



Defining a 'living wage' in America: transformations in union wage theories, 1870–1930

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Whereas union leaders in nineteenth-century America often used the phrase 'a living wage' to describe appropriate compensation for skilled workers, today that phrase is typically linked to unskilled labor. I argue that the erosion of ties between skilled workers and the living wage occurred in several stages between 1900 and 1930. Having traditionally avoided quantifying the 'living wage', unions were forced to do so within arbitration hearings during and after the First World War. Finding their proposed standards rejected by most boards, union officials turned to an alternative justification for boosting the wages of skilled workers: the need to balance productive capacity with an expanded mass consumer market. That justification would later become a central part of left-wing political economy during the New Deal, while the living wage became tied primarily to efforts to boost minimum rates.

The 'living wage' has been part of American discussions of working-class compensation since the late nineteenth century, but the meaning and usage of that phrase have varied considerably. For example, there are clear distinctions between the concept promulgated by early labor activists and the version promoted by present-day living wage campaigns. Nineteenth-century labor officials such as Samuel Gompers deliberately refused to define the exact value of a living wage, fearful that such a move would lock unions into a fixed wage range. By contrast, contemporary activists show no such reticence: during a widely publicized campaign at Harvard University, student activists (supported by officials from the American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations, AFL-CIO) pegged the living wage at exactly US\$10.25 per hour. Moreover, where unions had once set the living wage as a goal for their own skilled members and distinguished it from minimum-wage legislation sought by reformers, contemporary campaigns merge these two categories, using 'living wage' to describe their desired minimum rates.¹ The living wage has thus largely ceased to be a relevant concept for skilled labor and now appears almost exclusively within attempts to raise minimum wages, efforts that primarily effect unskilled, low-income workers.

The erosion of the ties between skilled workers and the living wage occurred primarily during the first third of the twentieth century and most dramatically in the years following the First World War. To date, the shift has been characterized largely through social-group analysis (framed by class, gender, race, etc.): different conceptions of the living wage

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were created by (and for) different social groups; the triumph of any one concept (in legislation or public discourse) reflected the dominance of its creators, or the resonance of that definition with larger social and cultural tendencies.² The mechanism sustaining this hegemony has not been specified, however, nor have authors explained why the 1920s proved a pivotal period nor why unions never resuscitated the older ideal of a high ‘living wage’ for skilled workers distinct from the protectionist ‘minimum wage’. Indeed, it is puzzling that unions muted their discussions of a higher, living wage at the very moment (1920s–1930s) that expansive consumption was becoming a central, even celebrated, component of liberal political economy – a conjunction that has led historian Lawrence Glickman to suggest that ‘living wage advocates had laid the ideological groundwork of New Deal economic thinking’.³

My view of this period is rather different. I suggest that in the shifting definition and use of the living wage, we can see the reflection of a labor movement struggling to adapt itself to a varying political and economic landscape – while confronting its own growing entanglement with the state. Accordingly, my account emphasizes praxis: not merely how union leaders described a ‘living wage’, but how they attempted to use (or not use) this concept to influence wage rates, how it became embedded in particular institutions, and how unions found themselves bound to systems of expertise (namely economists and statisticians). Without disputing the bulk of Glickman’s argument (including, for example, his attention to a long tradition of politicized, working-class views of consumption) I highlight the discontinuities in union approaches to consumption: first, the divisions that separated nineteenth-century discussions of the living wage from the application of that concept by arbitration boards during the First World War, and second, the split between the living-wage ideology in both periods and the consumerist, liberal political economy of the New Deal. This chronology maps directly onto political transformations and labor history over this period: the growing ties between unions and the Democratic party in the pre-war years, the intense federal management of labor relations during the war (when the living wage became an active principle of wage adjustment), the thwarting of nationalization schemes and collapse of labor hopes during the early 1920s (in which the failure of the older living-wage ideal played no small role), and the subsequent attempts by labor activists to construct a new basis for progressive reform in the 1920s, one that would shape and inform New Deal political economy and labor policies. The story of the ‘living wage’ between 1870 and 1930 thereby provides an illuminating window onto the trials and transformations of the labor movement as it struggled to justify skilled workers’ demands for higher wages.

The ‘living wage’ and expenditure surveys, 1870–1910

During the late nineteenth century labor activists such as Ira Steward, George McNeill, John Mitchell, and Samuel Gompers challenged market-based wage theories by insisting that workers (or at least white, male workers) had a social right to a decent wage, one that could provide an ‘American standard of living’ for them and their families. Working-class leaders occasionally described the criteria for this American standard: as Samuel Gompers put it in an 1898 article for the *American Federationist*, a living wage should ‘be sufficient to maintain an average-sized family in a manner consistent with whatever the contemporary local civilization recognizes as indispensable to physical and mental

health, or as required by the rational self-respect of human beings'. But union officials balked at providing specifics. Gompers, for example, famously refused to define the living wage in 'terms of money'.⁴

For middle-class reformers, Gompers' attitude was perplexing. How could you promote a living wage while refusing to say exactly what would satisfy that ideal? The logic of Gompers' stance can only be seen in context. Following his commitment to voluntarism (private and voluntary negotiation between unions and companies), Gompers had no intention of constraining workers' potential bargaining power by defining an *a priori* sufficient wage, nor did he support government-enforced, minimum-wage legislation (especially for men). Such efforts would be self-defeating, limiting workers' ability to expand their demands to fit improved economic conditions and working-class power. 'The minimum', Gompers warned, 'would become the maximum, from which we would soon find it necessary to depart.' Rather than create a single minimum wage, he and other union leaders aimed to establish the living wage as a 'principle' or a 'broad, comprehensive rule of life'.⁵

Considered in this vein, the living wage served a three-fold purpose that legitimated both workers and unions. First, it established a new conception of wage-earning that replaced the antebellum linkage between wage-earning and slavery. The male wage-worker was no longer a weak figure who had failed to reach the producerist ideal (the independent craftsman); instead, when justly compensated, he exemplified proper adaptation to an industrial age: a dynamic producer who rightfully shared in the fruits of industrial growth and who provided his family with the resources for physical, intellectual, and moral development appropriate to American citizens. Not wages *per se* but only inadequate wages were the bane of industrial society. Second, the link between social development and standards of living worked both ways: not only were high wages necessary to maintain American social and political ideals, but the lack of those ideals among particular social groups (certain European and Asian immigrants, blacks, women) explained the how these groups could undercut 'American' standards and thus justified their exclusion from unions and (ideally) the general workforce. Finally, the 'living wage' – or rather its absence – legitimated union action. In the face of continuing low wages, labor organization became the means through which workers could achieve an ethically mandated, politically necessary higher standard of living. None of these objectives required defining an explicit 'American standard' or adequate wage rate; indeed, as Gompers and others recognized, ambiguity made the living wage a more powerful rhetorical tool.⁶

