
Franklin D. Roosevelt — “The Great Communicator”
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*Urging Distribution of Population so as to Bring the Unemployed Closer to
the Source of Food Supply*

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I think we are all beginning to realize that some new factor is needed in our economic life as a Nation. We are beginning to find that mere drifting is not enough. We are finding that the changing play of economic forces as we know them inevitably leads us to hardships that take the rank of

great disasters, which affect all of us and bear most severely on those who have worked faithfully and unquestioningly—people who have depended on the leadership of the powerful to find them continuous work.

We are generally agreed today that things are somehow out of balance. It doesn't need any deep thinking to come to that conclusion. The bald facts are that the natural means for providing plenty of sustenance for all are still abundant. We have the resources of soil and other forms of productivity; we have the knowledge and we have plenty of trained labor. Of most commodities necessary to life and comfortable living we seem even to have a surplus. The producers can't sell all the goods they would like to make, nor can they buy the goods they want to buy.

What is this lack of balance and how is it caused? The question is one that must occupy every thoughtful mind today. It stands as a challenge to our ability to think.

It is a familiar fact to all of us that this Nation has changed in a relatively few years from one predominantly agricultural to one predominantly industrial. A century ago seventy-five per cent of the population lived on farms and twenty-five per cent in the cities. Today the figures are almost exactly reversed. There is an explanation, of course. Farm industry has been converted into factory industry. But any suggestion that the pendulum has swung too far brings a prompt rejoinder. It is pointed out that our farmers now produce more crops than they can sell to advantage, that farmers only a few weeks ago were being compelled to let go of their wheat for less than the actual money they had put into its production, and that the situation was the same with respect to all other crops. That is true enough, but it is equally true that the same thing could be said for many forms of manufacturing, and it is also true that the carpenter and the stonemason and the structural iron worker and the machinist—all manufacturers in the broad sense—are frequently unable to sell their labor and their skill, which are their only products, for any price at all.

Let us look one fact in the face. I do not want anyone to think that I am picturing American agriculture as being prosperous—the reverse is true. Nevertheless, when we read statistics that six million or eight million or ten million Americans are out of work do we stop to consider where they are out of work? It is undoubtedly true that the overwhelming majority of these millions of unemployed are living in the cities of the country.

What does unemployment in the city mean? It means that the whole family is not only out of work and out of cash, but is also out of food and is threatened with losing a roof over their heads.

That brings about as serious a picture as we can well imagine—a picture of human misery.

There are unemployed people in the agricultural sections of the country, though they total only a small minority of the whole of the unemployed, and I think it is fair to say that with certain exceptions most of these people in the country are not faced with actual starvation or actual eviction. In other words, while their situation is bad, thoroughly bad, most of them will in some way get through the winter.

I, therefore, come back to the thought that while agriculture is in a thoroughly bad way the actual distress and starvation and lack of fuel and lack of clothing exists primarily in the cities of the Nation. That is where the great bulk of our millions of unemployed is concentrated.

If we accept the theory that in so far as our industries are concerned the present problem is one of distribution—in other words, of distributing to the ultimate consumer the products of industry—then we face the immediate difficulty that population itself is up against the problem of distribution. In other words, the proper distribution of the products of industry cannot be solved until we do something to solve the proper distribution of the population who will use the products.

Let me give you a simple illustration.

A farmer ships milk to a great city two hundred miles away. He gets three cents a quart for his milk. After it has been handled by the milk station and refrigerated and again handled by the railroad and after it gets

to the big city and is trucked first to the central distributing point and then delivered either to the home or to the retail store, the cost of handling plus two or three profits on the trip make the mother, the father and three or four children in the city pay fifteen cents a quart for that same milk.

How many quarts of milk can the city family afford to buy at that price? Obviously, very little milk. This inability to buy milk on the part of families who have jobs is aggravated by the total inability to buy on the part of the hundreds of thousands and even millions of families who are wholly out of jobs.

Is it not true that if a lot of these city families lived a great deal closer to the dairy farmer they could get their milk for half what they are compelled to pay now? Is it not also true that if a lot of these city families lived nearer the farmer they would consume a great deal more milk, because the same amount of cash would buy more milk?

This situation as to milk applies to nearly all agricultural products. It is a fact that the per capita consumption of farm products in this country has decreased greatly in recent years. The market for what the farmer produces might be very greatly increased if we could find a way to bring more consumers closer to the source of supply. That is something decidedly worth thinking about.

That is why in this very brief talk on the undoubted fact that industry and agriculture are out of balance today I want to propound two simple questions.

The first is this. Is it worthwhile for us to make a definite effort to get people in large numbers to move out of cities where there are thousands and hundreds of thousands of unemployed and bring these people closer to the actual sources of food supply? It seems to me that to that question we must answer an emphatic YES.

The second question logically follows the first: What steps can be taken? It seems to me that the answer is this: First we must try to work out a definite plan by which industry itself will seek to move certain forms of industry out of the congested centers where unemployment is greatest into the smaller communities, closer to the primary food supply.

At least it is worthwhile to recognize the fact of the over-population of many of our urban centers, and to try to find some practical means to restore the balance.