

FOR MANY CHICAGOANS—AT LEAST FOR THE 65 PERCENT OF THE city's electorate who had cast their ballots for Franklin Roosevelt's re-election—1937 started on a note of cautious optimism. Although the Great Depression continued to exact a heavy toll, FDR's second term offered the possibility of expanded New Deal reforms that might help the region and its residents move toward better times.

Works Progress Administration (WPA) funds already paid artists to practice their crafts and researchers to survey the city. Public Works Administration (PWA) projects provided jobs and new housing. PWA funding and employees contributed to the Metropolitan Sanitary District's effort to upgrade the

region's sewage system. Federal funds were also helping to improve the city's transportation network, from Lake Shore Drive to the expansion of Municipal Airport to accommodate larger passenger planes. Perceived governmental support helped to revitalize the labor movement, as workers, sometimes crossing racial boundaries, organized for better wages and working conditions. Early in the year, strikes among electrical workers and taxi drivers left the city dark and still. Groups as diverse as the Chicago Tunnel Transport workers, the employees of Fan-Steel and the Chicago Mail Order Company, and the waitresses at de Met's Tea Rooms staged sit-down strikes to achieve their goals. On Memorial Day, the entire nation was shocked when police injured

1937

January: Social Security taxes and benefits payments begin; FDR's second inaugural address points to "one-third of a nation ill-housed, ill-clad, ill-nourished"

March: Chicago celebrates 100th anniversary of incorporation

April: Basque city of Guernica bombed by Germans during Spanish civil war

(a) *Background:* Images like this one and a Paramount newsreel shot at the scene of the confrontation between police and Republic Steel strikers on May 30 were used as evidence in the U.S. Senate's investigation of the incident. Although a local coroner's jury held the police blameless, the Senate and other investigative groups held that the ten deaths were both caused by the police and were avoidable. The newsreel, which was prohibited from being shown in Chicago, was used by the New York Police Department to demonstrate to officers what not to do in a similar situation.

(b) As this 1928 announcement illustrates, the battle to achieve union recognition for the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters began long before it happened in 1937. Excluded from most railroad unions because of their race and faced with the strong opposition of the Pullman Company, porters relied heavily on community support to build and sustain the union.

(c) Joe Louis's victory over Jim Braddock in the eighth round was not only a matter of pride for Chicago's African American community, it was also a boost for the local economy. Of some 60,000 attending the fight, about 75 percent were visitors to Chicago. Included in the audience were governors, congressmen, a cabinet member, and diplomats. United Airlines flew six extra 21-seat planes to Chicago. The largest hotels were booked six weeks in advance; the few remaining hotel rooms were going for twice their usual cost.

(d) The opening of the Outer Drive Bridge on October 5 and the president's visit provided depression-weary Chicagoans with an opportunity to celebrate despite worsening economic conditions at home and war threatening abroad. A parade down Michigan Avenue to the bridge included floats, Indian canoes, a covered wagon, horse-drawn carriages, a locomotive with tires, a man-powered hose cart, army units, American Legion and VFW posts, police, firemen, high-school and playground representatives, and other marchers organizers claimed exceeded 50,000. At the corner of the bridge where FDR spoke, he was greeted with airplanes, boats, hundreds of colored balloons, a fire tug spewing "geysers of water," and even more cheering Chicagoans.

(e) Lathrop Homes, located at Diversey and the North Branch of the Chicago River, was one of three PWA housing projects built for white Chicagoans and leased to the new Chicago Housing Authority. In 1937, a fourth was being planned for African Americans. Reflecting the severity of Chicago's housing crisis, there were seven applicants for every one unit available.



90 strikers and killed four at a march targeted at Republic Steel. Unionization efforts spread and some unions, like the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, succeeded in gaining recognition and concessions from their employers.

FDR's decision to cut federal spending in response to improved economic conditions early in the year plunged Chicago and the nation into recession as the year waned. Unemployment climbed as federal jobs disappeared and businesses faltered, returning Chicago families to the frightening levels of need experienced in 1929–1930. Relief requests increased so sharply that payments had to be reduced to well below what the state had determined was necessary for a minimum standard of living. The impact on already suffering communi-

ties such as the African American neighborhoods where unemployment had previously reached as high as 50 percent was devastating.

By October, when Roosevelt came to Chicago to celebrate the completion of Lake Shore Drive and, belatedly, the centenary of the city's incorporation, politicians and voters were acutely aware of the need for solutions to end the depression. Few, however, fully appreciated the relevance of the president's topic that day: the threat to world peace posed by certain nations. The war he talked about avoiding would eventually break the depression and move Chicago, the region, the country, and the world in new directions.

Janice L. Reiff

May: FDR signs Neutrality Act

June: Illinois passes law providing unemployment insurance

July: Japanese and Chinese troops clash in North China, begin undeclared war; Farm Security Administration created

September: National Housing Act signed; Chicago Housing Authority created soon thereafter