In the meantime, however, other Americans were working hard to reduce this very ambiguity. The reformers and (often indistinguishable) nascent social scientists who formed the backbone of middle-class responses to the economic and social crises of late-nineteenth-century industrial America made discussions about adequate income levels a commonplace of progressive reform projects. These conversations drew upon a set of investigations that, although subsequently disentangled into separate projects, were largely co-extensive well into the twentieth century: expenditure surveys and studies of living conditions among the working poor. The deepest and most well-known nineteenth-century examples of this research came from Europe: Frederic Le Play's intensive monographs on working-class families in France in the early nineteenth-century, Edouard Ducpétiaux's collection of roughly one thousand household accounts from Belgian workers in 1855 (comparing, unfavorably, their diets to those of prisoners), Ernst Engel's analysis of Ducpétiaux's data (providing a formative

methodological exemplar for decades to come), and Charles Booth's and Seebohm Rowntree's turn-of-the-century studies of the poor in London and York, respectively. Carroll Wright led the first large-scale American investigations of working-class living conditions, initially while head of the Massachusetts Bureau of Statistics of Labor in 1875; later with two major surveys (1888–1890, 1901–1902) during his tenure as the first commissioner of the federal Bureau of Labor Statistics. These were joined by a host of smaller private and public studies appearing at an increasingly rapid rate after 1900: the *Hull-House Maps & Papers* from the Chicago settlement house (1895), Louise More's research into *Wage Earner's Budgets* in New York (1907), Robert Chapin's surveys in the same city (1909), and many others.⁷

The majority of these investigations focused directly on the poor, while those that included a wider range of families typically made the delineation of 'adequate' income levels a primary objective, using them to set relief criteria or to define minimum wage rates. In both respects, the survey projects cut a sharp contrast with union discussions of a living wage. Naturally there was some overlap between the two. The term 'living wage' became common among middle-class reformers in the early twentieth century, used by the Protestant social gospel movement in key statements like 'The Social Creed of the Churches' (1908) and by the Catholic activist Father John A. Ryan (1906). It was soon applied to minimum-wage legislation as well, especially after the Commonwealth Arbitration Court of Australia, a country that largely pioneered modern wage regulation, set the living wage as its standard for judging whether unskilled laborers received 'fair and reasonable' compensation. (It is significant that this linkage appeared within an arbitration hearing, a point to which we will return.)⁸ Like labor leaders, most middle-class reformers believed that racial and gender differences led female and non-Anglo-American workers to accept lower wages, either because these were sufficient to meet their more restricted needs and desires or because power inequities prevented these groups from bargaining as effectively as organized, white, male workers.⁹ In a further similarity, some reformers proposed minimum rates that came much closer to union ideals, a pattern especially common in Massachusetts, the home of early consumerist, labor activists such as Ira Steward and George McNeill. Carroll Wright (who succeeded McNeill and Henry Kemble Oliver at the Massachusetts Bureau of Statistics of Labor) described an 'adequate' wage in terms that echoed union leaders: 'It seems natural and just', he declared in his 1875 report, 'that a man's labor should be worth, and that his wages should be, as much as, with economy and prudence, will comfortably maintain himself and family, educate his children, and also to lay by enough for his decent support when his laboring powers have failed.' Wright proposed that either 'public opinion' or legislation should establish a minimum wage sufficient to keep a family out of debt (US\$600 annually, a rate that was almost 40% greater than the average wage for an unskilled, male worker in Massachusetts as reported in his study).¹⁰

Nevertheless, through the first decade of the twentieth century, expenditure surveys and minimum-wage advocacy remained recognizably distinct from union promotion of a 'living wage'. The latter was intended for skilled workers and carefully avoided becoming linked to a specific set of goods or level of compensation. The former almost always included low standards clearly aimed at unskilled, unorganized workers. Perhaps more to the point, unions did not sponsor or conduct expenditure surveys, which were financed instead by charitable organizations and government agencies. What brought these two traditions together was a larger transformation in industrial relations.

Industrial relations and cost-of-living statistics, 1900–1917

Gompers' discussion of the 'living wage' in 1898 came against the background of a rapidly expanding trade union movement (the AFL would grow from 400,000 to 3 million workers between 1897 and 1903) and during a brief lull in violent strikes and repression (1898–1902). Gompers' adherence to trade unionism (rather than broader, class-based activism) and his allegiance to narrowly focused collective bargaining meshed well with the consensus emerging among political moderates during this period and exemplified by organizations like the National Civic Federation (NCF), of which Gompers was a member. Founded in 1900 by Ralph M. Easley, the NCF promoted a voluntary approach to industrial relations based upon conciliation between unions and companies, including collective bargaining (primarily focused on wages and hours) and limited improvements in working conditions, all designed to prevent overt class conflict.¹¹

As the first decade of the twentieth century progressed, however, the NCF model quickly collapsed in most industries. Open-shop campaigns, competitive pressures, and judicial rulings that constrained union tactics combined to batter existing unions and thwart organizing drives. In response, many workers embraced more radical alternatives to AFL trade unionism (such as the Industrial Workers of the World), while even the AFL was compelled to modify its voluntarist principles, implicitly accepting the need to engage the state and participate in partisan politics (if only to roll back the obstacles raised by judicial intervention). The limitations of local labor regulation amid a competitive and increasingly integrated national economy, plus the existence of a strong pro-business, anti-regulation wing of the Republican party, shaped this political engagement in two directions: towards national politics and towards a closer alliance with the Democratic party.¹²

The election of Woodrow Wilson in 1912, and especially his re-election in 1916, demonstrated the potency of this partnership, but it was unclear what fruits it would bear for labor. Could state intervention simply provide protection for union organizing, relief from judicial injunctions, and basic workplace regulation – all compatible with traditional voluntarist principles – or would it necessarily entail greater administrative oversight of industrial relations? Taken as a whole, the pre-war actions of the Wilson administration gave no coherent indications; indeed, the liberal wing of Wilson's blue-ribbon investigation into industrial unrest – the US Committee on Industrial Relations – fractured into dissenting views based upon these very questions.¹³

To predict the future trajectory, however, one needed only to glance at those few industries where NCF ideals had found their greatest success, thanks (ironically enough) to state intervention in domains of clear public interest, notably transportation. Since railroads crossed state lines and thus fell under federal oversight, they became the great model and exemplar for the potential of NCF methods on a national level, apparently illustrating the mutual benefits for labor and capital of peaceful, voluntary, mediated agreements between organized workers and large companies. Railroad 'brotherhoods' dominated a select group of highly skilled trades, but they were also relatively conservative, advocating cooperation with management to promote joint prosperity and eschewing talk of class conflict. A combination of shrewd regional and national organizing, industry prosperity near the turn of the century, and protection through the 1898 Erdman Act allowed the unions to prosper, roughly tripling their membership in the two decades after 1897. Mediation, sought frequently by companies and union leaders after 1906, prevented bitter strikes, lockouts, and the violence that had erupted repeatedly in the industry during the nineteenth century.¹⁴

By 1910, however, the flaws in this system were beginning to appear. Mediation limited strikes and shutdowns but had less success resolving underlying conflicts or promoting the class harmony envisioned by the NCF. Compromise was the essence of the method and also its fatal weakness. Unions soon recognized that strike threats led to mediation, which would invariably pull concessions from employers. The predictable result was an endless stream of disputes and negotiations between 1908 to 1912, with roughly sixty that prompted calls for mediation and a countless host of other revisions to 'wage scales and working conditions'. Facing strong national unions and constant disruption, employers soured on mediation and now promoted federal arbitration, which promised greater stability.¹⁵

