Negotiating Relief
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IN NOVEMBER 1933, just weeks after county emergency-relief offices opened, E. M. Zuver, chairperson of the Van Buren County Welfare Relief Commission, issued a statement refuting information that WRC employees earned nine hundred dollars for two weeks of work. A neighboring county’s newspaper had just published salary figures inflated by as much as three or four times. The incident was not uncommon. A major criticism of the emergency-relief system centered on administrative costs, particularly the salaries of clerical workers, caseworkers, and supervisors employed in the relief agencies. Local officials believed they could do the work more economically than “these so-called case workers,” and SERA issued more than one report defending its administrative expenses. Critics included local officials, community members, and some recipients who compared their meager grants to the salaries paid caseworkers. Low salaries angered relief workers and social workers, supposed professionals who, in their eyes, were not paid as such. The events of the 1930s prompted significant debates about professional social welfare, both within and outside the profession. Contrasting ideas of what expertise was needed to administer relief, rooted in the gendered nature of professionalization, were one of the focal points of debate about welfare reorganization.

2. Quote from Van Buren County Board of Supervisors’ resolution, “Proceedings of the Board of Supervisors, Van Buren County,” February 16, 1934, 92.
in Michigan. Two visions of professionalism—one from the social work camp and the other from local officials—clashed in these debates.

The Great Depression and the New Deal changed social work permanently, despite the continuities in policy before and after the Great Depression. A relatively new profession, social work was still engaged in defining its professional identity when its services were in demand as never before. Social workers and social work organizations participated in public policy development during the Depression and eventually the New Deal. The profession faced a huge influx of new relief workers, few with formal training, hired to staff the emergency-relief agencies around the country. The 1930s saw the rise of the “new social worker”: usually a young person, often female, with some college education but little or no formal social work training. The profession greatly expanded, both in numbers and in influence, as social workers entered the public welfare arena to a much greater degree. The United States was estimated to have about 30,500 social workers in 1930, largely employed by private agencies; their ranks doubled by the time Franklin Roosevelt was inaugurated in 1933.

By the 1920s, social work developed the tenets of a profession. No social work schools existed in the United States in 1898, but the United States and Canada together had forty by 1928. The Charity Organization movement organized in the National Board of Corrections and Charities in 1874—and would reorganize as the National Association of Social Work in 1917. The American Association of Social Workers, established in 1921, published its own professional journal, the Compass, later Social Work. Another major professional social work journal was the Survey, published by the Russell Sage Foundation and considered to be the voice for all social workers, rather than for a specific professional organization. By the 1920s, the AASW represented

between 15 and 20 percent of professional social workers. Usually members were the “elite” among social workers, often executives of private agencies or higher-salaried caseworkers. The 1936 AASW directory included primarily social workers from private agencies. The majority of relief workers were not AASW members, and their inability and, in some cases, unwillingness to attain “professional” standards would fuel the union movement among social workers.

Casework formed the core curriculum for the new social work schools that emerged by the 1930s. The use of volunteers as the backbone of social welfare agencies declined further. A social worker was no longer a friendly visitor or volunteer Lady Bountiful, but instead was “the ‘scientific’ Miss Case-Worker, an ‘objective’ social investigator.”

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8. Walkowitz, “The Making of a Feminine Professional Identity,” 1054. Membership in the National Association of Social Workers held similar requirements, although that organization was more flexible in terms of replacing practical experience for formal social work education. Junior members had to have at least one year of supervised experience or one year of social work experience, and full members had to have at least four years of experience unless they were graduates of an approved school of social work. See “Membership Requirements before 1930,” National Association of Social Workers Records, Box 5, Folder 46, Membership Applications.


11. Regina Kunzel argues that casework was the defining skill or element of the social work profession and was “a kind of litmus test to separate professionals from amateurs and to advertise their professional status to a skeptical public.” Regina G. Kunzel, Fallen Women, Problem
issues of social adjustment that obstructed their ability to function in society as needed, but the “objective” part was important; moral judgments were not to be a part of the diagnosis. Social workers diagnosed the problems only “to indicate limits and possibilities in a systematic way, to point toward a reasoned plan of action,” not to judge.

One significant continuity existed in the profession: Lady Bountiful and Miss Case-Worker were women, and the image of a social worker remained female throughout this era of professionalization. Social workers were employed largely by private agencies before 1930, and in 1920 about 60 percent were women. A decade later, 79 percent were female. Only the teaching profession had a higher percentage of women. Detroit's social work staff was 87 percent female and also 94 percent white in 1936. Whether the fact that the profession was dominated by women was the “cause” of the low status, or if the low status and low pay deterred men from entering the profession, was debated.

Feminized professions not only were numerically dominated by women, but also practiced professional values different from the more traditional (often male) professions. Historian Robyn Muncy argues that gender was often a key reason for differences in the professionalization process and its definition. Muncy connects the values these professionals espoused and

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15. Ibid., 88; Ehrenreich, The Altruistic Imagination, 81; and Walker, “Privately Supported Social Work,” 1189.


18. Robyn Muncy, Creating a Female Dominion, 1890–1935 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), xii–xiv, 17–22, 68–70; Gordon, Pitted But Not Entitled, 72–73. Margaret Rossiter analyzes the experiences of women entering both male- and female-dominated professions, as well as the strategies they employed. See Margaret W. Rossiter, Women Scientists in America: Struggles and Strategies to 1940 (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982), 55–65. Clarke Chambers argues that social work was a profession “created by an equal partnership of women and men working in coalition.” His argument may hold true for those women in national leadership positions, but I am not convinced it was true at other levels. See Clarke Chambers, “Women in the Creation of the Profession of Social Work,” Social Service Review 60 (March 1986): 6. See also Walkowitz, Working with Class.

19. Muncy, Creating a Female Dominion, xiii–xiv. The standard work on the history of professionalization is Burton J. Bledstein, The Culture of Professionalism: The Middle Class and
These So-Called Case Workers

practiced to gender, rooted in beliefs about the natural abilities of women and men. Male professional values centered on efficiency, expertise, competition, education, and research. Female professions tended to emphasize popularizing expert knowledge, an extension of the notion of women as educators, and service. Female professions, like social work, nursing, and teaching, capitalized on beliefs about the nurturing abilities of women. Muncy ties this to the need to justify women's professional role in the context of traditional notions of what was appropriate behavior for women. A 1982 essay also argues that feminization occurred in professions "because there was a 'fit' between economic need and cultural conceptions of gender roles." As social work developed as a profession, social workers sought to distance their work from notions about natural abilities based on gender. Regina Kunzel argues that the social work profession, in its efforts to distinguish itself from the friendly visitors and volunteers of the earlier era, was distancing itself from such beliefs about natural abilities and social work. Social work was a profession, and not a "natural" occupation for women, but it was a difficult image to erase.

These contrasting professional values, rooted in gender stereotypes, emerge vividly in the welfare-reorganization debates of the 1930s. The debate was a clash between professional social workers and local officials, two groups with very different ideas of precisely what expertise welfare administration required. Social workers sought to shed the notion that their field was a "natural" one for women, and abandoned such arguments by the 1930s. The values embedded in the two kinds of professionalization Muncy describes surfaced

the Development of Higher Education in America (New York: Norton, 1976), 86–92. Bledstein's work documents the culture of male professionalism, with no attention to gender and minimal attention to those professions termed "female."

20. Muncy, Creating a Female Dominion, 21–22. Muncy notes that while male professionals, such as doctors and lawyers, also included the idea of service, it was more abstract and directed toward the "public interest" rather than helping a specific group or individual. She also argues that in the early days of social work, female professionals relied on wealthy benefactors for support and thus had to interpret or "sell" their work to laypeople. They also had to persuade clients that their services were necessary: "At precisely the time when those traditional male professions were seeking to increase their fees and status by emphasizing esoteric knowledge, women were creating professions that depended on the cooperation of lay people" (20). For a discussion of gender and professionalism in psychiatry, see Elizabeth Lunbeck, The Psychiatric Persuasion: Knowledge, Gender, and Power in Modern America (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 37–38.


22. Kunzel, Fallen Women, Problem Girls, 47.

23. Even within social work, a hierarchy of gender emerges. Men tended to dominate administrative and supervisory positions, while women filled the ranks of entry-level social work. See Walkowitz, Working with Class, 94–95, 167.
in the welfare debates in Michigan. Local officials argued that business and efficiency, the male professional qualities described by Muncy, were critical to relief work; they accused professional social workers of coddling relief recipients. Such values were not connected to the sex of professionals, but rather to the ideologies they espoused. Local officials adopted, however unintended, the gendered language of professionalism in their efforts to retain control of relief administration, rejecting the belief that social work education was necessary.

