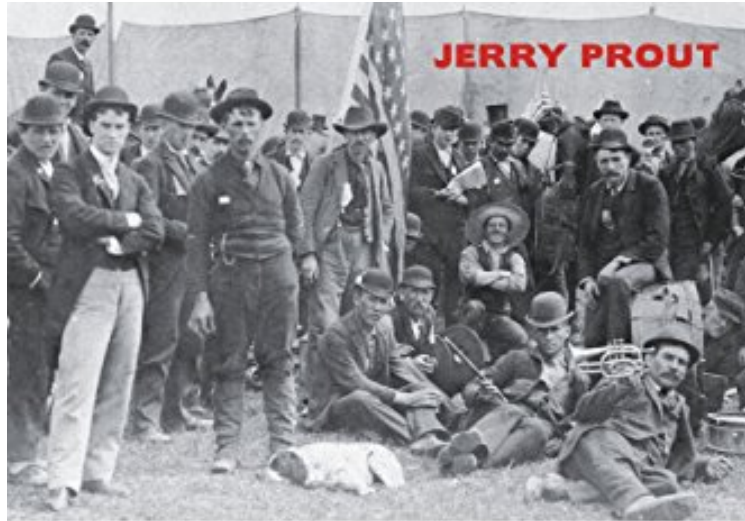


# Coxey's Crusade for Jobs: Unemployment in the Gilded Age

*Jerry Prout*

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## COXEY'S

## CRUSADE

## FOR JOBS

### UNEMPLOYMENT IN THE GILDED AGE

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**Jerry Prout : Coxey's Crusade for Jobs: Unemployment in the Gilded Age** before purchasing it in order to gauge whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Coxey's Crusade for Jobs: Unemployment in the Gilded Age:

0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. did not adopt the view of Social Darwinists like most business magnates that life was "sink or swim" By Customer I have just finished an eloquent, well-researched book that reminds us that fighting for justice, equality, and the welfare of all citizens began a long time ago and involves not only politics and policy, but also faith, the arts and culture, and an informed press. Importantly, it also reminds us that while the arc of history bends toward justice, that bending takes time, often measured in generations. I speak of a most

timely history that I finished last evening: "Coxey's Crusade for Jobs - Unemployment in the Gilded Age," by the renowned Jerry Prout (152 pages, Northern Illinois University Press). The march to Washington that is the centerpiece of Professor Prout's exhaustively researched work - an "army of proud men seeking honest jobs" - was the first known campaign of its kind in the U.S. Jacob Coxey, a prosperous industrialist and horse trader, mounted his crusade in the midst of the 1893 Panic and long depression that followed. Millions of working-class Americans who were just tasting the fruits of what had been a rising economy were thrown on the street, at a time when the term "unemployment" was not even in regular use - at a time when no entity, public or private, even tried to calculate the jobs impact of that depression - at a time when these newly jobless were characterized as tramps who deserved no more than the bitter fruits of desperate privation they were enduring. Coxey, a prime example of the Horatio Alger striver who pulled himself up from the bottom of the heap, did not adopt the view of Social Darwinists like most business magnates that life was "sink or swim." At a time when scanty private charity offered the only relief to these millions, Coxey proposed that the federal government should provide \$500 million in 1894 dollars to finance a public works program centered on building a national network of roads that would offer honest employment to the many jobless artisans tramping the byways of the country in a mostly fruitless search for work. (That \$500 million was larger than the entire federal budget of the time.) He and his activist allies conceived the idea of organizing the honest unemployed - "no anarchists or criminals" - into a band that would march from Coxey's home town, Massillon, Ohio, to the steps of the Capitol, where they would demand enactment of the Good Roads proposal. The five-week march, in the spring of 1894, was covered exhaustively by a group of journalists who walked beside Coxey's Army. While the band of the jobless never amounted to more than a couple of hundred marchers, the press's sensational coverage that began well before the first step was taken attracted tens of thousands of Americans to the roadside route from the Midwest to Washington, DC. The marchers were greeted with brass bands as they passed through town after town, and the local residents ensured that the activists were well supplied with provisions. A panicked Congress and the President rejected the notion of a federal public works program, perceived the "Army" as akin to the riotous Paris Commune, and arrested Coxey on the Capitol steps before he could utter a word championing his crusade. Given the halting recovery from our own Great Recession, with the rise of extremists on the left and right, one hopes the coming election can produce better outcomes than Coxey did in the short term. The parallels between the political atmosphere then and now are plain to see in "Coxey's Crusade." The marchers were of every nationality and race; at a time when Reconstruction had failed and Jim Crow was firmly in place, men of many colors shared the same blankets as they rested on the roadsides. Their champions used language very familiar in today's political conflict: Coxey's confidant Browne described reigning corporate trusts in the words of the Book of Revelation - "the beast with seven heads, ten horns, and ten crownshells." [T]he "seven heads" of the biblical beast became the seven great monopolies: the Standard Oil Company, the railroads, the iron producers, the newspapers, the national banks, and the speculators. "As Prout artfully demonstrates, even with the Populist movement in motion, decades would pass before Coxey's dream of a meaningful federal jobs program materialized. His chronicle ties together - from colonial times through the 20th century - the steps along the way that ultimately produced the expansive jobs programs of President Franklin Roosevelt in the midst of the 20th century's Great Depression. Much, much more of Prout's comprehensive, economically related history could be retailed here, but the interested reader should delve into the story on his own. Available right now on , "Coxey's Crusade" should take precedence on your bookshelf. We owe Jerry praise for this erudite work that comes at this perilous time in the Republic's life. 0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. ... Jacob Coxey I can honestly say that I thoroughly enjoyed the depth of this book. By Pew Pew Life As someone with no prior knowledge on the legend that is Jacob Coxey I can honestly say that I thoroughly enjoyed the depth of this book. It really is amazing to have the chance to read a raw and accurate account of history through the eyes of such an informed and articulate author. The words painted imagery in my head that made history come to life and I highly recommend this book to anyone who has even the slightest interest in the times that have been before us. 0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. Interesting history, and insightful background for contemporary politics. By Sue The perfect comment for our time. In light of the present debate on income inequity and how to address it, this account of Coxey's crusade for jobs provides such helpful context. The book is certainly well documented for the scholar, but it also resonates with the general reader. The relationships among the key players are fascinating, and very helpful commentary on where we are in 2016, confronting such similar challenges and proposals to solve them.