Facilitated by the Newlands Act, arbitration became increasingly common in railway industrial relations after 1913. In principle, as one economist argued, arbitration allowed an 'impartial' board to reach a 'judgment upon the merits of the questions involved' and therefore potentially construct a 'permanent solution' in which 'the underlying causes of the wage dispute are met by the application of a reasonable principle of wages'. But reaching this goal required a self-proclaimed class of impartial experts able to judge the cases, plus (following the quasi-legal analogy) a basic set of facts about a given company, its workers, and its industry, all in combination with a method for interpreting the significance of that data. In short, labor arbitration required both economic statistics and economic theory, and hence economists themselves: it was no accident that railroad unions began hiring labor economists like W. Jett Lauck to represent them during arbitration hearings during this period, nor that ties between economists and unions would deepen as arbitration spread.¹⁶

Unlike mediation (requiring compromise) or typical collective bargaining (based on economic power), arbitration required unions to create specific links between their wage demands and quantifiable principles. Accordingly, insofar as unions promoted the 'living wage' as an ideal for their members, it was only a matter of time before they would be pressed to abandon Gompers' studied ambiguity about the monetary value of that wage. Initially, the connection was forged at a lower level, overlapping the studies of adequate living standards created by middle-class reformers. The skilled and well-organized railroad unions succeeded in raising overall wage rates by consolidating their efforts and pushing for district or regional standardization, which raised wages along lower-paying lines. The weaker unions were left to rely more heavily on the living-wage argument, which, when not ignored, was readily conflated with the minimal 'normal standard' touted by earlier reformers like Robert C. Chapin or Louise More in New York City.¹⁷

Soon, however, skilled workers began to promote the higher living-wage ideal in arbitration hearings, a change that first came in 1917 along the Pacific coast, where unions had a strong base in several major cities. That year, a street railway union in Seattle presented an arbitration board with a set of family budgets designed to illustrate an adequate wage, only to have the railway company respond with its own estimates. Fortuitously for the union, the chairman of the arbitration board, Henry Suzzalo, was also the president of the University of Washington, which had a staple of left-leaning social scientists with interests in consumption, including Theresa McMahon, Carleton Parker, and William F. Ogburn. Suzzalo asked the economics department to create an impartial budget, a task largely performed by Ogburn. Rather than simply resuscitate early budgets, Ogburn sided with the union's contention that its members deserved more than a 'subsistence' standard of living adequate for unskilled labor; accordingly, Ogburn

developed what he called a ‘minimum comfort’ budget appropriate for skilled workers. As other consumption economists recognized, Ogburn had broken with the longstanding tradition linking ‘adequate’ budgets to studies of the poor or unskilled workers. Here, for the first time, was an attempt to define a distinct standard of living corresponding to the basic expectations of skilled workers – in other words, the union ‘living wage’ – an attempt driven by the needs of labor arbitration. In short succession, the ‘minimum comfort’ approach was used in two other California street railway cases (both in Oakland, one with the help of Berkeley’s Jessica Peixotto, who would later become a leading authority on high-level, standard budgets).¹⁸ But the real future for the ‘minimum comfort’ budget lay on the much larger stage prepared by the war mobilization effort.

The living wage in war and the early postwar years

After the chaos that accompanied American mobilization during the early part of 1917 (when a tight labor market promoted widespread strikes and high turnover rates), arbitration became an increasingly common component of American wartime labor management as the federal government sought to stabilize production. As arbitration spread, so too did attempts to reify the ‘living wage’. Though the principle appeared in more limited versions in several of the industry-demarcated federal arbitration systems, it found its formal, most important instantiation in the National War Labor Board (NWLB). As the name implies, the NWLB was created in the spring of 1918 to develop and implement a coherent set of national labor policies that would reduce the inefficient heterogeneity arising from the host of state and federal agencies managing industrial conflict in different geographical regions and industries. In practice, it failed in this task, as key federal agencies successfully battled to retain their authority over areas such as shipbuilding, railroads, or fuel, and the war ended without any true consolidation. Yet the NWLB managed to handle an enormous number of cases (roughly 500 in its 16-month lifespan), and it gained a prominent stature deriving from both its mission and its joint public chairmen: former president William Taft and Catholic labor activist and former chairman of the US Committee on Industrial Relations (CIR), Frank Walsh.¹⁹

Like many other wartime arbitration agencies, the NWLB drew heavily on the expertise of liberal-left intellectuals and social scientists. Although conservatives expected Taft to oppose Walsh and thereby leave the NWLB deadlocked, the former president proved far more amenable to compromise than predicted. Walsh managed to get Jett Lauck, the former railway union consultant and a past researcher for the CIR, appointed as the NWLB’s executive secretary, and the two proceeded to hire a host of union-friendly subordinates as field staff – including former labor officials, union members, and CIR researchers – making it, as one historian described, ‘the most left-leaning government agency that Washington had ever seen’.²⁰ To conduct cost-of-living research, Lauck turned to William Ogburn, with whom he had worked several months earlier for a Pacific coast ruling by the Shipbuilding Labor Adjustment Board (both men having been hired by the board’s secretary, the Columbia University economist and minimum-wage advocate Henry Seager).²¹

The NWLB was thus perfectly primed to promote a ‘living wage’; indeed, Walsh’s impoverished upbringing and his commitment to the Catholic labor teachings outlined in *Rerum Novarum* in 1891 had turned living-wage ideals into one of his central priorities. He had championed the living wage in his report for the CIR, and he successfully pressed

the NWLB to adopt the concept as one of its formal principles. As a result, a March 1918 statement by the board proclaimed that:

- (1) The right of all workers . . . to a living wage is hereby declared.
- (2) In fixing wages, minimum rates of pay shall be established which will insure the subsistence of the worker and his family in health and reasonable comfort.

Of course, as past experience had demonstrated, supporting a living wage in principle differed from offering a rate that unions and workers would find acceptable. The final phrase, ‘health and reasonable comfort’, indicated the direction Walsh was heading, however, as did the presence of Ogburn on the staff. Walsh began the NWLB’s first hearings on the living wage with a presentation from Ogburn, who had compiled estimates for both a ‘minimum subsistence’ budget (*ca* US\$1300 per year, largely an updated version of Robert Chapin’s 1907 budget from New York City and intended for unskilled workers) and a ‘minimum comfort’ budget (US\$1750, for skilled workers). Walsh then proposed the ‘minimum comfort’ level as a national minimum wage (a rate that would nearly double the existing average for unskilled labor); labor representatives (citing personal experience) insisted that Ogburn’s figures were too low for many cities; stunned employers, already resisting the very idea of a minimum wage, claimed that no universal, living wage could apply to workers who lived in different locations and had widely varying spending habits and family dependents. After tumultuous arguments spanning several days, the board agreed to a compromise from Taft which implied (at least to labor members) acceptance of a higher living wage ideal in ‘normal times’ but which also declared the war to be an ‘interregnum’ when neither labor nor capital would push its full advantage. In practice, the board treated the ‘minimum subsistence’ budget as a minimum wage, thereby raising rates for many unskilled workers.²²