Michigan's experience in the 1930s highlights the narrow definition of social worker in standard histories of the profession. One scholar argues that “it was the county agents, all males, who were the first true social workers in Michigan.”24 Michigan’s public welfare system—staffed by county agents who administered child welfare and, at times, mothers’ pensions; township supervisors; and superintendents of the poor, who administered relief funded by county dollars—was the dominant welfare system in Michigan prior to the 1930s. And it was a system dominated primarily by men. Michigan’s State Board of Corrections and Charities directed that agents be men “who were regarded as successful, knowledgeable, and moral.” Women were excluded. Most of these early relief workers were of middle-class backgrounds and began to see themselves as a “new occupational group” by 1900.25 Poor commissioners and superintendents of the poor, also predominantly men, were part of this group of early social workers. They never referred to themselves as social workers, but they did create their own sense of professional or occupational identity. They formed their own professional organizations, such as the Association of Superintendents of the Poor and the State Association of Supervisors, and held annual meetings addressing their shared problems and concerns. They sought to contrast their ideologies and practices with that of the professional social worker, building on the nineteenth-century legacy of county agents and poor officials.

Social work’s professional status was uncertain, and local officials did not see the profession as central to relief administration. One critic argued that social work required “no specialized skills; it was a mediating occupation without final authority.”26 Many of Michigan’s local officials, on the other hand,

did see a place for social workers, just not in public relief work. Local officials saw relief work as a business enterprise requiring business expertise, and their viewpoint directly collided with that of professional social work in the 1930s. The debate about professionalism, and the anxiety that accompanied it, took place within and outside of social work circles, and gender was very much at the center of debates about Michigan’s welfare-reorganization laws in the 1930s.27

Although such conflict was not universal, Michigan was certainly not alone in its battles over the role of professional social work in public relief. Susan Traverso argues that Boston’s relief staff became more male-dominated in the 1920s, and more men sought relief. The rise of mothers’ pensions, and investigations by women, fostered resentment among those male workers. “In short, new standards, new practices, and new female social workers challenged the tradition of poor relief in Boston, a system long administered by a staff of man with the sole prerogative to determine the needs of poor families.”28 Several groups in Illinois, including unemployment organizations, the press, and legislative groups, found social workers to be “snoopy” and arrogant. One senator called the emergency-relief workers “an oligarchy whose methods they assume to be above impeachment.”29 Some local officials in West Virginia saw social workers as “outsiders,” unfamiliar with local residents or needs. Gender was a fundamental point of disagreement in West Virginia, and in one case police were called in to protect a female relief administrator.30

Like many other professions, social work was one segregated by race both in education and employment. Nonwhite social work professionals generally worked in agencies that served their own communities, particularly the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and the National Urban League. Aspiring black social workers could attend most schools of social work in the North, but education in the South remained segregated. This trend prompted the creation of separate schools of social work for blacks.31 Beulah Whitby, educated at Oberlin College, was the first African-

29. Dwayne Charles Cole, “The Relief Crisis in Illinois during the Depression, 1930–1940,” (PhD dissertation, St. Louis University, 1973), 293. Cole also argues that such accusations were not true and that social workers often allied with the Workers’ Alliance to demand higher relief funds (295–96).
31. Robenia Baker Gary and Lawrence E. Gary, “The History of Social Work Education...
American supervisor in the Detroit Department of Public Welfare, in 1941, ten years after the department initially hired her. She was first a caseworker and then a supervisor in the Alfred District, which was almost entirely black. But she did not visit white clients, even if they were down the street from other families she visited: “There would be two workers on the same district which was very wasteful . . . And it definitely was segregated.” Whitby also served the city’s Muslim community, “because they didn’t know what to do with them.” Before working for the DPW, Whitby worked for the YWCA, but in a segregated branch. She was among the few black caseworkers in Detroit’s DPW. Only a small number of African-Americans, Hispanics, or other people of color entered the mainstream profession on a large scale until the 1960s, particularly in the South.

Professional organizations were a key part of controlling the profession. To control the education standards and institutions of the profession is, according to sociologist Magali Sarfatti Larson, to control the knowledge base of the field, and the training also serves as “a most powerful generator of deeply shared cultural assumptions.” Professionals, by definition in their ideal form, have autonomy in their place of work and field: “In part, professionals live within ideologies of their own creation, which they present to the outside as the most valid definitions of specific spheres of social reality.” A part of the process of professionalization is exclusion, often through requirements for membership. In 1921 AASW required just four years of experience in the field of social work, reflecting in part the varied educational backgrounds of practicing social workers. By 1929, however, full membership required some college education in social work, with specified numbers of courses from accredited schools of social work. The profession’s goal was to require a master’s degree in social work. Formal education was to be the means to entrance into the profession by 1932, as for law and medicine. In effect, the stringent requirements


33. Whitby Interview, 18.

34. Walkowitz, Working with Class, 17, 65–66, 213.


37. Ibid., xiii.

excluded many social work practitioners from joining the professional organization. Older social workers who had social work experience but no formal social work education were eligible for membership only if they had belonged to the AASW before the requirements changed. New relief workers, hired only because they had some formal education, were often not eligible. These standards also excluded virtually all local relief officials, including county agents, township supervisors, superintendents of the poor, and poor commissioners.

Professional organizations like the Family Welfare Association (later the Family Service Association) determined what agencies could be recognized as “accredited” in the social work profession. Member agencies engaged in family social work, largely through private social work agencies. The FWA provided field-service visits to assist agencies in social work practice and to ensure that social work methods met their standards. Annual regional, state, and national conferences provided members with opportunities to learn new developments. The FWA also helped agencies develop training programs and published the journal *The Family.* Individuals could become FWA members if they were AASW members and had one year of field experience in family social work. To accommodate agency board or committee members, the FWA offered associate memberships.

Assessing the membership of the FWA points to changes in public welfare prompted by FERA. Both public and private agencies were eligible for membership in the FWA, although the majority of member agencies were private. Membership opened to public agencies in 1921, but a lack of trained social work personnel usually excluded them. By 1931, just eight public agencies nationwide belonged to the FWA. Interest in developing professional social work in public agencies grew during the Depression years, when public agency membership increased in the FWA and similar organizations. FERA’s goal to separate politics from relief administration included staffing emergency-relief

42. Brown, *Public Relief*, 54; Memo by Joanna Colcord dated November 11, 1940, FSA, Box 17, Folder Membership Public Departments. Josephine Brown argues that professional social work organizations, like the FWA, established their membership requirements for agencies in a way that excluded public welfare departments. Colcord is critical of Brown’s assessment of the FWA’s involvement with public agencies. Brown argues that the FWA did not admit public agencies until 1926, while Colcord notes it was five years earlier.
43. Memo to membership committee, dated March 22, 1931, FSA Records, Box 17, Folder Membership—Public Departments. Agencies were in Denver, CO; Jacksonville and Orlando, FL; Chicago, IL; Clarkston, SC; Nashville, TN; Fort Worth, TX; and Madison, WI.
agencies with trained social workers. Gauging the interest and success of public agencies seekingFWA membership in the 1930s is one way to assess the degree to which professional social work operated in public social welfare.

Before the 1930s, Michigan’s public relief agencies employed almost no professional social workers, and most relief workers were men. A 1917 study found county agents to be older men with almost no social work experience. Their occupations ranged from physician to mechanic, and in rural areas farmers often served in that position. A 1936 study commission on welfare issues found that most of the local poor-relief administrators—township supervisors, county agents, investigators of mothers’ pensions, superintendents of the poor, or welfare directors—had no training in social work and were simply the elected official or employee assigned to the task. The study also noted that most superintendents of the poor were more than forty. Investigators found superintendents beyond the age of sixty in the seventeen counties surveyed. Probate judges tended to be younger, but some were past the age of fifty. The report acknowledged that while these members thus had experience, they also were not at the peak of their abilities.

Education was a concern as well, since few officials had even a high school diploma. Probate judges, elected to their positions, were not required to have any specific training, and some serving on the bench had less than an eighth-grade education. Saginaw County’s probate judge, John Murphy, was a candidate for his second term on the Democratic ticket in 1936. He had served as court register for eighteen years, but had no formal legal training and was “sensitive about it.” County agents, often responsible for mothers’ and old-age pensions, also were found wanting: “County agents present a discouraging picture of grade school education, short service and lack of training and experience.”

FERA welcomed professional social workers into its relief agencies, but finding trained workers to staff its agencies was difficult. Administrators often

44. Ellis, “Juvenile Courts and Mothers’ Pensions in Michigan,” 8–9. The report was conducted for the state’s Child Welfare Commission and included analysis of thirty-three counties. Brown is extremely critical of the county agents and the fee schedule under which they operate. See Matson, Local Relief to Dependents, 19–22, 38.
45. “Local Public Welfare,” WRSC Records, Box 5, Folder 10, chapter V, “Present Public Welfare Organization,” 81. A study of Flint’s social services (Genesee County) found that Flint’s Division of the Poor—later dissolved under FERA—had eighteen employees, none of whom had training or education in social work. “The Development of Community Resources in Flint, Michigan, during Depression Years,” Prepared by A. C. Findlay (Flint Institute of Research and Planning: October 1938), 6–7.
47. Ibid.
48. “Sampling Survey of Local Relief Agencies, 1936,” WRSC Records, Box 6, Folder 7, Saginaw, Probate Judge.
Simply hired the more educated applicants. Rural areas, in particular, had few trained social workers on staff in emergency-relief agencies. In 1936, ERA staff were more educated than poor-relief officials, but not necessarily in social work. Eleven of the sixteen county administrators surveyed had some college education, and five had college degrees. Among casework supervisors, the numbers were eleven and eight, respectively. Seven had social work experience, three were teachers, and the rest had business experience. Manistee and Van Buren counties both hired staff with college educations of some sort, but only Manistee's Louise Armstrong had formal social work experience. Detroit's case was similar; a 1936 survey found that about 80 percent of the staff had some college education, but only 2.4 percent had undergraduate certification in social work, and only 1.6 percent had a graduate degree. Marquette and Saginaw counties also hired relief workers with college educations.

