

# Workers on Relief, 1934-1938, in Key West

By DURWARD LONG

The economic base of Key West throughout most of its history has depended in great measure upon its military and naval establishments and its cigar manufacturing industry. Although the extension of the Florida East Coast Railroad to Key West in 1912 offered additional grounds for economic expansion, it was actually the strengthening of naval and military posts in Key West during World War I that provided the basis of growth during that period. Following World War I the real estate and building boom continued the temporary war-time prosperity of the island city; but the shattering of that boom, the subsequent reduction and elimination of the military and naval bases in Key West, and the severe decline in cigar manufacturing after 1926 eroded almost completely the economic basis for the continuance of the city and its inhabitants. Manufacturing establishments decreased from 69 in 1919 to 26 in 1929 and the average number of wage earners of manufacturing declined from 2,313 in 1919 to 756 in 1929. Salaries paid wage earners in manufacturing dropped from \$2,094,461 in 1919 to only \$648,404 in 1929.<sup>1</sup> The undesirable economic situation in the island city prompted many families to move away during this period and as a result the population was reduced from 18,749 in 1920 to 13,445 in 1930.<sup>2</sup> Of those remaining in 1934, over one-fourth was categorized as "Latins,"<sup>3</sup> many of whom had followed the cigar manufacturing industry to Key West from Cuba and who had no intention of leaving their new tropical home although jobs comparable to their skills were totally unavailable.

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<sup>1</sup> U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, *Fourteenth Census of the United States* (1920), *Manufacturing: 1919, IX* (Washington, 1923), pp. 260-261; and *Fifteenth Census of the United States* (1930), *Manufacturing: 1929, III* (Washington, 1933), p. 116.

<sup>2</sup> U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, *Fourteenth Census of the United States* (1920), *Population, III* (Washington, 1921), p. 195; and *Fifteenth Census of the United States* (1930), *Population, III, Part I* (Washington, 1932), p. 145.

<sup>3</sup> Report by Harold Ballou, Director of the Department of Research and Statistics of the Key West Administration, to the F.E.R.A., "Population on August 1, 1932," in unpublished manuscripts of the Federal Writers Project Archives for Key West, Florida. Located in the P.K. Yonge Library of Florida History, University of Florida. The archives will be referred to hereafter as FWPA.

Because of these factors, unemployment grew rapidly during the early thirties. The county authorities attempted to provide relief for families of the unemployed, investing \$2,045 in relief in 1929, nearly half again as much in 1930,<sup>4</sup> and \$21,892 in 1931.<sup>5</sup> The program of relief was helpful but inadequate as shrinking tax revenues made it difficult even to pay current governmental operating expenses. By October, 1933, Monroe County had nearly five thousand persons on its relief rolls.<sup>6</sup> Funds for relief payments were received from the Reconstruction Finance Corporation and channeled into the county through the state government. By the summer of 1934 local sources of funds were completely exhausted and the governmental authorities found themselves with over \$100,000 in debts for operational costs that they could not pay.

In this bankrupt situation, Monroe County and Key West officials decided that continuance as governmental units was no longer fiscally possible. On July 2, 1934, they relinquished governing authority to the Governor, David Sholtz. He accepted the responsibility and requested Julius Stone, the Federal Emergency Relief Administrator in Florida, to act as his representative to provide whatever relief was possible through federal funds.<sup>7</sup>

Assuming this task, the F.E.R.A. soon thereafter embarked upon a program designed to rebuild Key West as a tourist resort, planning to spend \$1 million during the first eighteen months of the program. Stone took the position that the agency was authorized to provide direct relief but was not permitted to spend funds for labor in rehabilitation projects, a position he later changed. At the outset, however, he stated that the labor necessary to accomplish the "rebuilding" of Key West would have to be voluntary labor.<sup>8</sup> (Construction projects at that time were under the direction of the Civil Works Administration which was building an aquarium in Key West.) The heads of families in need would receive direct relief grants from the F.E.R.A. upon establishing eligibility.

<sup>4</sup> State Board of Public Welfare, *Florida Welfare Progress*, II, 6 (September), 1931 (Gainesville, 1931), p. 3.

<sup>5</sup> *Organization and Activities of the State Board of Public Welfare, January 1, 1931 to January 1, 1933* (Tallahassee, 1931), p. 32.

<sup>6</sup> Federal Emergency Relief Administration, *Unemployment Relief Census, Report Number 2* (Washington, 1932), p. 117.

<sup>7</sup> Key West Administration, *Key West in Transition* (Key West, 1934), pp. 6, 62. This surrender of authority to the Governor was validated by the Florida Legislature of 1935. See the *Laws of Florida Enacted by the Legislature of 1935*, II (Tallahassee, 1935), pp. 238-240.

<sup>8</sup> *Key West in Transition*, pp. i-vii.