After the war, the combination of the dismantling of the NWLB and other federal arbitration boards, the resurgence of Republicans in national politics, and a renewed open-shop campaign all helped to drive organized labor back to areas of traditional strength: highly skilled trades, local market industries with less competitive pressure plus greater local control, and a few domains under federal oversight (coal, railroads). If the labor movement had failed to organize key mass production industries, it nevertheless saw an opportunity to capitalize on wartime gains and working-class ambitions, and the living wage would prove a key element in this campaign. Claiming that the NWLB had accepted the principle of a ‘minimum comfort’ standard of living for skilled workers, unions turned to former NWLB economists to press this argument in arbitration hearings. Jett Lauck represented unions in street railway cases during the early postwar years and in major hearings before the US Railroad Labor Board (1920, 1921, 1922) and the US Anthracite Coal Commission (1920), each time offering the ‘minimum comfort’ budget as a governing standard. William Ogburn created a modified ‘minimum comfort’ budget for the United Mine Workers of America (UMWA) before the US Bituminous Coal Mining Commission (1920), and defended its formulation in academic journals.²³ Subsequently, the new labor think-tank, Labor Bureau, Inc. – created in 1920 by labor activists and leftist intellectuals Evans Clark, David Saposs, and George Soule – took the lead in providing unions with extensive economic statistics on a variety of topics and in presenting the ‘minimum comfort’ standard in a host of arbitration hearings (including cases in printing, garment trades, and railroads, among others).²⁴ Though the leadership of both the AFL and the railroad brotherhoods continued to ‘denounce a system of fixing wages solely on the basis

of family budgets', in practice organized labor was doing just that, advocating a higher basic wage for all skilled workers predicated on budgets delineating a 'minimum comfort' standard. As a result, wrote James C. Young in 1922, the question 'What is a living wage?' appeared 'likely to assume national and economic importance overshadowing almost any other problem of industry', and it would be answered, as Young recognized, through studies of prices and family expenditures.²⁵

Naturally, as unions began to tout the 'minimum comfort' standard with increasing regularity, their arguments did not go unchallenged. Some conservatives rejected the living-wage concept outright, continuing to insist that wages should be governed by supply and demand alone. Yet in truth that was a minority view – by the early 1920s, the living wage was a widely accepted principle: it had been formally adopted by the NWLB; it had been endorsed by all presidents from Theodore Roosevelt onwards; and it had support from progressive social scientists, religious organizations, and even some employers.²⁶ Of course, the ambiguity in the concept that had served labor leaders so well in the nineteenth century now proved a serious handicap as unions struggled to utilize living-wage arguments to support specific wage hikes for their members.

In part, employers challenged unions on narrow fronts, for example by berating them for applying a single standard budget across the entire country when surveys showed that climate, local economies, and social custom made expenditure patterns differ substantially from place to place. Likewise, employers criticized unions for demanding a wage sufficient to support a family of five (husband, wife, and three children under the age of 14), arguing that the census and other survey data showed that most workers did not have four dependents, either because they had less than three children or because other family members worked an income-producing job.²⁷ The greatest obstacle facing a living wage, however, was the obvious one: how to define an objective, adequate standard of living. Early attempts among statisticians such as Carroll Wright had started with food, seeking to ground a basic standard in physiological and nutritive requirements.²⁸ These proved more ambiguous than proponents had hoped, and the problem grew rapidly worse as reformers moved into other categories, such as clothing, housing, and home furnishings.²⁹ The most common approach – finding the level at which families ceased to go into debt or could maintain a small amount of savings – was only applicable to the low, subsistence levels.

Not surprisingly, skeptical conservatives attacked standard budget projects relentlessly – especially the higher, minimum-comfort standard promoted by unions – a process that reached its zenith in the 1922 decision of the US Railroad Labor Board. The board majority (employers and government representatives) declared that 'much that is said on the subject [of 'living standards'] is highly theoretical and of but little value'. 'Living costs', the board continued, 'cannot be standardized any more than men can be standardized.' Accordingly, it dismissed 'the abstract thing called the "living wage"', mocked the 'fantastic theory' of union advocates, and decried the 'fallacy' of adequate budget studies. Altogether, the board concluded, there was no evidence 'that any committee of experts could set up an average living standard upon which a wage scale could be practicably based . . .'.³⁰ Labor advocates recognized that by discarding budgetary studies, the ruling effectively foreswore any normative judgments about wages. 'Judging from the recent pronouncements of the Railroad Labor Board on the living wage', William Ogburn dryly observed, 'there is current opinion that any wage which workers work for is a living wage, since in order to work they must be alive'.³¹ But how could labor activists secure a

persuasive basis for normative proposals? Stymied on this point, the reform-minded staff of the private Bureau of Applied Economics (much like Ogburn himself) could only recommend recourse to ‘impartial and experienced students of the question’, which of course largely begged the question.³²

In practice, unions and their advisors usually tried to leverage the authority of government agencies: first the precedents established in wartime and then the work of the federal Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS). At the request of a congressional committee examining government salaries in 1919, the BLS built upon William Ogburn’s work to compile a ‘tentative quantity–cost budget’ that would sustain a family of five at ‘a standard of health and decency’ in Washington, DC. Six months later, the bureau produced a slightly altered version for a working-class family of five, and union representatives (including Ogburn, Lauck, and the Labor Bureau, Inc.) quickly adopted the BLS budget as their basic reference.³³ Yet the BLS had an ambivalent attitude towards its own creation. On the one hand, staff described it as their ‘best estimate . . . of what should be included in the family budget of the workingman’. Yet, the agency also conceded that the phrase ‘health and decency’ was ‘not entirely precise in meaning’, and indeed could never ‘be wholly satisfactory’.³⁴ Moreover, it never bothered to calculate the actual cost of the worker’s budget in any cities, nor did it extend the work into other studies or update it as the decade progressed. Instead, the insurmountable subjectivity inherent in the project, combined with its controversial applications (made worse by union tendencies to pit the BLS against other government officials and employers), led the bureau to be extremely wary of the whole topic. Repeatedly over the next half-century, BLS staff would make abortive efforts to create more empirically-grounded, ‘objective’ standard budgets, but the project never reached any long-term stability and was eventually abandoned in the 1970s by officials reluctant to judge ‘what is adequate or inadequate’.³⁵

The bureau’s relationship to the ‘health and decency’ budget mirrored the fate of the union’s living wage campaign as a whole. Though labor activists occasionally proclaimed the triumph of the ‘minimum comfort’ ideal, the decisions of arbitrators told another story – either they ignored the living wage or defined it in terms of subsistence.³⁶ Nor was this merely a local, American problem. Worldwide, labor activists struggled and typically failed to establish a second, higher tier of standard budgets above the subsistence level that could function effectively in arbitration or other settings. Indeed, in Australia, the country most sympathetic to the living wage, a tripartite industrial committee tried to define a budget meeting ‘reasonable standards of comfort’ only to face a conservative backlash that proved insurmountable.³⁷ Attempting to define multiple, higher levels of ‘adequate’ living standards made the subjectivity of the whole procedure become overwhelmingly evident; even sympathetic researchers conceded that standard budget projects met increasingly ‘serious difficulties’ as they sought to delineate higher levels of living.³⁸