To address this problem, FERA and social work organizations offered training in social work methods to new relief workers. Time precluded graduate degrees in social work, so FERA officials sent workers to summer institutes for short courses and provided semester leaves for staff to attend college. Agencies trained staff using in-house programs, office libraries, and subscriptions to professional journals. Summer institutes provided intense training for relief workers. The University of Michigan also offered some courses, both on and off campus. Institutes at what was then Michigan State College dated to the mid-1920s, but served many emergency-relief workers once the Depression hit and FERA began. The emphasis was on social casework and investigations. More than five hundred workers attended the 1934 institute.

FERA provided grants to states to send social workers to schools of social work for a semester of study. One thousand students attended more than twenty different professional schools in 1934–1935. Officials targeted states with particularly low numbers of trained social workers, and eleven states

54. SERA Letter #374, June 5, 1935, SEWRC Papers, Box 1, Folder April to June 1935; SERA Letter # 590, June 4, 1936, SEWRC Papers, Box 1, Folder April to June 1936.
55. Letter dated September 18, 1934, from Josephine Brown to the Rev. Joseph Husslein, Dean, St. Louis School of Social Work; FERA SST, Social Work, Box 71, Folder J–Z.
never participated. Only schools that were members of the Association of Schools of Social Work were acceptable sites of study, because of the lack of time to ensure that other programs were of the appropriate quality. Maintaining professional social work standards was a key reason behind the limited number of schools eligible to participate. Many state schools had social work courses in their departments of sociology, or began new programs, with the rising demand for social workers, but were not able to participate in the FERA training program. Attendance at all programs of social work increased during the 1930s.

Professional social work education, fueled by the demand for social workers, made significant strides in Michigan during the 1930s. The growing programs also had ties to the emergency-relief personnel at the state level; SERA administrators later took teaching positions at the major social work programs in Michigan, and schools worked with state officials in developing a social work curriculum. A 1938 Michigan State College report noted that “this department is becoming a potent force in the Welfare activities of the State of Michigan.” The University of Michigan offered courses in the 1920s, and began issuing certificates in social work in 1927. The school created its Institute for Health and Social Sciences in Detroit in 1935, offering a two-year master’s program. Wayne University began offering courses in social work in Detroit in 1930; this evolved into a school of public affairs and social work in 1935, when it granted its first degrees. Michigan State College offered summer institutes and courses through its sociology department in the 1930s. Demand for social work education led to a one-year social work certification program in 1940. Michigan’s universities responded to the demand for social workers by working quickly to offer programs to educate workers.

Despite the obvious benefits of these programs, they served only a fraction of relief workers. Surveys of students reported that the education focused on urban social work; rural workers received little help in adapting urban

57. Ibid., 282–83. The states that did not participate included Massachusetts, Connecticut, Rhode Island, New York, Pennsylvania, Delaware, New Jersey, Maryland, and Ohio.
58. Ibid., 283.
60. Shaw, The University of Michigan, 259–60.
62. Report of the Dean of Liberal Arts, Seventy-ninth Annual Report of the Secretary of the Board of Agriculture (Lansing: 1940), 85. All three schools were accredited with the American Association of Schools of Social Work: University of Michigan in 1927, Wayne State in 1941, and MSC in 1952.
casework practices to their rural agencies. Some graduate social work programs emphasized private social work. Relief workers, however, needed further training in public, emergency-relief work, and in the specific policies and regulations that work entailed. For workers in the northern part of the state and the Upper Peninsula, travel to programs such as those at MSC was not necessarily practical. (A social worker in Marquette faced a four-hundred-mile drive to East Lansing to attend an institute.)

Relief workers gained most of their training in their own offices, from their supervisors. Programs ranged in formality from a deliberate set of training steps, including supervised fieldwork and competency examinations, to informal staff meetings that addressed policies, case practices, and social work. Wayne County provided a series of thirty orientation classes to new workers in 1934. Staff met weekly in small groups for further discussion and training. By mid-1935, Kent County had a training schedule for all new workers. In addition to an office library and training manual, the staff developed a series of lectures by supervisors, covering a range of topics in social work. Some focused specifically on emergency-relief practices while others centered on general social work methods, including interviews, psychiatry in social work, rural problems, and ethics. The course's final stage was a written examination. Kent County's WRC also conducted a rural institute, bringing in outside speakers to cover rural social work. A published staff bulletin, weekly staff meetings, and district conferences provided an ongoing training system for all relief workers. Kent County’s WRC also sought to familiarize its workers with the community’s resources and businesses through tours of local industries, businesses, and community agencies. Weekly meetings included practical casework discussions with active case files. Staff members also took a

63. Brown, Public Relief, 289–290. State officials also warned staff about unaccredited correspondence courses for social work. One was advertised through a Washington DC office, but SERA warned relief workers that it was not connected to FERA and was not an appropriate way to secure additional training. SERA Letter #350, April 30, 1935, SEWRC Records, Box 1, Folder April to June 1935.

64. Social workers in the Upper Peninsula also did not have the Mackinac Bridge (completed in 1957) connecting the upper and lower peninsulas of Michigan; instead, travelers had to rely on car ferries to cross the five-mile span of water.


67. “Training Program,” Kent County, FERA SST, Box 1, Folder Michigan. The city of Detroit and Wayne County also had formal training programs for their relief workers, covering many of the same topics. Wayne County also dealt with the rural or out-county aspects of relief work. “Intake Outline,” City of Detroit ERA, and “Wayne County—Rural and Suburban Division,” FERA SST, Box 1, Folder Michigan.
seventeen-week course in family casework at the University of Michigan through an extension program.\textsuperscript{68}

Although county agencies sought to provide education for new relief workers, inadequate training was a continued problem for Detroit’s DPW in the 1930s. A lack of training facilities was cited as a key concern in 1933 by the FWA, although staff were able to attend periodic seminars as well as state conferences and institutes to further their social work education. The DPW established a training center by 1937 to provide in-service instruction for DPW employees, and also to make fieldwork available for college students of social work, who were largely from the University of Michigan and Wayne University. DPW employees pursuing college degrees in social work could do their fieldwork in the Detroit agency or a private agency. Major obstacles to the continued training of social workers were funding, facilities, and a lack of support from DPW superintendents and the city government.\textsuperscript{69}

Some Michigan counties embraced, albeit briefly, the professional practices and values of social work. Professional social workers, either on the Welfare Relief Commission or in the relief agency, were central to these efforts. Two Michigan counties earned membership in the FWA. Kent County was the first WRC in 1934; Detroit’s DPW (operating as the Wayne County WRC) became a member in 1935.\textsuperscript{70} Oakland County, in southeastern Michigan, sought membership in late 1935, but little action is recorded in the surviving files. Bay and Midland counties both began inquiries in 1939, but a car accident that seriously injured the women pushing for it stalled those efforts.\textsuperscript{71} Genesee County sought membership in 1933, through the WRC chairperson and city manager, John Barringer. Barringer was active in the local community chest and anxious to have the newly created public department adopt social work practices. He disagreed with the director of public welfare, Milton Van Geison, a former clerk with the Buick personnel department and ardent home rule proponent. Van Geison argued that investigators were to be detectives and that relief “should be made hard for the families . . . in order to encourage them to be self-supporting.” He held great disdain for professional social work.

\textsuperscript{68} “Training Program,” Kent County, FERA SST, Box 1, Folder Michigan.

\textsuperscript{69} Rose Porter, Memo dated July 1933, FSA Correspondence, FSA Records, Box 57, Detroit Folder 1929–1934; Questionnaire, April 21, 1937, 4, Detroit Folder, 1936–37; Rosemary Reynolds, Field Visit, Oct. 16–20, 1939, 4, FSA Records, Detroit Folder, 1938–39.

\textsuperscript{70} Memo dated January 19, 1937, FSA Records, Membership Folder. Seventeen public agencies held full membership in the FSA by 1936.

\textsuperscript{71} Rosemary Reynolds, Memo dated June 21, 1939, FSA Correspondence, FSA Records, Box 57, Bay City Folder; Rosemary Reynolds, Extra Mural Conference, June 21, 1939, FSA Correspondence, FSA Records, Box 58, Midland Folder.
in relief administration.  