The citizens of Key West responded well to the request for voluntary labor. According to one source, over four thousand persons enlisted in the Volunteer Work Corps and contributed nearly two million hours of work.<sup>10</sup> Although the voluntary work force began some of the early projects of refurbishing buildings and making sanitary improvements, the F.E.R.A. quickly inaugurated a work relief program and paid wages for work on the projects. The rates established were: 30¢ an hour for unskilled workers, 50¢ for semi-skilled, and 80¢ for skilled workers.<sup>11</sup>

Through the combined efforts of work relief provided by the Civil Works Administration and the F.E.R.A., direct relief administered through the latter agency, and improvement in the tourist trade of more than fifty percent over the previous winter,<sup>12</sup> the Key West workers' situation was more tolerable throughout the winter of 1934-35. The number of persons on relief dropped twenty-five percent between November, 1934 and March, 1935.<sup>13</sup> In addition to the sources of relief and tourist trade income, the workers and their families were provided health service and foods from the surplus commodity program and from the relief agency's vegetable farm near Homestead.

After the successful winter of 1934-35, the F.E.R.A. administrative unit in Key West (the Key West Administration) announced a new wage scale on a monthly basis. Under the new rates, unskilled workers would receive \$22; semiskilled workers \$32; and skilled workers \$42 for a month of four-day work weeks (128 hours per month). The scale was lower per hour than the former F.E.R.A. rate and was designed to transfer all work relief to the Works Progress Administration.<sup>14</sup>

The Key West workers responded to the new wage scale by staging a demonstration at the headquarters of the Key West Administration on May

<sup>9</sup> *New York Times*, July 22, 1934.

<sup>10</sup> *The Florida Keys Sun*, Supplement, July 5, 1935, p. 7. See also, Elmer Davis, "New World Symphony," *Harper's Monthly Magazine*, May, 1935, p. 646.

<sup>11</sup> *Key West Citizen*, June 27, 1935. Descriptions of some of the projects undertaken may be found in the *Florida Motorist*, October, 1935, and the *Florida Keys Sun*, Supplement, July 5, 1935.

<sup>12</sup> *Florida Keys Sun*, Supplement, July 5, 1935, and Julius F. Stone, Jr., "Facts About the Rehabilitation of Key West," unpublished manuscript in the FWPA, n.p.

<sup>13</sup> Stone, "Facts About the Rehabilitation of Key West," *loc. cit.*, n.p.

<sup>14</sup> *Florida Social Security Survey*, published by the Florida State Board of Social Welfare in cooperation with the Works Progress Administration, June 1937, p. 3.

28, 1935.<sup>15</sup> The local editor pointed out that the protest came from a small number who felt that the government was not doing enough for them, and supported administrator M. E. Gilfond in taking the stand that the officials would “not be threatened nor browbeaten by recalcitrant relief workers.” The journalist promised the “fullest endorsement of the better class of citizens of Key West.”<sup>16</sup> Shortly afterward, however, the editor agreed that the new scale of wages was too low since transportation charges made the cost of living higher in Key West and the price of food especially was 15-20 percent higher than in many other places.<sup>17</sup> This position was agreed to by C. B. Treadway, the W.P.A. administrator in Florida, and he informed local officials in July that the wage scale was increased 10 percent in view of the “distinctive set of conditions in Key West.”<sup>18</sup>

It appeared, therefore, that the dissatisfaction of the workers had been overcome when the W.P.A. assumed direction of the work relief program in August with a gradual transfer of laborers to its payrolls. The aura of good relations was shattered quickly, however, as the workers experienced the new payroll procedure of the W.P.A. Whereas the F.E.R.A. drew checks locally and issued them on time, the W.P.A. checks were drawn by the state disbursing office of the U.S. Treasury and were often received late. A combination of factors causing delay and irregularity of payment included “changes in procedures emanating from the Washington office, misinterpretations of state office instructions by local divisions, and general unfamiliarity with the new set-up . . .”<sup>19</sup> Furthermore, merchants exacted a fee of five cents to cash each check. These conditions were not quickly resolved and the initial unrest of the workers became greater as the number enrolled by the W.P.A. increased. An additional cause of grievance appeared in September, after the hurricane of that month destroyed most of the bridges in the Keys and Dade County workers were brought into Monroe to assist in repairing the damage. The Key West laborers discovered in their contact with the workers from Miami that the latter were receiving higher wages even though they were doing the same work.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> *Key West Citizen*, May 29, 1935.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, May 31, 1935.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, June 27, 1935.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, July 19, 1935.