In practice, living-wage arguments typically had beneficial effects for workers only at very low income levels,³⁹ a compromise implicitly sanctioned by those employers who recognized the benefits of co-opting the living-wage ideal rather than denying it outright. The respective actions of the US Railroad Labor Board and the National Industrial Conference Board (NICB, a business association) are instructive in this regard. The Railroad Labor Board’s polemical 1922 ruling against the living wage prompted a furious dissent from its labor members, sparked the first national railway strike in over 25 years, and left the board largely impotent and irrelevant.⁴⁰ By contrast, the NICB adopted a more conciliatory stance, building upon its experience participating in the

wartime hearings of the NLRB. The association reported that its members 'believed in a living wage and intended to pay at least a living wage. They denied, however, that this could be measured by theoretical budgets for theoretical families and insisted that the only fair measure of the sufficiency of wages was the prevailing standard of living in their own community among their own operatives.'⁴¹ Accordingly, the NLRB conducted numerous small studies in which it took a self-defined 'fair standard of living' (comparable to Ogburn's lower 'minimum of subsistence') and adjusted it to meet prevailing local conditions (in some cases rather substantially).⁴² These were then offered in place of the 'subjective' and 'theoretical' minimum-comfort budgets of labor activists.⁴³ In the end, the NLRB strategy helped to blunt labor's living-wage campaign. Though unions continued to support the development of more generous standard budgets, these projects had unresolved epistemological problems (as the example of the BLS makes clear), and studies of living standards never regained the central role that they had held for unions in the immediate aftermath of the war. Nor, for that matter, did the living wage.

Towards the new deal: from living wage to purchasing power

By 1923, it was apparent that wage arguments based upon the 'minimum comfort' standard had failed, and with that failure came the concomitant death of serious efforts to base wage rates for skilled workers upon standards of living. Over the next decade, union leaders, labor economists, and liberal reformers would work concertedly to develop a new theory of wages that could be a more reliable and effective foundation for the labor movement. In the view of Labor Bureau co-founder Evans Clark, a key moment came at the 1925 AFL convention, in which delegates 'relegated to official oblivion the traditional formula of a "fair day's wage for a fair day's work,"' in favor of a new ideal that linked wages to productivity: 'Social inequality, industrial instability and injustice must increase', read the corresponding resolution, 'unless the workers' real wages, the purchasing power of their wages, ... are progressed in proportion to man's increasing power of production'.⁴⁴ The logic behind this declaration was explained in greater detail later that year by John Frey, then president of the Ohio State Federation and the resolution's primary sponsor, during a roundtable discussion at the American Economics Association. In Frey's view, tying wages to productivity was an economic necessity, essential for mitigating or eliminating cyclical depressions produced by an overabundance of goods and a weak consumer market. 'Wages have been considered for too long upon the basis of what the wage earner should receive, his standard of living, or an amount sufficient to enable him to save', Frey told the audience. 'Industry and commerce, for its own salvation, must see that the wage-earner's capacity to buy keeps pace with the capacity to produce.'⁴⁵

Frey's arguments were not entirely novel. Starting with Malthus and Ricardo in the nineteenth century, economists had long debated the viability of 'underconsumption' as a cause of cyclical depressions.⁴⁶ Likewise, nineteenth century discussions of the living wage among union leaders had included suggestions that rising productivity would require high wages for stability and growth.⁴⁷ Yet these arguments had been disconnected from one another and had been marginal considerations in both arenas. Labor activists initially framed their analyses of the living wage in ethical and political terms: workers not only deserved sufficient wages as a basic economic right, but low wages would destroy social bonds and create 'mental and physical dwarfs' (to borrow Samuel Gompers' description),

thereby undermining the virtues necessary for responsible, productive citizenship. Any strictly economic arguments appended to these considerations served as side props to the central, normative claims.⁴⁸ Moreover, union treatments of underconsumption ignored basic concepts from academic political economy (like the relationship between savings and investment).⁴⁹ By the same token, underconsumptionist ideas remained a minor theme in political economy well into the twentieth century: the most outspoken proponent of underconsumption in the early twentieth century – the British socialist John A. Hobson – was widely regarded as an intelligent but eccentric outsider.⁵⁰

The 1920s saw a revived interest in underconsumptionist theories, however, driven by growing concern among businessmen and economists alike about the problems of distribution in a mass industrial economy. These fears were crystallized by both the productivity boom during the war and the subsequent depression in 1920–1921, which caught businesses by surprise and left many companies saddled with excess inventory and costly, idle capacity. The experience prompted a widespread effort to improve knowledge of consumer markets, dampen cyclical fluctuations, and expand mass consumption. Individual firms like General Motors worked to streamline distribution channels, increase flexibility, boost market research, raise the level and sophistication of advertising, and pioneer new forms of credit and consumer incentives. On a broader scale, the Department of Commerce (led by Herbert Hoover) exemplified a postwar model of the state as a cooperative agent in economic development, winning praise from leading businessmen for the torrent of new economic and commercial data pouring forth from its rapidly expanding statistical agencies.⁵¹

The increasing attention to consumer demand among businessmen merged with a related trend in economics: the rise of institutional economics. With strongholds at the University of Wisconsin, Columbia University, and new think-tanks like the National Bureau of Economic Research (NBER) and the Brookings Institution, institutional economics emerged as a self-defined approach in the wake of the war, one designed to counter flaws in traditional political economy that practitioners believed had left it impotent in the face of contemporary problems. Inspired by Thorstein Veblen and led initially by Wesley Mitchell, Walton Hamilton, and John M. Clark, the institutionalist program encompassed many facets. A key element, though, was the conviction that economists needed detailed, quantitative, empirical studies of consumer behavior and existing markets, encompassing everything from focused psychological or sociological analyses to expansive, aggregative surveys of household income, prices, and family expenditures. These objectives became manifest in the wide range of projects attracting institutionalist support: the NBER's pioneering surveys of 'national income', Robert Lynd's sociological studies of contemporary consumers, and the ambitious attempted syntheses of *Recent Economic Changes in the United States* and *Recent Social Trends in the United States* near the end of the decade (in which consumer behavior, consumer demand, and market analysis played central roles).⁵²