The two men’s views again illustrate the divide over the question of who should administer relief. Three years later the agency still had not gained membership, although it was recognized by the FWA as one of Michigan’s highest-quality public agencies.

Social workers in Detroit’s Department of Public Welfare first inquired about membership in 1924, although the DPW was divided on its commitment to professional social work and casework. In 1929 the FWA sponsored a two-week educational institute on casework principles for DPW staff; DPW Superintendent Thomas Dolan supported professionalizing the department, although he had no formal training in social work. The revised city charter in 1918 granted the department the power to do so, but it remained largely a relief-giving agency. The reality of the budget crises of 1930 and 1931 placed professionalization of the department, and membership in the FWA, on hold. Caseloads were running as high as 300 to 400 per worker, and morale was low. “[DPW social workers] said quite regretfully that each winter saw them plunged into a similar emergency situation and that the period between the emergency situations was spent chiefly in recuperating from the emergency before.” Professional social work practices were a luxury the DPW could not afford in the early Depression crisis. But by 1935 caseloads had dropped to between 80 and 125, and the department had established a training program for its staff. The FWA granted the DPW membership in June 1935.

Federal officials recognized Kent County as having one of the best Michigan county agencies. The agency first inquired about membership in February 1934, and seven months later the agency became an FWA member. Quick

72. Consultation Visit, Rose Porter, April 28 to May 11, 1933, 3, FSA Correspondence, FSA Records, Box 58, Flint Folder. Van Geison was a formidable opponent and would lead the fight to preserve local control of welfare—and its punitive nature—in the battle over welfare reorganization later in the decade.

73. FWA field investigators were doubtful about the motives for membership. They reported that the county WRC wanted the benefits of membership but was not eager to assume its responsibilities. Consultation Visit, F. R. Day, December 10, 1936, FSA Correspondence, FSA Records, Box 58, Flint Folder.

74. Consultations, David Holbrook, December 15, 1924, FSA Correspondence, FSA Records, Box 57, Michigan Prior to 1928 Folder.

75. Consultations, Ella M. Weinfurther, May 2, 1930, FSA Correspondence, FSA Records, Box 57, Detroit 1928–1935 Folder.

76. Ibid., 7–9.

77. Consultation Visit, FSA Correspondence, FSA Records, Box 57, Detroit 1931–35 Folder.

78. Memo from field representative Howard Hunter to Harry Hopkins, June 1, 1934; Harry Hopkins Papers, Box 58, FERA-WPA Narrative Field Reports, Michigan, 7. Hunter reported to Hopkins that Kent County’s relief organization was “one of the best in the state” and credits social welfare activism with leading “an uprising of citizens,” resulting in a new city council.
granting of membership likely arose in part from the casework supervisor, Alice Yonkman, who had both public and private social work experience. Yonkman had worked with the public agency in the early 1920s before moving to the Red Cross. The Family Service Association, a private agency and member of the FWA, hired her in 1929. FWA field visitors commended Yonkman’s direct manner and the quality of her case records, which showed “increasing case work treatment and more thoughtful work, and real participation on the part of the client.” By 1933 she had the support of Howard Hunter, head of the community chest, to lead the local WRC. Yonkman later left the FSA to work in the WRC. New staff members had formal social work training, and Yonkman was committed to professional social work standards in the agency. The proliferation of caseloads, which ranged from 187 to 230 per caseworker, was a concern of the FWA. But membership was recommended and the Kent County WRC joined the FWA.

A county WRC board sympathetic to social work was critical in the professionalization of local agencies. All three men—a business executive, an attorney, and a township trustee—on Kent County’s commission supported professional social work ideals and took an active and positive interest in its development in the public agency. When the commission changed under the revised administrative rules in early 1936, support for a social work organization continued under Probate Judge Clark Higbee, a member of the Welfare and Relief Study Commission. Detroit’s Public Welfare Commission (PWC) and the Wayne County WRC included some members who had backgrounds in social work and social work education, and who were active in either public or private welfare work in the city. James Fitzgerald, who was PWC chairperson for several years, was executive secretary of the city’s St. Vincent de Paul Society. Other members had affiliations with the Jewish Social Service Bureau, the Council of Social Agencies, and the city’s medical community.

79. Polk’s Grand Rapids City Directory (Grand Rapids: Grand Rapids Directory Company, 1922), 907. From 1922 to 1925 Yonkman was listed as a social service worker, but with no place of employment specified. By 1926 she was a supervisor with the city social service department and in 1929 began working for the FSA. She disappeared from the city directory in 1935.
81. Consultation Visit, Rose Porter, July 17–18, 1933, 4–6; Consultation Visit, Rose Porter, June 13–14, 1934, 4, FSA Records, Box 58, Grand Rapids Folder.
82. Rose Porter, Consultation Visit, June 16, 1934, 4, FSA Correspondence, FSA Records, Box 58, Grand Rapids Folder.
83. Consultation Visit, Margaret Wead, October 1934, FSA Correspondence, FSA Records, Box 58, Grand Rapids Folder.
84. Consultation Visit, Rosemary Reynolds, November 9 and 12, 1937, FSA Correspondence, FSA Records, Box 58, Grand Rapids Folder.
Fitzgerald also served as chair of the county’s WRC. Other members included Frederic Siedenburg, a Catholic priest active in the Council of Social Agencies, and Ruth Whipple. Whipple served on the Plymouth City Commission and also was active in the Women’s Christian Temperance Union, the League of Women Voters, and the Business and Professional Women’s Club. City officials were often hostile to social work in the administration of public welfare, but the social work background of commission members helped to counter their opposition.

The FWA was willing to work with those public agencies that chose to instill professional social work into their programs. But such efforts were not very successful during the 1930s. Just two of Michigan’s eighty-three counties actually gained membership, and only a handful more sought FWA support. Thus the active drive for professionalization was small and brief, as events would further reinforce by the decade’s end. Most county agencies professionalized only to secure federal and state funds, and resisted even that.

THE REALITY OF RELIEF WORK

The rhetoric of professionalization rang hollow for some relief workers, and speaks further to the competing visions of professionalization in this period, even within the profession. College-educated but untrained in professional social work, these workers were at the heart of debates about the definition of social work and the expertise needed for welfare administration. Low salaries continued to be one of several issues relief workers—experienced and not—faced in the emergency-relief period, and yet their salaries were the focus of criticism regarding SERA’s administrative costs. Relief workers, however, saw their wages and working conditions as grievances to be addressed. The contest over professional standards and labor issues prompted some new relief workers to pursue union organization as a means to gain higher wages and job security. These relief workers did not entirely reject professionalization but, rather, used it to further their cause. The union movement met opposition within the profession, and social work union activists faced reprisals for their outspoken advocacy on behalf of themselves and their clients.

Despite the rhetoric of professionalization, relief workers did not earn a professional wage, even before the 1930s. Salaries among the “elite psychiatric and medical case workers” in urban areas were about $150 per month

($1800 per year), while most social workers, concentrated largely in family- and child-welfare agencies, earned between $90 and $125. Wages for social workers increased just 3 percent from 1913 to 1926, and most social workers earned slightly less than skilled industrial workers. Daniel Walkowitz argues that a wage of $1,800 in the 1920s earned social workers a “bare existence.” Few social workers earned a middle-class standard of living.\(^86\) This continued to be true in the 1930s, when wages rose little and SERA constantly faced criticism about administrative costs and high salaries. The average caseworker salary in 1936 was $1,573, a monthly salary of about $131. But 20 percent of the welfare department in Detroit earned more than $2,500 per year, “nearly twice as much as the average auto worker.”\(^87\) This group likely included administrators and supervisors. The average relief worker earned much less.

According to SERA, Michigan’s casework supervisors earned an average monthly salary of $127.93, while caseworkers and investigators earned an average monthly salary of $89.31 in the first year of SERA’s operations. The average salary for other workers, largely clerical and office staff, was $85.97.\(^88\) Investigators, home visitors, and aides were paid between $70 and $90; the positions required a high school education and a “desire to learn to do social work.” Caseworkers earned between $90 and $105 and were required either to be a college graduate with a year of social work experience, or to have two or more years of experience in a related field along with a year of formal social work training. Senior caseworkers earned between $105 and $130 and had to be eligible for junior membership in the AASW; their responsibilities included supervision of other caseworkers. Supervisors earned from $120 to $175. Administrators’ salaries depended on the county’s population, with larger counties having higher-paid administrators. Monthly salaries ranged from $90 to $300. Clerical workers were paid from $60 to $100, depending on the level of responsibility.\(^89\) Van Buren County’s administrator received $140 per month ($1,680 per year) in October 1934, while the deputy administrator and supervisor each received $130 per month. Caseworkers received $80 per month and the stenographer’s monthly salary was $70.\(^90\)

89. SERA Letter #188, October 16, 1934, FERA SST, Box 4, Michigan—Personnel Folder. Van Buren and Marquette fell in the second-tier salary schedule, while Saginaw was in the third tier and Wayne County in the fifth tier. Placement was based on population.
90. State Personnel Dept., Salary Schedule, Van Buren County, October 25, 1934; Records of Van Buren County Emergency Welfare Relief Commission (hereafter cited as VB EWRC Records), Archives and Regional History Collections, Western Michigan University, Box 1, Folder 23.
To refute the charges of waste and excessive spending, SERA published the report *Cost of Administration in the Emergency Relief Program* in 1935, and also addressed the issue in its first two annual reports. The reports state that SERA’s administrative costs were just 8.5 percent of first-year expenditures, and 9.4 percent the second year. SERA also reported that 6.7 cents of each dollar spent went to pay salaries of employees in the first year (the rest paid for travel, office supplies, and rent), or about 8 percent of the total cost of relief programs.

