



# The Ford Hunger March: Five Martyrs for Justice

By JIM PITA

In the dark days of the Great Depression, unemployment in Detroit was nearly 50 percent, even higher among black workers. Families that couldn't pay their rent or mortgages were losing their homes and facing eviction. A local physician reported that there were up to four deaths a day in which malnutrition played a role.

The grim conditions led many workers to form Unemployed Councils to press for relief. Homeless workers slept in downtown Detroit's Grand Circus Park where, as organizer Joe Billups recalled, people spoke at all hours raising the issue of unemployment insurance. "Work or bread" was the slogan," he said.

On March 6, 1932, a racially mixed crowd of workers filled a hall on Detroit's Woodward Ave. to hear organizer and Communist Party leader William Z. Foster call for a demonstration. The next day, March 7, three thousand workers set out from several locations to converge at Fort and Oakwood Streets on Detroit's far-west side. Their intention was to continue to the Ford River Rouge plant in Dearborn, where the number of jobs had dropped from 128,000 to 37,000 between 1929 and 1932, even as Henry Ford was maintaining that there was plenty of work for anyone who wanted a job. The event became known as the Ford Hunger March.

Metro Detroit was in the midst of a cold snap as the marchers took off, some of them even being waved off by Detroit Mayor Frank Murphy as they left downtown Detroit. When they reached the Fort Street Bridge at Fort and Oakwood, march leaders provided instructions — be loud but be peaceful — as the marchers prepared to walk to the employment office at the Ford Rouge plant.

At about 1:30 p.m., the marchers crossed the bridge and moved north along Miller Road. The objective was to accompany a team of activists who intended to deliver a list of demands to Henry Ford.

A contingent of Detroit police officers was deployed to assure order was maintained within Detroit city limits. The police peeled off as the march



**Above, jobless workers and their supporters rally before marching to the Ford Rouge Plant on March 6, 1932.**

**Right, demonstrators scatter after being attacked by Ford security guards. Five men died as a result.**

**Top, a poster announces a public meeting to investigate the attack on the Ford Hunger March.**



reached the Dearborn city limits. A line of Dearborn police blocked Miller Road and ordered the marchers to turn back. They did not, and crossed into Dearborn, pushing the police line back. The police responded with tear gas, but the wind blew the gas back into their ranks. Firefighters positioned on the pedestrian overpass at the Ford plant sprayed the approaching marchers with high-pressure hoses.

The event then took a tragic turn. Ford security agents opened gunfire on the crowd. Four men died of their wounds that day; a fifth died three months later. Dozens were wounded.

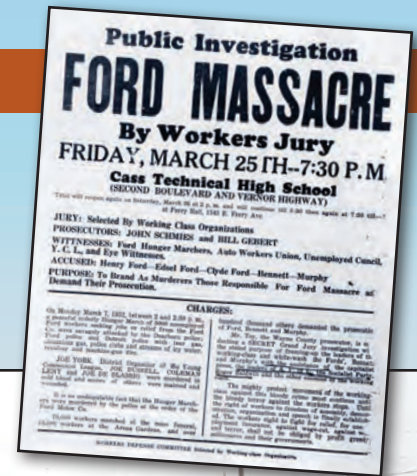
The victims ranged in age from 17 to 37. They were: **Joe York**, 20, a leader in the Young Communist League; **Joe DeBlasio**, 31, an Italian-American immigrant active with the Detroit Unemployed Councils; **Joe Bussell**, 17, a high-school student and Young Communist League member; **Kalman Leny**, 27, unemployed; and **Curtis Williams**, 37, an unemployed autoworker and Communist Party member.

All but Williams were buried in Wood-

mere Cemetery in Detroit in the shadow of the Ford Rouge plant. Williams, an African American who died three months later, was denied burial in the cemetery because he was black. His comrades then said they would bury him in Detroit's Grand Circus Park, but police stopped them as they were digging up concrete for a grave. Instead, they planned to cremate him and scatter his ashes from an airplane over the Rouge plant.

Some fifty years later, a team of labor activists found the victims' gravesites, marked only by small brass markers in an overgrown part of the cemetery. They persuaded UAW Local 600's retiree chapter to pay for headstones for the four, as well as for a fifth honoring Curtis Williams.

Today, one can visit Woodmere Cemetery and find the graves in block 18 of the Fernwood section. At Fort and Denmark Streets, near the Fort Street Bridge, work is underway to build a neighborhood park that will have a memorial to the Hunger Marchers, a few yards away from where they gathered on that chilly day in 1932.



Photos: Walter P. Reuther Library