<sup>19</sup> “Key West W.P.A. Strike,” unpublished manuscript in the FWPA, p. 3.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

On October 15, shortly after contact with the Dade workmen, about 200 Key West laborers staged a walkout as a beginning of what was to become three months of stormy relations with W.P.A. officials.<sup>21</sup> The spokesman for the strikers, Juan Jara, Jr., presented four grievances for which relief was demanded. The initial cause of the walkout was the cessation of serving ice water to the workers by the W.P.A. The first demand, therefore, was the restoration of that practice. They also demanded: (1) a higher wage scale; (2) fewer hours of work per week; and (3) ending of the fee required to cash checks.<sup>22</sup>

M. E. Gilfond, district W.P.A. director, explained that the funds for the ice had previously come from the F.E.R.A. which had ended the allowance. In response to the workers' protest, however, Gilfond promised to provide the ice water if the workers would return to their jobs. The laborers accepted Gilfond's gesture of compliance and returned to work with assurance that their other grievances would be given attention by the state officials.<sup>23</sup> In fact, three days after the strike, two W.P.A. officials, Gertrude C. Huntsman, statistician for the Washington office, and John F. Carpenter, labor relations representative of the state office, went to Key West to investigate labor problems there.<sup>24</sup> Their findings were not released, however, nor were steps taken to improve the situation described by the workers.

Shortly after that brief flurry of activity, the *Key West Citizen* featured an editorial entitled, "Maladministration of Relief," in which the writer accused the local relief administrators of ignoring the requirements for eligibility to participate in the relief programs<sup>25</sup> and which received widespread coverage in the state's press. The state F.E.R.A. director, Conrad Van Hying, immediately replied that an investigation of the *Citizen's* charges would be undertaken.<sup>26</sup> He promptly arranged for William Beehler, former F.E.R.A. administrator for West Virginia, to visit Key West to conduct an inquiry into the charges of maladministration.<sup>27</sup> The Key West Adminis-

<sup>21</sup> *Key West Citizen*, October 15, 1935.

<sup>22</sup> *Miami Herald*, October 16, 1935.

<sup>23</sup> *Key West Citizen*, October 15, 1935.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, October 19, 1935; *Miami Herald*, October 19, 1935.

<sup>25</sup> *Key West Citizen*, October 31, 1935.

<sup>26</sup> *Tampa Morning Tribune*, November 9, 1935; *Jacksonville Florida Times-Union*, November 14, 1935.

<sup>27</sup> *Jacksonville Journal*, November 13, 1935; *Florida Times-Union*, November 14, 1935; and *Palm Beach Post*, November 14, 1935.

tration welcomed the investigation and asked that the findings be made public.<sup>28</sup>

In the meantime a local election for mayor defeated the candidate most critical of the relief activities. The re-elected mayor, Dr. Harry E. Galey, organized a committee to go to Washington to negotiate with the W.P.A. national administrator, Harry Hopkins, for an increase in wages for the Key West workmen.<sup>29</sup> The committee consisted of Galey, State Senator Arthur Gomez, and Bernie C. Papy. The latter was a state representative from Monroe County who was selected by the workers as their representative on the committee.<sup>30</sup> The three mediators travelled to Washington on their mission but the Key West laborers exhausted their patience with the wage scale and payroll arrangements and struck on December 3.

The strike was no doubt precipitated by the emergence of a leader among the workers in late November. Luis Avalo emerged as spokesman for the dissatisfied laborers after he was discharged for refusing to lead his work detail through intolerable work conditions. Avalo stated that he was foreman of a crew of about eighty-five men doing work on a drainage canal which required "wading and working among broken glass, snakes, and swarms of mosquitoes." According to Avalo, the group consisted mainly of old men, some of whom were eighty-five years old and most of whom were unable to do the kind of work assigned. When Avalo refused to lead them and protested the working conditions to his supervisor, he was fired.<sup>31</sup> Sympathy for Avalo among the Cuban workers combined with the general dissatisfaction with the new pay system led directly to the strike.

The walkout of the workers on December 3 assumed more serious proportions than had the sporadic demonstrations of previous months. The strike threatened the continuance of the only source of work for pay for most of the workers in the island. Furthermore, there was an effort to split the laborers into an "American" faction and a "Cuban" faction. As a result feelings ran high and on occasions these feelings could have led to violence had not the non-violent leadership of Avalo prevailed.<sup>32</sup> He quickly won

<sup>28</sup> *Miami Daily News*, November 16, 1935.

<sup>29</sup> *Miami Herald*, November 18, 1935.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>31</sup> "Key West W.P.A. Strike," *loc. cit.*

<sup>32</sup> "Significant Highlights of Avalo's Leadership," unpublished manuscript in the FWPA, n.p.

leadership over the great majority of all the workmen and led 1,300 (of a total of slightly less than 1,400) off their jobs the first day of the strike.<sup>33</sup> All activities and projects of the W.P.A. with few exceptions were shut down.