To limit relief spending and to refute charges of wasteful spending, SERA regularly ordered reinvestigations to ensure that people receiving relief remained in need. Such reinvestigations were another issue of contention for relief workers. Public criticism regarding the number of “chiselers” on the relief rolls prompted SERA to undertake a major reevaluation of its caseload in December 1934. Every head of household on relief received a letter stating that their case would be closed; if the family was still in need they had to reapply. Each letter included a two-week grocery order, which would allow the family “that length of time to make other plans.” When possible, a different caseworker was assigned to those people who did reapply, to avoid any preconceptions about the family. Van Buren County’s acting administrator, M. D. Cook, announced the program in a front-page article in the *Hartford Day Spring* in February of 1935, and new caseworkers were hired to help. The WRC dropped between forty and fifty cases each week. Cook advised that the WRC was not seeking to deny relief to anyone in need, but wrote that “the burden of proof for such need will rest entirely with the applicant . . . Applicants who have not proven the need for relief will be rejected and so informed.”

Some welfare-relief commissions sought the assistance of local citizens to uncover anyone cheating the system, a practice not endorsed by SERA but

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91. Haber and Stanchfield, *Unemployment and Relief in Michigan*, 60; Haber and Stanchfield, *Unemployment, Relief, and Economic Security* (Lansing: 1936), 27; and Michigan State Emergency Welfare Relief Commission, *Cost of Administration in the Emergency Relief Program* (Lansing, 1935), 7. The latter publication found that administrative costs were just 8.14 percent in the first three months of FERA.

92. Haber and Stanchfield, *Unemployment and Relief in Michigan*, 61. Comparable figures are not available for the second year.

93. SERA Letter #156, September 20, 1934, SEWRC Papers, Box 1, Folder July to September 1934; SERA Letter #352, May 1, 1935, SEWRC Papers, Box 1, Folder April to June 1935.


nevertheless implemented by some agencies. The use of “gossip” in welfare investigation was not new, and is a significant continuity in relief work. In some cases, agencies invited “spying” by residents, and fostered the assumption that relief recipients were likely dishonest. Manistee County, which undertook its own reinvestigation independent of the WRC in November of 1934, also sought information provided by residents. The Manistee News-Advocate ran front-page forms for residents to use to report so-called “chiselers” (see figure 5.1). The cases were then reinvestigated by a special committee appointed by the mayor. Clients had to prove their need and agencies encouraged citizens to inform on their neighbors and fellow residents. Although administrators rejected the notion that they asked their workers to be detectives, some did pressure caseworkers to do so.

Reinvestigations did reduce the relief rolls. SERA reported that about 15 percent of cases in some counties remained closed, although reports noted that increased employment opportunities in industry and agriculture explained some of the decline in need. SERA found that between 5 and 7 percent of relief recipients were not entitled to aid. Van Buren closed 213 cases (more than 30 percent of the caseload) in the first three months of its reinvestigation. Two-thirds of those dropped never reapplied for relief, and apparently either had the resources to manage or simply did not want to endure the extensive reinvestigation. Most of the remaining cases simply had “adequate resources,” according to the WRC report.

97. Cook, “Welfare Rolls,” 8; Haber and Stanchfield, Unemployment, Relief, and Economic Security, 219–20. Haber and Stanchfield do not discuss using residents to report on relief recipients in their coverage of this program. See “Anti-Chiseling Group Carries on with Work,” Manistee News-Advocate, November 22, 1934, 1, 8; copy in Armstrong Papers, Box 1, Reviews Folder.


100. Frances Fox Piven and Richard A. Cloward, Regulating the Poor: The Functions of Public Welfare, Rev. Ed. (New York: Vintage, 1993), 177. The authors argue that professionalism in social work did little to improve the dispensing of relief, and they assert that although social work was to make the process more humane, the results were not that different from those of poor-relief methods.


Detroit also underwent several investigations to purge the relief rolls, particularly under the leadership of conservative mayors intent on removing chiselers. Richard Reading, elected mayor in 1937, specifically targeted the city DPW’s practice of allowing the United Auto Workers to investigate members seeking relief. Reading used police officers to investigate current welfare recipients’ cases. He also sought to have all relief applicants sign a “notarized affidavit attesting to their financial status and need.” Having such a document would make it easier to prosecute relief recipients who defrauded the DPW. He “urged that a program be worked out whereby the so-called chiselers and drones would be entirely eliminated from relief rolls.”

Professional social workers harshly criticized Reading’s plans, but to little avail. His crusade did result in closed cases, but found fraud in just one in three hundred cases, and restitution agreements brought in just under twenty-four thousand dollars—far less than the cost of the investigation to the department.

Despite efforts to reduce the number of relief recipients, caseloads for relief workers remained high. Social work guidelines warned against more than 150 cases for each public relief investigator. However, only twenty-six of Michigan’s eighty-three counties had caseloads below 150 in January 1935; the

state average, excluding Wayne County, was actually 175. Forty-two counties had caseloads between 150 and 250 and thirteen counties averaged more than 250 cases per investigator.\textsuperscript{105} In December of 1936, Van Buren County’s WRC reported that its caseload was 285, not including service-only cases, which were about fourteen per investigator.\textsuperscript{106} The problem persisted throughout the emergency-relief years. When SERA told the Van Buren County WRC that staff numbers had to be cut in 1939, administrator Louise Wilkinson argued that any reductions in investigators and caseworkers were impossible. Caseloads were already as high as seven hundred, and a resolution by the county’s WRC reiterated her position.\textsuperscript{107} Such high caseloads placed incredible pressure on relief workers who sought to investigate that many families properly.

Autonomy and control over daily tasks are key to the definition of a profession.\textsuperscript{108} Relief workers did have some measure of control over their workday, although high caseloads and limited budgets placed great strain on maintaining a forty-hour workweek. Clerks prepared work schedules for social workers to enable caseworkers to leave the office shortly after reporting for work. In a two-week cycle, relief workers spent eight days in the field, visiting families and conducting home visits. Caseworkers returned to the office in the early afternoon to dictate case histories and submit relief requisitions for that day. They had one day each week in the office for appointments (for families they had difficulty finding at home or for complaints), and used their remaining time after field visits for emergency requests and work on new cases.\textsuperscript{109}

The day of a caseworker was thus controlled in some measure by the office, but caseworkers determined what families to visit and set appointments and office visits. They were not confined to the office and determined their day within the larger time frame of field and office work. Clerical staff provided

105. SEWRC, \textit{Cost of Administration}, 10. The SERA study included data for only eighty-one of the state’s eighty-three counties. A study by \textit{Social Work Today} found that the average case-load in twenty-three agencies was 129. Caseloads ranged from 80 in New York City to 250 in Milwaukee. Ten of the public agencies surveyed were in the Midwest, although the study does not list which cities were included; Detroit likely was one. George Hedin, “Salaries and Working Conditions in Public Relief Agencies,” \textit{Social Work Today}, 2.6 (May 1935): 12.
106. Letter from Van Buren WRC to Helen Daley, Field Case Representative, December 30, 1936; VB EWRC Records, Box 1, Folder 10. Service-only cases were those that received no material relief but were eligible for surplus commodities and clothing; clients under the WPA and Rural Resettlement programs were among those classed as “service only.”
107. Letter from Helen Daley to George Granger, December 30, 1936; VB EWRC Records, Box 1, Folder 10.
108. Larson, \textit{The Rise of Professionalism}, xii, 182–87. Larson defines social work as an organizational profession, dependent on the state’s expansion of social services. “True” professions (she cites the example of the medical profession) have complete control over their workday, with no outside interference.
109. Report by Irene Murphy, supervisor of casework for Detroit Department of Public Welfare, 1935; FSA Correspondence, Wayne County folder; FSA Records.
support by typing case histories and correspondence, and preparing checks and relief requisitions, but a typical relief worker faced long and hectic days trying to successfully serve the high caseload assigned. Each case, when first investigated, required significant document collection and verification, including financial information, birth and marriage documents, medical statements (if applicable), residence verification, and employment checks. In Detroit, a caseworker might visit fifteen families on a given day.\textsuperscript{110} Home visits were the primary contact with clients, although how often caseworkers visited families depended on their caseload, since on a given day they also may have had to contact other individuals or agencies, including schools, private welfare agencies, and businesses, to investigate a child’s school attendance, other aid received, or the employment status of a member of the household. Cases that involved questions about eligibility or suspicion of the validity of a client’s claims demanded much more time and attention. Caseworkers faced hostility and distrust on many visits, and often were the targets of verbal abuse from recipients, at times for issues beyond their control. It is easy to envision the harried nature of such work and the frustrations of high caseloads with too little time to complete the work.

