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: Hey, John.

John Biewen: it seems fair, I think, and actually important, to say that the New Deal brought some real change, changes that made things better for a lot of people.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: I think that's right. You know, I see people now who are trying to make an argument for a broader and bolder political vision and the courage that it takes achieve that vision, and I think they cite the New Deal for a

reason. I mean look at some of the things that are in it. Minimum wage. Abolishing child labor. A forty-hour work week. Social Security. You know what I'm saying?

John Biewen: Yeah. Protection of collective bargaining rights. Those banking regulations, deposit insurance. The jobs programs.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: Yes, massive jobs programs, support for the arts. So I think all those things are, you can't dismiss those. And then, even if you look at this language in Roosevelt's speech where he talks about the Second Bill of Rights, I think that's something that is really important to look at.

John Biewen: You're talking about a speech he gave near the end of his life, and actually at the beginning of his fourth term as president, in 1944, where he called for a Second Bill of Rights. And I would just suggest that people who don't know about that just look it up and see what he was calling for. It's pretty striking, and today looks like a pipe dream. And of course he would die the following year and the Second Bill of Rights did not happen, to say the least.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: Right. But you know, to me, when we talk about Roosevelt and people like him, and things like the New Deal, we have a habit of talking about them like they just originated in some man's mind, or like his

Cabinet. And I think that's a mistake. One, because it's not true. That's not how things happen. And two, because it gives us the idea that all important change is made by great men, kind of a great man theory of history. So I think with the New Deal what you have to look at is, a lot of the good things that happened in the New Deal were really responses to ideas that came from radical movements which had been struggling and pushing for those for years. There's a long history of radical struggle before Roosevelt. And I want to be clear: Roosevelt himself was not a radical. I guess I would describe him as a capitalist humanitarian.

John Biewen: That seems about right. He was committed to both of those things: to capitalism, to essentially preserving the way that the country operated economically, and a genuine humanitarian vision, wanting to make life better for a lot of people. But I know that he was hearing from more radical leaders, quite directly.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: Yeah. So, for example, two weeks after he was inaugurated, he brought in this socialist preacher named Norman Thomas, and another socialist leader, Morris Hillquit, right into the White House. And so they sat with Roosevelt, and he was listening to their propositions for how they [wanted] to deal with the Great Depression. And you know, they started talking about nationalizing the banks, and they also looked at his jobs program and they criticized that proposal, basically, wondering whether it was just gonna mean a

whole bunch of really low-wage work, which they had already been fighting against. So, you know, he heard those things but he ultimately rejected their banking proposal and kind of ignored their jobs complaint as well.

John Biewen: So he was kind of, he was taking ideas -- and these things are complicated, but I get a sense from some scholars that it would be fair to say that the New Deal adopted some ideas that were out there, that were being offered by more radical people, and pretty inevitably watered them down somewhat. Sort of co-opted them and moderated those proposals.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: Yeah. So, earlier in the episode we talked about sorting out the democratic versus anti-democratic forces as they played out in the New Deal? And here's one really clear example. Just take the Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938. That includes like the child labor stuff, minimum wage, forty-hour work week, all that really important stuff. Who introduces it? It's Hugo Black, who's a labor activist and former Lawyer for Mine workers. And he introduces that in 1932, and he's just fighting to get it passed all the way 'til 1938. I should also mention, just as a side note, that he, Black, was briefly in the Klan.

John Biewen: Oops.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: Just temporarily.

John Biewen: People are complicated, people evolve sometimes.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: I'm not defending that. But the point is that, who emerges as an opponent of things like [ending] child labor? It's the Supreme Court. And they kind of roll out like a states' rights argument. And so Roosevelt and Black are pushing to get this thing through, and they can't even do it, ultimately, until Black actually gets on the supreme court in 1937, and then they can start to change it and get that passed.

John Biewen: Wow.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: And that brings me to a point, John.

John Biewen: Yes.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: Can you, do you think you can get me on the supreme court? I know that you know a lot of people, white people....

John Biewen: I know some white people. (Laughs.) Yeah, well actually I hereby nominate you. Publicly.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: OK.

John Biewen: Now we can see if I have as much clout as the Federalist Society, in putting people on the Supreme Court.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: But I mean, also outside of the White House, there was forces that were kind of pushing and leading to what would ultimately become the New Deal, and there was a certain kind of urgency to some of the organizing that was happening, particularly between like 1933 and 1936, kind of like Roosevelt's first term. I mean, people were shutting stuff down. There was the Chevrolet Strike in Toledo, the longshoremen had a dock strike in 1934 that was very important, and of course you had Black organizing in the South against Jim Crow, lynching and tenant farming. Some of that was in response to the first New Deal proposals. In fact, some scholars argue that those things pushed Roosevelt, but what ultimately got legislated were things that were discouraging the most radical parts of that struggle.