As is well known, the institutionalist program meshed readily with the needs of businessmen, for indeed institutional economists promoted the empirical study of issues (like consumer markets) that had become critical topics for companies themselves.⁵³ But the new concern about mass consumer markets could also be (and was) adapted to progressive ends. Most of the leading institutional economists (such as Mitchell, Hamilton, Clark, or Harold Moulton) were either moderates or on the political left and clearly saw the reformist potential of their new analyses. For the particular case of underconsumption,

left-wing economists built on the work of the socialist John Hobson to argue that the excess inventory that plagued the country in 1920–1921 derived from a weak consumer market created by an inequitable distribution of income. The solution was simple and followed the same lines suggested by AFL official John Frey: raise working class ‘purchasing power’ to match the nation’s enormous productive capacity. The nexus between institutional economics, market research, and labor activism was instantiated in the 1925 roundtable at the American Economics Association wherein Frey described the AFL’s new wage theory. Alongside Frey, the participants who discussed ‘The Consuming Power of Labor and Business Fluctuations’ included Herbet Feis (a young labor economist who had written extensively about labor arbitration), Waddill Catchings (an investment banker who avidly promoted underconsumptionist analyses in the 1920s), and William Berridge (an institutional economist who became a leading market researcher for Metropolitan Life).⁵⁴

As this combination of interests suggests, the attraction of the new underconsumption arguments lay in their apparent ability to unite the needs of businessmen (especially in mass-production and mass-distribution sectors) with the desires of unions and pro-labor liberals. Indeed, support for the purchasing-power thesis came both from leaders of companies dependent on mass-consumer markets – such as Henry Ford, department store magnate Edward Filene, Owen Young at General Electric, and Eugene Grace at Bethlehem Steel – and from labor activists and union leaders. The alliance was by no means complete: many of the businessmen who touted the value of high wages (like Ford or Grace) were strongly anti-union. Still, the shared belief that high wages were necessary for economic growth and stability seemed to promise a common ground that was particularly attractive to those in the labor movement who had seen the obstacles facing the older, ethically-based, living-wage argument. Thus the Labor Bureau became a primary advocate of the underconsumptionist analysis as the decade progressed, while by 1929 Jett Lauck was proclaiming the arrival of a new industrial era predicated on high productivity and correspondingly high wages.⁵⁵

The commitment to living-wage arguments did not disappear immediately: the Labor Bureau continued to publish estimates for a minimum-comfort budget, and Lauck made the living wage a basic component of his new era of industrial relations, still insisting (despite all evidence to the contrary) that the minimum-comfort standard had been widely accepted as a basis for this wage. Yet discussions of the living wage were now joined by underconsumptionist arguments. A 1930 article on ‘economic statistics’ in the *American Federationist* is an excellent example. Beginning with the question, ‘What is a living wage?’, the article illustrated the departure from nineteenth-century treatments by noting the need for ‘actual figures’ describing this wage ‘in dollars and cents’, calculations derived from estimates by the Labor Bureau and other economists. The second half of the article turned to an ‘economic reason for higher [living] standards’, namely supplying ‘a market for our goods’, an analysis that relied heavily on the purchasing power thesis.⁵⁶ Although both the ‘living wage’ and ‘purchasing power’ framework led labor activists to the same conclusion, they were in fact very different arguments. One found its justification in the rights of workers, their expectations as consumers, and their needs as citizens; the other looked for economic growth and stability. The first was defined through studies of living conditions among specific workers in particular locations; the second required correlated analyses of price movements, wage changes, expenditure patterns, and productivity on a national scale.

In the wake of the growing depression after 1929, left-wing intellectuals and labor progressives turned to the purchasing-power thesis both to explain the causes of the collapse and to delineate the remedies for recovery, thereby giving it a dominance that almost completely eclipsed the older living-wage tradition. An influential cluster of younger economists associated with the institutionalist movement (like Rexford Tugwell, Gardiner Means, Isador Lubin, and Mordecai Ezekiel) became champions of purchasing-power analysis within the Roosevelt administration. Meanwhile, the new unionism represented by the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO), which built the closest ties to the New Deal, was likewise steeped in the purchasing-power perspective of the 1920s. These links were evident in the two core unions who split with the AFL to form the CIO: the Amalgamated Clothing Workers (an early convert to the purchasing-power approach under the leadership of Sidney Hillman) and the United Mine Workers (whose economic adviser was Jett Lauck). Many of the CIO's leaders had passed through Brookwood Labor College, which had been infused with underconsumptionist economic analysis thanks to Lauck and Labor Bureau economists like David Saposs. Purchasing power thus became a central concept in New Deal economic policy.⁵⁷ By contrast, attention to living conditions in the 1930s remained focused on remedial solutions for the poor and unemployed. The Works Progress Administration did sponsor a set of standard budgets (subsequently priced by the Bureau of Labor Statistics), but these were created by former NICB economist Margaret Stecker, who, though insisting that her 'maintenance level' surpassed the 'minimum of subsistence' from a decade earlier, conceded that it fell short of the 'health and decency' budget established by the BLS in 1920 and promoted by labor activists.⁵⁸ Likewise, The Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938, establishing a federal minimum wage, was clearly aimed at the low-end of unskilled labor.⁵⁹ While working-class purchasing power continued to be central theme in union wage analyses for decades to come, the living wage retained the connection with minimum rates for unskilled labor that it has held ever since.

Reflecting on the living wage

Examining the history of the 'living wage' shows a clear shift in union wage strategies between 1900 and 1930, as labor officials began to minimize normative, rights-based arguments in favor of putatively objective macroeconomic analyses that aligned higher wages with business self-interest. The necessary corollary to this move was a greater reliance on economic theory, economic statistics, and left-wing economists who could act as advocates for unions. In this respect, historians such as Nelson Lichtenstein who have seen a qualitative difference in the labor movement by the tail end of the 'New Deal order' are correct (although I would suggest that the roots of this transformation lie in the 1920s). Still, we must not confuse means with ends: as Lizabeth Cohen, Lawrence Glickman, Meg Jacobs, and others have argued, consumption-based claims could be directed towards radical goals, and the neither the staid formalism of economic analysis nor the attempt to portray reform objectives as natural concomitants of economic growth should be conflated with a simple conservatism. On the contrary, purchasing-power advocates made some of the most statist and pro-labor policy proposals within the New Deal, and they were on the forefront of industrial unionism. Indeed, the primary architect of the AFL's economic analysis of wages and productivity in the 1920s, Jürgen Kuczynski, had close (albeit carefully concealed) ties to the Communist Party.⁶⁰

Although both the purchasing-power thesis and the New Deal coalition proved more fragile than proponents had hoped, the transformations in union strategies should nevertheless be seen as logical responses to the constraints and opportunities facing the American labor movement in the early twentieth century. At the turn-of-the century, the living-wage ‘principle’ had justified unionization and union action, but the latter relied for its effectiveness on economic power manifest through strikes and collective bargaining. The AFL quickly learned that political protection was necessary to defend and expand that economic power, but in turn, this required a closer link between the principles advocated and the wages demanded, a bond forged most tightly in arbitration hearings. The inability of living-wage arguments to win substantial benefits for skilled union workers – due to the all-too-clear subjectivity inherent in the formation of high-level standard budgets – necessitated a search for new principles and underpinned the success of underconsumption theories. The road to the political economy of the New Deal was not paved by the triumph of the nineteenth-century, living-wage argument but by its failure.