In the depths of a depression in 1894, a highly successful Gilded Age businessman named Jacob Coxey led a group of jobless men on a march from his hometown of Massillon, Ohio, to the steps of the nation's Capitol. Though a financial panic and the resulting widespread business failures caused millions of Americans to be without work at the time, the word unemployment was rarely used and generally misunderstood. In an era that worshipped the self-reliant individual who triumphed in a laissez-faire market, the out-of-work "tramp" was disparaged as weak or flawed, and undeserving of assistance. Private charities were unable to meet the needs of the jobless, and only a few

communities experimented with public works programs. Despite these limitations, Coxe conceived a plan to put millions back to work building a nationwide system of roads and drew attention to his idea with the march to Washington. In Coxe's Crusade for Jobs, Jerry Prout recounts Coxe's story and adds depth and context by focusing on the reporters who were embedded in the march. Their fascinating depictions of life on the road occupied the headlines and front pages of America's newspapers for more than a month, turning the spectacle into a serialized drama. These accounts humanized the idea of unemployment and helped Americans realize that in a new industrial economy, unemployment was not going away and the unemployed deserved attention. This unique study will appeal to scholars and students interested in the Gilded Age and US and labor history.

"This book provides an important perspective on American life in the 1890s by examining the debate over unemployment and the reaction to and reception of Coxe's march." —Wyatt Wells, author of *American Capitalism, 1945–2000* "Coxey's Crusade for Jobs helps bridge the historical eras of narrative-based journalism, expounded by historian Hazel Dicken-Garcia, and the sensationalism and sometimes fact-stretching yellow journalism that followed. It is highly recommended for journalism historians as well as casual readers." —*Journalism History* "Prout provides an important work in the historiography of Coxe's Army, the history of unemployment, and the broader history of the Gilded Age. Prout uses his history of Coxe's Army to illuminate multiple strains of Populism in the 1890s. This important contribution challenges historians to think about the ways in which Populism had multiple potentials, as well as how it survived into the New Deal era and shaped thinking of future government officials and reformers. Well researched and well written, this work is highly recommended for those interested in Coxe's Army, the history of unemployment, and the longer legacies of American protests." —*H-Net*