**UNIONIZING RELIEF WORKERS**

Low salaries and high caseloads were among the issues that fueled the rise of the union movement, known as the rank and file movement, in the 1920s and 1930s. Social workers employed in private agencies in New York City were the original organizers of the movement,\textsuperscript{111} which spread outside of New York by 1932; the following year it had thirteen organizations in private agencies in eight cities, including Detroit. In 1934 unions began to enter public agencies, but remained concentrated in the largest American cities, including Chicago, Detroit, Los Angeles, Minneapolis, and New York City.\textsuperscript{112} The movement’s leadership began publishing *Social Work Today*, the journal dedicated to trade unionism and the rank and file movement, in 1934, and held its first national conference in 1936.\textsuperscript{113}

\textsuperscript{110} Report by Irene Murphy, 1935.
The influx of new relief workers was one factor in the growth of social work unionism in the 1930s. Rank and file members challenged the AASW’s standards, and offered an alternate vision of professionalization. Many of these workers could not meet AASW professional guidelines; the shift in emphasis to formal education placed professional recognition farther out of reach for most relief workers. Low salaries, long hours, poor working conditions, a lack of grievance procedures, and little job security were the chief concerns of relief workers. Public agency workers faced the worst conditions. Many of them had the highest caseloads and the poorest working conditions of any social workers. Because professional organizations were not at their disposal, some turned to unions to address their problems. But union members did not entirely reject professionalization; many employed professional language and credentials in their negotiations on behalf of themselves and their clients.

Michigan’s social work union movement originated in Detroit, and expanded to include four other counties and cities as well as a statewide organization by the decade’s end (see map 5.1). The Wayne County Social Workers’ Association formed in 1934 and, like many public agency groups, affiliated with the Congress of Industrial Organization, in 1937, as Local 79, under the State, County and Municipal Workers of America. Some unions, including the Detroit group, represented not only caseworkers but also clerks and Detroit Receiving Hospital support staff.

116. Alexander, “Organizing the Professional Social Worker,” 64–67; Walkowitz, Working with Class, 83–85, 136–40. Walkowitz assesses the involvement of the AASW in grievance procedures for caseworkers, illustrating that some relief workers did not share the AASW’s vision of social work.
118. The Wayne County group originally organized as the Detroit Association of Social Workers but changed its name a year later. See “Directory of Rank and File Organizations,” Social Work Today 2.3 (January 1935): 31. “A Budget for Human Needs: Analysis of the Department of Public Welfare Budget, 1940–1941,” Research and Standards Committee, Local 79, State, County, and Municipal Workers of America, Pre-1970s Vertical Files, ALUA, Box 59, Folder: Public Welfare—1940s, 34. Local 79 represented only city workers; county workers organized in Local 116 of the SCMWA. Most public social workers who unionized organized within the SCMWA, the American Federation of Labor’s AFSCME. Social workers in private agencies often joined the United Office and Professional Workers of America, also affiliated with the CIO. Alexander, “Organizing the Professional Social Worker,” 136; Walkowitz, Working with Class, 121.
119. Sharon Hartman Strom argues that social service employee unions—often comprised largely of women—tended to include clerks and other support staff in their groups. She also
No details of Local 79's membership are available, but a 1938 study of Detroit social workers found that the DPW's social workers were 87 percent female and 94 percent white. Clerical workers were also largely female by the Depression years, and thus women likely made up a major portion of the union's potential membership. Although concentrated in a minority of

argues that the Congress of Industrial Organizations gave little support or encouragement to its government employee unions (United Federal Workers; State, County, and Municipal Workers of America; and the United Office and Professional Workers of America). In addition, their options were more limited because they could not strike, which also would have gone against the rank and file movement's dual purpose of aiding both workers and clients. Sharon Hartman Strom, "'We're no Kitty Foyle': Organizing Office Workers for the Congress of Industrial Organizations, 1937–1950," in Women, Work, and Protest: A Century of US Women's Labor History, ed. Ruth Milkman (Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1985), 212–15; Strom, "Challenging 'Woman's Place': Feminism, the Left, and Industrial Unionism in the 1930s," Feminist Studies 9 (Summer 1983): 371–72.

120. They were also relatively well educated, with just 14 percent with no college credits. Whalen, Tenure, Training, and Compensation, 3, 55, 57.

121. Mark McColloch, White Collar Workers in Transition: The Boom Years, 1940–1970 (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1983), 21; Strom, "We're No Kitty Foyle," 212–15; and Strom,
public agencies, the union movement nonetheless is significant for the issues it raised and for its involvement in cases that attracted the attention of labor and civil rights groups. The movement first appeared at the Michigan State Conferences of Social Work in December 1935. Reports in *Social Work Today* noted that the rank and file sessions attracted “real if somewhat skeptical interest” and that the final session was attended by more than fifty social workers.\(^{122}\)

One result of the state conference was the formation of a Michigan State Coordinating Committee of Rank and File Groups to serve as a centralized state network of rank and file groups, and to assist other local groups in organizing. The state committee participated in national rank and file conferences, giving Michigan social workers a voice in the national movement.\(^{123}\) It evolved into the Michigan Federation of Social Agency Employees, organized at a state rank and file conference in January 1936, becoming one of just three state organizations in the rank and file movement.\(^{124}\) Twenty-three county public agencies and twelve private groups sent delegations, and membership in the state organization was open to all employees in social agencies in Michigan.\(^{125}\) Formal unions organized in Washtenaw County (centered in Ann Arbor) in 1935, and caseworkers in Kalamazoo and St. Clair counties organized rank and file groups in 1936. Agency workers in Dearborn, also in southeastern Michigan, organized in 1939.\(^{126}\) (See map 5.1.)

Union representatives’ negotiations with their respective agencies reflected the dual purpose of the organized social work movement: to ensure that social services provided adequately for clients’ needs while also addressing the labor and professional issues important to the caseworkers. Union members believed their two goals were connected: only a trained, professional staff, in conjunction with adequate relief budgets, could make certain that clients received the

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services and assistance they needed. The constitution for the Kalamazoo County Federation of Social Workers “provide[d] for the protection of the interest of both employees and clients,” and St. Clair County workers called for “collective action for client and worker security.” Detroit social workers aimed to “further cooperative action and mutual understanding between the various divisions within the Department of Public Welfare . . . and to improve the professional standards of its members.” Unions sought to work for improvement of larger social services, such as the expansion of the provisions of the Social Security Act. They protested cuts in travel allowances and pushed for grievance procedures; they also fought for more-adequate food budgets for clients when food costs rose steeply.

Perhaps the most visible role for the unions was defending the right of social workers both to organize themselves and to participate in the organization of their clients. Union activity could have severe consequences for relief workers, regardless of their experience or ability. Caseworkers in both Wayne and Washtenaw counties were fired or demoted because of organizational activities. Wayne County’s Local 79 did not appear before Detroit’s Public Welfare Commission or Common Council until 1937, when it mobilized to protest the suspension of several employees, including Rachel Norber, a founding member of Local 79, for alleged inefficiency. The case galvanized the union around the right of employees to a fair hearing before discharge and the right to unionize. Unionization was recognized as a means not only to protect professional workers’ rights as employees, but also to safeguard professional standards for those workers. Norber eventually regained her job five months after her discharge, when the Civil Service Commission ordered the PWC to reinstate her and to pay her for the time off, and she lost no seniority.

130. Florence Gardner, “Not Without Protest,” Social Work Today 5.1 (October 1937): 22; “A Budget for Human Needs.” Martin Sullivan makes no mention of the union movement among social workers in his study of relief in Detroit and argues, “At no time during the Thirties did Welfare Department employees in Detroit participate in, or lend overt support to, demonstrations by clients or by radical pressure groups.” While this may be true for many of the DPW’s employees, it is too broad a statement and ignores the efforts of the Wayne County social worker union. Sullivan, “On the Dole,” 180.
131. Ibid. Union members also voted to affiliate with the SCMW of the CIO during this period, and their issues overlapped with those advocated in the eight-point program of the state SCMW. See Alexander Taylor, “State, County Union Lists Important Gains,” Michigan CIO News, September 25, 1939.
or vacation credit. In addition, the union gained the PWC pledge to allow all employees a hearing before the commission considered their discharge. Several months after the Norber case was decided, the commission revisited the issue of discharging and suspending employees, adopting a formal four-step process. The revised policy again guaranteed employees a hearing before either a discharge or a suspension. The union would use the strength it gained from this battle to defend the rights of both union members and relief recipients.