The story of the living wage in early twentieth-century America therefore illustrates the limitations of consumption as a driving force behind progressive labor reform and union action. A desire for ‘more’, to borrow one of Samuel Gompers’ favorite slogans, may have been a valuable rallying cry for unions.⁶¹ Yet, in a democratic system the establishment of minimally acceptable living conditions succeeds only by social consensus, and that consensus has proven much easier to achieve at a (relatively speaking) low end of the economic spectrum. As a result, ‘more’ only became an effective argument for higher wages among skilled workers once those demands were linked to the pursuit of broader economic prosperity through underconsumptionist analyses. Far from being the social right that Gompers had envisioned, by the mid-1930s calls for increased working-class consumption rested heavily on justifications provided by economic analysis, and over the next two decades union leaders would learn just how fickle an ally economics could be.

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Notes

1. On consumption-based labor activism in the nineteenth century, see Glickman, *Living Wage*; Currarino, ‘The Politics of “More”’, 17–36. On contemporary campaigns, see Luce, ‘Rebirth of the Living Wage Movement’, 401–409, and a major website: <http://www.livingwagecampaign.org/>.
2. Glickman, for example, posits the triumph of a middle-class version of the ‘living wage’: Glickman, *Living Wage*, 131–156. Ellen Mutari provides a more general articulation of the social-group perspective in her

- analysis of New Deal minimum wage legislation: Mutari, 'Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938', 408–416; Mutari, 'Brothers and Breadwinners', 129–148.
3. Glickman, *Living Wage*, 155. On changing attitudes towards consumption during this period, see Horowitz, *Morality of Spending*, 134–165; Cohen, *Making a New Deal*; Donahue, *Freedom from Want*, 115–275; Jacobs, *Pocketbook Politics*, 53–175.
 4. Gompers, 'A Minimum Living Wage', 25; Glickman, *Living Wage*, 61–91.
 5. Gompers, 'A Minimum Living Wage', 25.
 6. Glickman, 'Inventing the "American Standard"', 221–235; Glickman, *Living Wage*, 9–91; Currarino, 'The Politics of "More"', 17–36.
 7. Chapin, *The Standard of Living*, 3–21; Douglas, 'Description of Standards of Living', 272–287; Nystrom, *Economic Principles of Consumption*, 215–226; Williams and Zimmerman, *Studies of Family Living*; Horowitz, *Morality of Spending*; Bulmer, Bales and Sklar, eds., *The Social Survey in Historical Perspective, 1880–1940*; Bateman, 'Making a Righteous Number', 57–85.
 8. Ryan, *A Living Wage*; Gorrell, *Age of Social Responsibility*, 100–114. Hammond, 'Judicial Interpretation of the Minimum Wage in Australia', 268–269; Lauck, *New Industrial Revolution*, 93–94.
 9. Leonard, 'Protecting Family and Race', 757–791; Power, 'Parasitic Industries Analysis', 61–78.
 10. On the early history of the Massachusetts bureau, see Leiby, *Carroll Wright*. On the 1875 study, see Massachusetts Bureau of Statistics of Labor, *Sixth Annual Report*, 193, 358–359, 380, 447–450; McClymer, 'How to Read Wright', 37–43; Anderson, 'Standards, Statuses, and Statistics', 4–12.
 11. Dubofsky, *The State & Labor in Modern America*, 38. Montgomery, *Fall of the House of Labor*, 4–6, 257–264; Wunderlin, *Visions of a New Industrial Order*, 27–45; Furner, 'The Republican Tradition and the New Liberalism', 214–218, 228–230.
 12. Montgomery, *Fall of the House of Labor*, 257–329; Dubofsky, *The State & Labor in Modern America*, 37–52. On the problems for reform raised by federalism, see Graebner, 'Federalism in the Progressive Era', 331–357; Berkowitz and McQuaid, *Creating the Welfare State*, 39–51; Gordon, *New Deals*, 14–29.
 13. Adams, *Age of Industrial Violence*; Wunderlin, *Visions of a New Industrial Order*, 95–129; Dubofsky, *The State & Labor in Modern America*, 52–60; Furner, 'Social Scientists and the State', 177–181; Fink, 'Expert Advice', 183–213.
 14. Montgomery, *Fall of the House of Labor*, 365–366; Marot, *American Labor Unions*, 29–47.
 15. Marot, *American Labor Unions*, 37; Lecht, *Railway Labor Legislation*, 19–24; Dixon, 'Public Regulation of Railway Wages', 258–260.
 16. On the need for a greater judicial character to arbitrations, combined with expert analysis and scientific study, see Stockett, *Determination of Railway Wages*, xiii–xxv, esp. xiii; Dixon, 'Public Regulation of Railway Wages', 260–269. On Lauck, see Fink, *Progressive Intellectuals*, 214–241.
 17. Stockett, *Determination of Railway Wages*, 54–76.
 18. Bureau of Applied Economics, *Standards of Living*, 7–8; National Industrial Conference Board, *Family Budgets of American Wage-Earners*, 75. For representative classifications of standard budgets, see Douglas, 'Description of Standards of Living', 286; Nystrom, *Economic Principles of Consumption*, 300–301.
 19. Reeder, *The National War Labor Board*; Lauck, *New Industrial Revolution*, 42–50; Conner, *The National War Labor Board*; Dubofsky, *The State & Labor in Modern America*, 61–74.
 20. McCartin, *Labor's Great War*, 90–91.
 21. Hotchkiss and Seager, 'History of the Shipbuilding Labor Adjustment Board', 15.
 22. Reeder, *The National War Labor Board*, 33; Ogburn, *Memorandum on the Minimum Wage*; Lauck, *New Industrial Revolution*, 47–50; Conner, *The National War Labor Board*, 50–67. NWLB Executive minutes, 10, 24, 25, & 26 July 1918, boxes 1–2, Records of the NWLB, RG 2, National Archives, College Park, MD. Overall, the war raised rates for unskilled labor more than for union workers: Douglas, *Real Wages*, 138–139, 182–183.
 23. National Industrial Conference Board, *Family Budgets of American Wage-Earners*, 78–84; Soule, *Wage Arbitration*, 158–219; Lauck, *New Industrial Revolution*, 62–66. Ogburn, 'Measurement of the Cost of Living', 110–122; Ogburn, 'The Standard-of-Living Factor', 118–128.
 24. On the Labor Bureau, see Jacobs, *Pocketbook Politics*, 75–77, and arbitration cases in Soule, *Wage Arbitration*.
 25. 'Labor, Its Grievances, Protests, and Demands', *American Federationist*, January 1920, 36. James C. Young, 'What is a Worker's Living Wage?' *New York Times*, 19 November 1922, 105.
 26. Lauck, *New Industrial Revolution*, 95–122; Carr, 'Cost-of-Living Figures', 314–320.

