

## READING 2: MINORITIES DURING THE GREAT DEPRESSION

The Great Depression was a period in American history that saw the collapse of the U.S. economy, a rapid closure of factories, and a lack of goods and food production, all resulting in widespread hardships for virtually all Americans. Beginning with the stock market crash in October 1929, which wiped out millions of dollars in investments, the United States entered an era marked by extreme poverty and joblessness.

As unemployment swept through the United States, hostility toward immigrant and minority workers grew. African Americans were hit especially hard with unemployment. By 1932, approximately half of all African Americans were out of work. During the '30s, many African Americans worked domestic and low-paying jobs as bellmen, waiters, farm workers, gardeners, and servants. Racial discrimination, already prevalent, became even more apparent toward African Americans and immigrants as the competition and pressure to find any type of work intensified for everyone. In Northern cities, citizens often demanded that African Americans be fired from jobs if whites were willing to work them.

In the South, many African-American farmers were sharecroppers—renting land from landowners in return for a portion of the harvested crop. During the Great Depression, sharecroppers fell into debt, as did many other farmers. Lynching and discrimination increased in the South as well. Many African-American sharecroppers migrated north. By 1940, it was estimated that 1.75 million African Americans had migrated from the South to Northern cities.

The 1930s also saw a rise in activism by African Americans. In Chicago, for example, boycotts and protests organized against department stores that refused to hire African Americans resulted in 2,000 jobs restored to African-American workers. Traditionally, African Americans had voted Republican, because it was the party of Abraham Lincoln. In the '30s, they organized around Democratic candidate Franklin Roosevelt, who offered job creation and equal opportunity for more jobs for all Americans.

In the West, the migration of farmers from the Great Plains states, which had been stricken by a period of severe drought and dust storms known as the “Dust Bowl,” forced many Mexican-American workers out of migrant farm jobs. About 400,000 Mexican Americans were forced to move to Mexico in the 1930s, many against their will. Like African Americans, Mexican Americans were asked to leave their migrant labor jobs so that white farmers could fill them. President Roosevelt created the Farm Security Administration to aid migrant workers with safe and habitable migrant camps. In the FSA migrant camps, Mexican-American laborers began to organize their fellow workers around issues of migrant working conditions and pay. These early efforts became the foundation for more organized labor movements in future decades.

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