In this case, Local 79 defended professional status as it fought for Norber’s job and union rights. Norber had received no advance notice of her suspension or her discharge. Following critical reports by the director of personnel at a special public welfare commission meeting, with the support of Superintendent Gerald Harris, the commission voted to discharge Norber in June of 1937. In response to the charges, one month later Norber argued that she had lost her job because of her union activism, and not because of inefficiency, a stance supported by the national rank and file journal Social Work Today. She based her defense on her abilities as a trained social worker. Hired in 1930 as a family investigator, Norber had passed the civil service examination in 1935 and had then been promoted to student caseworker. She was working on her bachelor’s degree in social work from Wayne University, and had received at least one educational leave in 1936 to pursue that goal. Norber questioned the validity of the report on her inefficiency because it was drafted by the Field Work Observation Bureau, an agency, she charged, that knew little about social work or casework practices or DPW policy. She was a professional social worker, even though she did not yet have her degree, and was judged, she argued, by those who did not have the appropriate credentials. Their information, subjectively and inaccurately presented, was then used by

her supervisors to obtain her discharge.\textsuperscript{139} Her professional status, even though she had not completed her formal study, was the cornerstone of her defense.

In contrast, the union apparently remained silent about the removal of the family investigators, or those untrained relief workers hired in 1930 and 1931—like Norber—to help with rising caseloads. The 1937–38 reclassification plan eliminated that job category; most family investigators who had not been promoted as Norber had faced either dismissal or demotion. The group argued that their six to seven years of service qualified them as professionals. They had attended conferences and professional training programs, and often worked overtime with no additional compensation because they had been told they were professionals.\textsuperscript{140} Significantly, the group did not use the union, either Local 79 or any other employee organization, to pursue its case. The union’s silence on this issue, just a few months before Norber’s situation, illuminates its commitment to a trained, professional staff that employed professionalization as a means to further unionization.

Washtenaw County’s social workers engaged in a similar battle with their supervisors. Milton Kemnitz, a supervisor, was demoted to caseworker, because, co-workers alleged, of Kemnitz’s efforts to organize the unemployed and relief clients.\textsuperscript{141} Henry Meyer, an agency caseworker, was fired for protesting Kemnitz’s demotion. The WRC issued a statement shortly after the incidents, outlining policies prohibiting employees, both on and off work, from engaging in organizational activities that “might lead to controversial discussions regarding relief policies of the organization, or which might lead to criticism from the general public.” The commission also stated, however, that it was “not opposed to the organization of case workers or other employees.”\textsuperscript{142}


\textsuperscript{140} Letter to Mayor Frank Couzens from Family Investigator Group, March 9, 1937; Detroit Mayor’s Papers, 1937, Box 7, Burton Historical Collections.

\textsuperscript{141} Letter from Washtenew County Rank and File Social Workers to Aubrey Williams, Assistant FERA and WPA Administrator, dated October 8, 1935; FERA State Series, Michigan, Box 140, Complaints, Folder T–Z; “Michigan Cracks Down,” Social Work Today 3.2 (November 1935): 3; “Review of Case of Washtenaw County Welfare Workers Discriminated against for Organizational Activity,” Conference for the Protection of Civil Rights, Detroit, and letter to Frank Martel, President, Detroit and Wayne County Federation of Labor, from J. H. Bollens, Chairman, Conference, dated November 15, 1935, Wayne County AFL-CIO Collection, ALUA, Box 23, Welfare Department Folder; and Letter from Edith Foster, Regional Social Worker to Elizabeth Wickenden, Asst. Director, WPA, dated January 3, 1935; FERA State Series, Michigan, Box 140, Complaints, Folder T–Z. I believe the date on this letter is an error; it should be January of 1936, given the sequence of prior events.

\textsuperscript{142} Memo to “All Employees of the Washtenaw County Welfare Commission,” from C. H. Elliot, administrator, n.d., FERA State Series, Michigan, Box 140, Complaints, Folder T–Z.
The case attracted the attention of labor and civil liberties groups, including the Detroit and Wayne County Federation of Labor, as well as several other rank and file groups. An investigation by state and federal officials, working with the Conference for the Protection of Civil Rights in Detroit and an Ann Arbor civil liberties group (both of which were active in defense of the caseworkers), found that the WRC had “acted in anger” and without the knowledge or approval of the casework supervisor. At a review of Kemnitz’s case, clients and caseworkers supported his work, while public officials, including local mayors, spoke against his performance. Meyer was reinstated as a caseworker, but was transferred to Battle Creek. The resolution of Kemnitz’s case is unclear regarding his demotion, but he apparently did not leave the agency.

The position of the State Emergency Relief Administration on unionization is not clear. SERA administrator William Haber believed in the right of social workers “to organize into a union for the purpose of improving their own condition.” Haber did not take a public stand on the issue, but did tell union members that they “may rest assured that the entire matter will be presented very sympathetically to the State Relief Commission.” He did not support “active participation in the organization of clients by the case worker,” but left the final decision to the state commission. But while Haber opposed the alliance of caseworkers with their clients, he did back the right of social workers to organize, particularly to address issues such as low salaries.

144. Public officials also criticized Manistee County administrator Louise Armstrong, who refused to follow the tenets of local officials and instead followed state rules. When pressed to resign, she refused, and SERA supported her. The critical difference, apparently, is that she was not attempting to organize relief clients. See Armstrong, We Too Are the People, 188–89; SEWRC Minutes, April 10, 1934, Box 1, Folder 1; “Rengo, Peterson Desire to Quit Welfare Body,” Manistee News-Advocate, April 12, 1934; “Will Act upon Resignations Late Next Week,” Manistee News-Advocate, April 13, 1934; and “Local Welfare Problems Increase,” Manistee News-Advocate, November 9, 1934.
146. Rank and file members also mobilized against the dismissal of another Washtenaw County social worker, Louise Stellwagen, who was secretary of the rank and file group. The outcome of that case is also unclear, although the circumstances were similar to the case of Kemnitz, who regularly contributed articles to Social Work Today about rank and file activities in Michigan. See “Difficult to Supervise,” Social Work Today 3.4 (January 1936): 25.
147. Letter from Haber to Frank Martel, Detroit and Wayne Federation of Labor, dated November 22, 1935, Wayne County AFL-CIO Collection, ALUA, Box 23, Welfare Department Folder.
148. “Civil Liberties in Michigan,” 19. The minutes of the SEWRC include no references to the unionization of social workers.
The rank and file movement remained concentrated in large cities but had organizations in fifteen states, including Michigan, Ohio, and Illinois, by 1938. Public agency organizations tended to affiliate with the State, County and Municipal Workers of America while private agency groups were affiliated with the United Office and Professional Workers of America, both a part of the Congress of Industrial Organizations.\textsuperscript{150} Active in four counties and one city in Michigan, the rank and file movement did strike a chord with social workers, particularly those in public agencies. An important question is why social workers organized in those counties but not in others, including Marquette, Saginaw, and Van Buren. The lack of organization in Saginaw County is the most puzzling, as the area already had a union presence in the auto-related factories and was also the site of organized protests by work-relief recipients. But no evidence of an organization of relief workers is evident. Regional representatives were able to minimize the influence and appeal of the rank and file movement, but it is likely that many relief workers shared the frustrations and concerns articulated by the rank and file movement.\textsuperscript{151}

Roadblocks to social work unions in general were significant, including ideological conflicts between labor organizing and professions, the high turnover in relief-agency staff, and regional hostility to unions. As a profession, social work seemed to some to be in direct conflict with labor organizing. Unions were for workers, not professionals. The rank and file movement sought to reconcile those apparent contradictions, creating a new social worker identity, which Daniel Walkowitz calls “The Professional Worker.”\textsuperscript{152} Many AASW members viewed unions with hostility, and while some AASW chapters made efforts to build relationships with the unions, the issue of membership standards continued to preclude unity.\textsuperscript{153}

Unions organizing relief workers often dealt with people who did not have a long-term commitment to the field. Many relief workers, often white and middle-class, were teachers or nurses, and thus returned to their own fields when those job prospects improved. The elimination of federal funds for relief in 1936 also resulted in cuts in staff. Civil service merit requirements, instituted in 1936, gave rise to qualifying examinations for all relief employees.


\textsuperscript{151} Edith Foster reported that the rank and file group, although active in state conferences, was generating “little interest . . . even in Detroit.” See Foster to Wickenden, October 21, 1935, n137.

\textsuperscript{152} Walkowitz, \textit{Working with Class}, 119–20.

\textsuperscript{153} Leighninger, \textit{Social Work}, 40–42.
About 12 percent of those examined failed to qualify for their positions, and thus lost their jobs, adding to the turnover in relief workers. A majority of relief workers were women, and thus arguments related to the difficulty in organizing women workers and the problems women faced in unions are significant. The demographics of relief workers, then, played a role in limiting union development.