27. National Industrial Conference Board, *Family Budgets of American Wage-Earners*, 2, 59, 86, *et passim*; Stecker, 'Family Budgets and Wages', 454–462; Stecker, 'Wage Studies of the National Industrial Conference Board', 262–263. Cf. Rosewater, 'Wages, Budgets, Cost of Living', 660.
28. US Commissioner of Labor, *Seventh Annual Report*, 859–860; Anderson, 'Standards, Statuses, and Statistics', 4–12.
29. Kyrk, *Economic Problems of the Family*, 194–203; Williams and Zimmerman, *Studies of Family Living*, 39–59. Indeed, today the poverty thresholds published by the US Census Bureau are extrapolated from the cost of a minimum food budget (the threshold is three times the cost of the food budget).
30. Majority opinion and supporting opinion, US Railroad Labor Board (1922), as quoted in Soule, *Wage Arbitration*, 236–237; Feis, *Principles of Wage Settlement*, 163–164.
31. Ogburn, 'The Standard-of-Living Factor', 126.
32. Bureau of Applied Economics, *Standards of Living*, 15. Cf. Ogburn, 'Measurement of the Cost of Living', 118–119.
33. US Bureau of Labor Statistics, 'Tentative Quantity–Cost Budget', 1686–1693; US Bureau of Labor Statistics, 'Minimum Quantity Budget', 1307–1324. For examples of union reliance on the BLS budgets, see National Industrial Conference Board, *Family Budgets of American Wage-Earners*, 46–48; Soule, *Wage Arbitration*, 16–83 (*passim*), 145, 162. During the war, the BLS had worked closely with Lauck and Ogburn on a major survey of family expenditures conducted at the behest of the NWLB that helped to shape the bureau's postwar 'health and decency' budget. Goldberg and Moye, *First Hundred Years*, 104–106.
34. US Bureau of Labor Statistics, 'Minimum Quantity Budget', 1307; US Bureau of Labor Statistics, 'Tentative Quantity–Cost Budget', 1687.
35. On the bureau's struggles with standard budgets, see Goldberg and Moye, *First Hundred Years*, 105–106, 158–159, 198–199, 233–234. Quotation from then-BLS commissioner Geoffrey Moore in 1969, included in Goldberg and Moye, 233.
36. For an optimistic assessment, see Bureau of Applied Economics, *Standards of Living*, 10. Lauck, despite a concerted attempt at positive spin, could not hide the reality that all major arbitration decisions denied the minimum comfort standard: Lauck, *New Industrial Revolution*, 53–76, 124–151.
37. Higgins, *A New Province for Law and Order*, 135–136; Douglas, *Wages and the Family*, 171–183.
38. US Bureau of Labor Statistics, 'Tentative Quantity–Cost Budget', 23. Cf. Kyrk, *Economic Problems of the Family*, 203–204.
39. Feis, *Principles of Wage Settlement*, 169; Hohman, 'Use of Cost-of-Living Figures', 529.
40. Dubofsky, *The State & Labor in Modern America*, 93–95; Lecht, *Railway Labor Legislation*, 42–43.
41. National Industrial Conference Board, *Family Budgets of American Wage-Earners*, 86.
42. Cf. National Industrial Conference Board, *The Cost of Living among Wage Earners in Fall River*. In total, the NICB published eight regional and city surveys conducted between 1919 and 1922, all with similar titles. For comparisons with other standard budget studies in this period, see Douglas, 'Description of Standards of Living', 280–282; Nystrom, *Economic Principles of Consumption*, 300–301; Kyrk, *Economic Problems of the Family*, 206–207.
43. National Industrial Conference Board, *Family Budgets of American Wage-Earners*, 34, 50.
44. Evans Clark, 'Labor takes a new view of wages', *New York Times*, 18 October 1925.
45. Feis et al., 'The Consuming Power of Labor', 81–83; Jacobs, *Pocketbook Politics*, 81–83.
46. Bleaney, *Underconsumption Theories*; Maclachlan, 'The Ricardo–Malthus Debate', 563–574.
47. Currarino, 'The Politics of "More"', 22–30.
48. Gompers, 'A Minimum Living Wage', 26.
49. Nineteenth-century union discussions typically treated savings as withdrawals from the market, ignoring the reintroduction of those funds as capital investment which would require the production of capital goods and hence the payment of additional wages. An excellent example of this oversight is the 1901 story 'Economy that proved disastrous' from the *American Federationist*, retold in Currarino, 'The Politics of "More"', 27–30.
50. Richmond, 'John A. Hobson: Economic Heretic', 283–294; Backhouse, 'Hobson as Macroeconomic Theorist', 116–136.
51. Chandler, *Visible Hand*, 456–463; Barber, *From New Era to New Deal*, 15–22, 53–58; Leach, *Land of Desire*, 349–378; Gordon, *New Deals*, 35–45; Wells, 'Remapping America', 291–304, 314–335; Jacobs, *Pocketbook Politics*, 84–87.
52. Cf. Clark, 'Economics and Modern Psychology I', 1–30; Mitchell, 'Quantitative Analysis', 1–12. On institutional economics more generally, see Rutherford, 'Understanding Institutional Economics: 1918–1929', 277–308. For institutionalist projects related to consumption, see Smith, 'Robert Lynd and

- Consumerism', 99–101; Alchon, *The Invisible Hand of Planning*; Stapleford, 'Market Visions', 421–425. President's Conference on Unemployment. Committee on Recent Economic Changes, *Recent Economic Changes in the United States*; President's Research Committee on Social Trends, *Recent Social Trends in the United States*.
53. Alchon, *The Invisible Hand of Planning*; Leach, *Land of Desire*, 358–372; Wells, 'Remapping America', 99–123, 129–145, 311–335.
 54. Feis et al., 'The Consuming Power of Labor', 78–88. On underconsumptionist arguments in the 1920s, including the connection to institutional economics, see Critchlow, *The Brookings Institution*, 64–81, 117–124; Dorfman, *The Economic Mind in American Civilization*, 570–579; Barber, *From New Era to New Deal*, 54–58; Jacobs, *Pocketbook Politics*, 75–84.
 55. Lauck, *New Industrial Revolution*; Barber, *From New Era to New Deal*, 27–30; Fraser, 'The "Labor Question"', 59–62; Gordon, *New Deals*, 35–45; Jacobs, *Pocketbook Politics*, 75–76, 84–92.
 56. Labor Bureau, 'The Skilled Workers' Budget', 1–2. 'Economic Statistics', *American Federationist*, May 1930, 591–597.
 57. Fraser, 'The "Labor Question"', 68–71; Brinkley, *End of Reform*, 70–85, 94–105, 124–131; Jacobs, *Pocketbook Politics*, 79, 95–104, 136–164.
 58. Stecker, *Intercity Differences in Costs of Living*, xii–xiv.
 59. Paulsen, *A Living Wage*, 82–130, 153; Mutari, 'Brothers and Breadwinners', 129–148.
 60. Lichtenstein, 'From Corporatism to Collective Bargaining', 122–152; Lichtenstein, *The Most Dangerous Man in Detroit*, 220–247. Steve Fraser has also seen greater continuity in the labor movement's engagement with economic analysis and business self-interest: Fraser, 'The "Labor Question"', 59–62, 67–78. For examples of politicized working-class consumption, see Cohen, *Making a New Deal*; Frank, *Purchasing Power*; Glickman, *Living Wage*; Glickman, 'The Strike in the Temple of Consumption', 99–128; Jacobs, *Pocketbook Politics*. On Kuczynski and the AFL, see Linder, *Labor Statistics and Class Struggle*, 13–25.
 61. Reed, *The Labor Philosophy of Samuel Gompers*, 11–13.

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