The strikers had hardly walked out and made their demands for more pay when the Galey Committee telegraphed from Washington that a ten percent raise in monthly wages had been secured. This new pay scale would require the workers to work a five-day work week (160 hours per month) instead of a four-day week (128 hours per month).<sup>34</sup> Avalo and his strike committee refused to accept the terms of the increase because of the extra work required. In the meantime he directed the striking workers not to solicit money or assistance to feed their families, "neither to beg nor to steal." He did advocate organizing fishing groups to provide food but was unsuccessful in getting volunteers to join him.<sup>35</sup>

The strikers' refusal to return to work on the terms offered was met with a prompt announcement from the state W.P.A. administrator E. A. Pynchon. He declared that all W.P.A. projects in the island would be terminated and the aid given to other communities unless the men returned to work immediately.<sup>36</sup> Avalo called a mass meeting of the strikers and asked for a vote on whether to return to work. The strikers voted "no" by a large majority.<sup>37</sup>

At this point in the negotiations, according to a rumor, the Ku Klux Klan organized a demonstration "to get Avalo." One account of the KKK parade described it as "twenty-one men robed in sheets, with pillow cases on their heads, . . . [who] carried revolvers in their hands." Although the "parade" followed by "a long line of people on bicycles and automobiles," came to the corner of the street where Avalo lived, they did not march in front of his house. Avalo described the episode as follows:

"I took both pistols, one in each hand and went out and stood on my porch. I made up my mind that if the Klan turned the corner to march in front of my house that they intended to kill me, so I

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<sup>33</sup> *Key West Citizen*, December 3, 4, 1935.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>35</sup> "Significant Highlights of Avalo's Leadership," *loc. cit.*, n. p.

<sup>36</sup> *Key West Citizen*, December 5, 1935.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, December 6, 1935.

planned to throw myself down on the ground and begin shooting. When they got to the corner, they looked down my street and seen (*sic.*) me standing there with two pistols and seen (*sic.*) the attitude I was in, they kept on marching and did not turn the corner."<sup>38</sup>

Following the demonstration by the Klan, the strike committee telegraphed Governor Sholtz urging his intervention to protect the lives of the workers but no reply was ever received. Avalo also appeared before the local authorities to ask for protection and announced that he would advise the workers to return to work to prevent bloodshed. The workers did so and all projects were operating on December 10, one week after the strike had begun.<sup>39</sup>

An after effect of the strike was the investigation of Avalo as a possible communist. When he was asked by the government's investigator whether he was a communist, he replied:

"My idea of a communist is somebody with a red beard, big and hungry. All I know about communists and what they stand for is what I read in the papers. However, if I knew their program and accepted it, became a member, I would be proud to state that I am one—and you can tell that to Washington. But up to today, it hasn't entered my head to join them because I don't even know what they stand for."<sup>40</sup>

Shortly afterward Key West was visited by recruiters from the Leftist National Workers Alliance. They succeeded in enlisting seventeen workers including Avalo. The small group soon collapsed, however, because of what Avalo called "too strong intimidation," by the W.P.A. foremen.<sup>41</sup>

Although cleavages created during the early fall and in the strike of December remained to cause minor labor relations difficulty between the workers and the W.P.A., the workmen continued to improve their economic position in 1936 and the following years. The continued improvement of the tourist trade and the increasing availability of jobs, both in privately

<sup>38</sup> "Key West W.P.A. Strike," *loc. cit.*, n.p.; *Jacksonville Journal*, December 7, 1935.

<sup>39</sup> *Florida Times-Union*, December 8, 9, 1935; *Key West Citizen*, December 9, 14, 1935; *Tampa Morning Tribune*, December 14, 1935; and *St. Augustine Evening Record*, December 9, 1935.

<sup>40</sup> "Key West W.P.A. Strike," *loc. cit.*, n. p.

<sup>41</sup> "Significant Highlights of Avalo's Leadership," *loc. cit.*, n. p.



financed projects and in additional governmental programs, almost eliminated serious unemployment in Key West by 1938.<sup>42</sup> The workers in the island community had come through rough times indeed but through inter-governmental cooperation and dogged determination they and their city had survived. The experience of the thirties, the opening of the Overseas Highway in 1938, and the ending of the depression, ushered in a new era for Key West as a progressive city of renewed vitality.

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<sup>42</sup> Unemployment in Monroe County decreased from 3557 in March, 1935 to 841 by the end of 1936. See Works Progress Administration, *Workers on Relief in the United States*, March, 1935, I, "A Census of Usual Occupations" (Washington, 1938), p. 281; and Works Progress Administration, *Census of Unemployment, 1937*, I, "Final Report on Total and Partial Unemployment," Washington, 1938, p. 486. See also, Durward Long, "Key West and the New Deal, 1934-1936," *Florida Historical Quarterly*, January, 1968, pp. 209-218.

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