Regional hostility to unions and to social workers further complicated social work organizing. Some regions of Michigan, such as the mining district of the Upper Peninsula, which included Marquette County, and also southwest Michigan, including Kent County, were hostile to labor organizations in general. While Detroit had an active labor movement on several fronts, Grand Rapids and Marquette did not. A final factor with respect to restricted union development was the hostility toward professional social work, which the rank and file movement was allied to some degree. At the same time that relief workers argued for higher salaries as professionals, opponents advocated the removal of social work from relief administration entirely, because of what they viewed as the high salaries. New Deal measures protecting labor unions and workers, and the successful sit-down strikes in Flint against General Motors, only heightened animosity and exacerbated fears about Communists in unions. While no direct accusations about Communism appear in the surviving records, it is not difficult to imagine the link made by critics. Accusations of Communism in the WPA unions likely touched relief workers seeking better aid for their clients. Given the barriers to social work organization in Michigan and elsewhere, individuals willing to risk their jobs in uncertain economic times were probably the exception rather than the rule.

Some recipients of relief had little sympathy for caseworkers, deeming them to be overpaid, nosey investigators and, like other critics of the program,


155. For a review of this debate, see Alice Kessler-Harris, "Where Are the Organized Women Workers?" in U.S. Women in Struggle: A Feminist Studies Anthology, ed. Claire Goldberg Moses and Heidi Hartman (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1995), 110–33, and Dorothy Sue Cobble, "Rethinking Troubled Relations between Women and Unions," same volume, 166–88. It is unclear how gender played into the social worker unions, particularly in relation to the role of women and their access, or lack of access, to positions of leadership in the union movement.

156. Lankton, Cradle to Grave, 211–12; Lorence, Organizing the Unemployed, 58–63.

157. Labor issues were a major debate in the 1938 elections, and some historians believe that Governor Frank Murphy's support of labor rights and the General Motors strikers cost him the election that year. See Fine, Frank Murphy: The New Deal Years, 510–11; Dunbar, Michigan: A History of the Wolverine State, 530–31.
not seeing the need for “professional” workers. Historian James Lorence argues that protests by Houghton County’s relief recipients “revealed deep worker resentment against welfare bureaucrats whom they perceived to be hostile towards the clients they served.”

Some recipients also resented the income caseworkers earned in comparison to relief grants. Jobs with the county emergency-relief agencies were not categorized as work relief, and thus were not open to those most in need unless the applicant was qualified for the position. Some Houghton County residents saw the money paid in salaries to caseworkers and clerical employees as money diverted from direct or work relief, arguing that the $65 monthly salary earned by ten welfare investigators could be better spent on clothing for relief recipients. Another common complaint was that while a work-relief recipient’s earnings might be cut from $44 to $22, the office workers continued to draw their full pay. Salaries for relief workers averaged $1,573 in 1936, more than four times the relief grant awarded a family of four. In the case of women’s work, little enough money was spent on projects for women, compounding the problem. The minimal requirements for a caseworker—a high school education and preferably college and some social work experience—excluded many relief applicants. While the requirements for clerical workers were less tied to formal education, few women outside the white middle class held the skills necessary to obtain a job as a stenographer or bookkeeper, let alone an investigator or caseworker.

Amanda Lorenson held a particularly hostile view of the emergency-relief agency. Lorenson, a divorced mother of six children, two of whom lived at home, was a constant critic of the Saginaw County social welfare programs. She wrote numerous letters complaining about the size of her grants, her ex-husband’s failure to pay court-ordered alimony, and the personnel in the social welfare agency. Several of the caseworkers assigned to her reported that their visits consisted of “continuous complaints.” They argued that she often withheld information about income or alimony when it was received, and few of the caseworkers trusted her. She received relief beginning in 1933, supplementing the earnings of her older children. Most had left home, and she was dependent upon public aid. A college graduate who had taught elementary education for three years, she was later a file clerk in the county’s WRC, but was discharged in 1936. Lorenson maintained it was because she was eligible for Aid to Dependent Children; agency officials, however, stated that she was

158. Lorence, Organizing the Unemployed, 86.
159. Letter from Emil Kangas to Harry Hopkins, dated December 20, 1934, FERA State Series, Box 140, Folder G–H.
161. Saginaw County ADC Case C7300045, quoted from case history dated March 19, 1940.
unable to do the job.\textsuperscript{162} She complained to several officials, including the governor. She wrote that she had been given high praise for her earlier work, and couldn’t understand “why [county administrator] Mr. Howlett should lay me off and keep on his negroes, it is more than I can account for.”\textsuperscript{163} As a white woman, she believed she deserved first consideration for employment. As an educated woman, she would have been an attractive candidate as a relief worker, let alone a file clerk, but clearly the WRC staff did not agree.

Lorenson also criticized the young women who worked in the office, and had nothing good to say about any of the caseworkers she encountered in the five years she received aid. Her experience, age, and education placed her above these young women, in her view, and she deeply resented that they had such control over her life through the relief program, first under the WRC and later through ADC: “It would be impossible to state on paper the suffering I have undergone at the hands of young girls who have no interest in older people. A girl who is single and spends most of their time smoking cigarettes in a rest room has no right to dictate to older people who have a college education.”\textsuperscript{164} It was her belief that the relief workers did not need these jobs, and were indeed working for amusement, with no children to support: “I was given a pension of $32.97 to care for two children and myself for one month, while [they] draw no less than $80 for pin money.”\textsuperscript{165} Lorenson wanted a job, preferably with the WRC, or a larger grant, and wrote that she would not take anything less simply “because of some young girl's whims.”\textsuperscript{166} She did not see caseworkers as women with families to support, but as single young women benefiting from employment in a “poor man's institution” at the expense of those in need.\textsuperscript{167}

Gender factored into other recipients’ outlooks as well. Martin Sheets, a Van Buren County applicant, wrote several letters to Michigan Governor Frank Fitzgerald because he had no patience or use for the women in the WRC office. Caseworkers approved a grocery order of $1 per week, the amount allowed for single men. He had received $650 in compensation for an ampu-

\textsuperscript{162} Employment application dated July 27, 1938; Letter from Ella Lee Council, field representative, to SERA, August 15, 1938, Case C7300045, Saginaw County ADC Records, State Archives of Michigan.

\textsuperscript{163} Employment application dated July 27, 1938; Case C7300045, Saginaw ADC.

\textsuperscript{164} Letter from Lorenson to SERA, Lansing, dated July 28, 1938; Case C7300045, Saginaw ADC.

\textsuperscript{165} Letter from Lorenson to Dora Heilman, supervisor, December 30, 1940, Case C7300045, Saginaw County ADC. She did not receive the increased grant, as she was already receiving the maximum grant of twenty-four dollars under state law.

\textsuperscript{166} Letter, July 27, 1938, Case C7300045, Saginaw ADC.

\textsuperscript{167} Letter, July 27, 1938, Case C7300045, Saginaw ADC.
states arm, and also had a son in Chicago with whom he could live. Sheets told the caseworker, a woman, that the WRC needed to pay his room and board and food until he was eligible for an old-age pension. He was refused and the case rejected because he would not accept the aid offered.168

Sheets first contacted SERA and Fitzgerald about his need before he applied for relief, according to the WRC. He told Fitzgerald that he was not able to work and that he was entitled to relief: “Now I can’t live on snow balls or grass.”169 He claimed that he had no money left from his arm-injury award: “I am not begging, never did, never stole a cent.”170 He was an honest laborer, he insisted, who had earned help. He refused to take no for an answer, and the office workers also would not budge, even when his son wrote that he could not support his father.171 Caseworkers believed he was trying to get something for nothing, and that he should still have insurance money to live on or that he could go and live with his son; the people he listed as references reported that he should have money left. Sheets wrote Fitzgerald: “Beg I never will. It would [please] this lipstick and powder puff office here to [sic] well.”172 A former salesman who had divorced twice, Sheets believed the women in the office were the problem. Thus he turned to male “higher authorities,” although it did him little good.

The profession of social work faced contention on many fronts in the 1930s. They sought to differentiate their status from that of the earlier social workers, many of whom were the most vocal critics of professional social work, while also protecting their status from untrained relief workers within their own ranks. Relief workers were not full members of the profession in which they worked. For many, true membership in the profession was a college degree out of reach. Engaged in a debate over the definition of social worker, and what qualifications were needed for that job, many relief workers were likely looking for meaningful work at a decent pay. Some probably shared the concerns of one anonymous critic of the relief worker’s position, who signed an article of complaint “by a white collar worker who is getting a trifle hot under the collar.”173 The 1930s witnessed a debate over not only welfare policy in Michigan, but also who should administer that policy. There was also a dispute over the very notion of social worker identity, both within and outside the profession.

168. Case history, March 24, 1936, Case #8351, VB ERA, Box 3, Folder 3.
169. Letter to Fitzgerald dated December 27, 1935; Case #8351, VB ERA, Box 3, Folder 3.
171. Letter from son to agency dated February 1, 1936, Case #8351, VB ERA, Box 3, Folder 3.
172. Letter to Fitzgerald dated March 13, 1936, Case #8351, VB ERA, Box 3, Folder 3.
173. “Vademecum fur Herrn Haber,” William Haber Papers, Bentley Historical Library, Box 33, Folder MSERA-4, 7.