John Biewen: Can you say more about what you mean by that? An example?

Chenjerai Kumanyika: In labor, for example. It seemed that there was a push toward mediation, you know, working with management and negotiation, in that

mode, without the sit-ins and the kind of radical uprisings and some of the even more spontaneous uprisings that had happened, so, things like that.

John Biewen: Oh, OK. The larger point that I think you're making here takes me back to our last episode, when we were talking about the Civil War, and that the radical abolitionists had been calling for emancipation for decades, and then the Civil War created the conditions where a moderate like Lincoln finally sees that, you know, it's gonna help his agenda, namely trying to win the war, and that it's really in the interests of the country to adopt that position. So there's something similar at work here. In a big enough crisis, ideas that powerful people have successfully categorized as wildly radical and outside the mainstream, suddenly look reasonable and even necessary. Right?

Chenjerai Kumanyika: Yes. I also think it's important to talk about race, when we talk about the New Deal. You have to talk about that. And going back to the beginning of the episode, we heard from Clifford Burke, and he was kind of saying the Great Depression wasn't really a depression for Black people, in a way, because we were already born in depression. And in the same way, a lot of scholars have said that the New Deal wasn't really a New Deal for most Black people. And I think that's important, but it's important to talk about how that happened. Because I think it's sometimes more complicated than how we think

of it, particularly if we're looking at it through the lens of explicit attitudes and bias.

John Biewen: Yeah, there definitely ways in which straight-up racism was at play.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: Yes.

John Biewen: And we gave a couple of examples of that in the episode. A really key thing to understand is the fact that a lot of the New Deal programs were administered locally, and that gave people an opportunity in those places to discriminate against Black and brown people.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: Right. But when we talk about what was actually in the policies for Black and brown people, it gets complicated. Like, a lot of times people talk about the Social Security exclusion, the fact that Black and brown people weren't able to access that benefit. And for years I kind of thought, oh, that's just because there was this racial veto. There's a lot of scholarship that says that, a lot of people assume that that's true. And it kind of makes sense; it's intuitively right. But in my study what I found is that it doesn't really hold up when you really understand how that process of legislation proceeded. And so, I'm not

gonna go all the way into the weeds on that, but John it would be great if we can put some of those links up that people can check out.

John Biewen: Yeah, we'll put up a link to an article that you found that I think pretty persuasively debunks a more simplistic view of how that went down.

[LINK: <https://www.ssa.gov/policy/docs/ssb/v70n4/v70n4p49.html>]

Chenjerai Kumanyika: And I think this is really important if we want to understand the mechanisms of what could be called structural racism. A big part of why that exclusion played out the way it did for Black and brown workers is that they were already in a more marginalized position in the economy, so when whole categories of workers got excluded, they were more likely to be excluded. That also included a lot of white people, too, though, right? Disproportionately Black and brown people, but a lot of white people -- fifteen million white people, actually, were excluded.

John Biewen: I think it's also important to say that a lot of the changes that came from the New Deal, that were really advances for working people and poor people, that they were gonna be rolled back a few decades later. Which by the way is something that we'll get to in a future episode.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: That's right. And I think this is a point about Roosevelt and people like him. Roosevelt was, to me, a sincere humanitarian. But what the New Deal shows is that it's not just about a humanitarian impulse and having good ideas. You have to have the right analysis of economics. You have to empower movements from below that can keep pressing and keep working on this, like an engine, until things are really transformed at a deeper level. And that's inevitable, if you really want to have deeper democracy.

John Biewen: Mmm.

(Music: Theme)

John Biewen: Speaking of movements. Coming in Episode 7: Mississippi, 1964. A major episode in the modern Civil Rights Movement, and the fight for democracy. America's Third Founding? Next time.

By the way, Langston Hughes wrote the poem from which we borrowed the title of our series -- the poem is titled "Let America be America Again" -- during the Depression and the New Deal Years, in 1935.

Our editor on the series is Loretta Williams. Music consulting and production help by Joe Augustine of Narrative Music. Our theme song, The Underside of Power,

is by Algiers. Other music this season by John Erik Kaada, Eric Neveux, and Lucas Biewen. Thanks to the Studs Terkel Radio Archive at WFMT, the Franklin D. Roosevelt Presidential Library and Museum, and to North Carolina Public Radio-WUNC for use of its Durham studios. *Scene on Radio* is distributed by PRX. The show comes to you from the Center for Documentary Studies at Duke University.