



ALBUM LEAGUE OF THE PHYSICALLY HANDICAPPED'S PROTESTS AGAINST THE WPA (PRIMARY SOURCE LEARNING ACTIVITY)

Album Description

This learning activity uses news articles from the 1930s to learn about protests by the New York City group, League of the Physically Handicapped, against the Works Progress Administration (WPA). These articles provide insight into the group's reasons for protesting, as well as their tactics. Some students might be especially interested in the involvement of women in these protests (in fact, the 1936 sit in was led by a disabled woman). These sources are relevant to the longer history of disabled people and employment as well as disabled people and activism. They can also strengthen lessons on the Great Depression and the New Deal.

*Note: Before starting this exercise, discuss respectful language and historical terms (like crippled) which are considered offensive today. Although the League used "Handicapped" in its title, students should be made aware that the term is considered out-of-date today.

Consider starting with the Observe, Reflect, Question approach to [analyze the newspaper articles](#).

Short background information on the League of the Physically Handicapped is available [here](#). Harry Hopkins led the Works Progress Administration (WPA), Federal Emergency Relief Administration (FERA), Civil Works Administration (CWA).

Potential Discussion Questions

1. What surprised you in these articles?
2. What tactics did the League of the Physically Handicapped use to try to accomplish their goals?
3. What did the League of the Physically Handicapped want?
 1. Why do you think the League asked for jobs instead of home relief (direct financial aid from the government)?
 2. What can the Leagues' demands tell us about Americans' changing relationship with the government during the Great Depression?
4. What assumptions about disabled people did these protesters challenge?
5. What conclusions can we draw from the fact that these protests spanned from 1935 to 1937?
6. *If students have learned about the 1918 Rehabilitation Act:* What do these protests tell us about the effectiveness of the post-World War I rehabilitation model for employing disabled people? In other words, what were some of the limits of that model?

If you'd like to do a deeper dive on this topic, there are a few longer news articles you could use (I linked them in the teacher notes of "Crippled Jobless Besiege Hopkins' Office" photo). You could also look at this 10-page ["Thesis on Conditions of Physically Handicapped"](#) that the League sent to President Roosevelt and Hopkins in 1936.

This source set can be put into conversation with:

-sources on the Rehabilitation Act of 1918 (see album)

-general lessons on the Great Depression (including FDR's celebration of work and other 1930s protests aimed at the government)

SIX CRIPPLES PICKET PU

SIX CRIPPLES PICKET PUBLIC WELFARE OFFICE

Declare They Will Stay Without
Food Until Officials Grant
Interviews.

By the Associated Press.

NEW YORK, May 30.—Six adults crippled by infantile paralysis—three of them women—picketed the office of the Public Welfare Administration today in what they announced was a hunger strike.

The delegation, members of the League for the Unemployed Physically Handicapped, slept last night on desk tops and office chairs.

They said they would stay in the office without food until granted an interview by Oswald W. Knauth, head of the administration, or Dr. John Gambs, chief examiner of the Department of Public Welfare. They are demanding employment, and not home relief.

(G STAR, MAY 30 1935).JPG

Reference Link: <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn83045462/1935-05-30/ed-1/seq-2/>

Evening Star, May 30, 1935, p.A-2 (article located in bottom left above "Traffic Tips")

Alt Text

Six Cripples Picket Public Welfare Office

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New York. May 30 – Six adults crippled by infantile paralysis – three of them women – picketed the office of the Public Welfare Administration today in what they announced was a hunger strike.

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CRIPPLED JOBLESS BESIEGE Hopkins' Office (EVENING STAR, MAY 10 1936).JPG



Insisting they would not leave until seeing Administrator Harry L. Hopkins, 23 members of the League of the Physically Handicapped camped out last night in the W. P. A. offices. Coming here from New York by truck, they demanded jobs. Here they are pictured at their midnight lunch.



Photo taken about midnight showing the job seekers as they prepared to bed down for the night. —A. P. Photos.

Teaching Notes:

If you're interested in more sources, this photo accompanies a longer article about the protest.

Page 1: "Cripples Bivouacked in W.P.A. To Await Arrival of Hopkins":
<https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn83045462/1936-05-10/ed-1/seq-1/>

Page 2: "Siege" (article continues under the photos):
<https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn83045462/1936-05-10/ed-1/seq-2/>

Key paragraph in this article (on p.2): "Because the physically handicapped are discriminated against in private industry as well as in work relief, Friedman insisted, they demanded special treatment from the Federal Government: a special quota and a stop to discrimination."

There's also a follow-up article two days later that discusses the results of the protest: "W.P.A. Heads Map Aid for Cripples" (left column): <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn83045462/1936-05-12/ed-1/seq-2/>

Reference Link: <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn83045462/1936-05-10/ed-1/seq-2/>

Evening Star, May 10, 1936, p.A-2

Alt Text



Crippled Jobless Besiege Hopkins' Office

Top black and white photo depicts a group of men and women standing and sitting together, drinking out of paper cups, and talking to each other. A crutch is leaning up against the wall in the background.

Caption: Insisting they would not leave until seeing Administrator Harry L. Hopkins, 33, members of the League of the Physically Handicapped camped out last night in the W.P.A. offices. Coming here from new York by truck, they demanded jobs. Here they are pictured at their midnight lunch.

Bottom black and white photo shows a group of men and women with their eyes closed. Several of the figures are bent over with their heads laying on their arms on a table. One woman is resting her head in her hand with her elbow propped on the table.

Caption: Photo taken about midnight showing the job seekers as they prepared to bed down for the night. - A.P. Photos.

CRIPPLES A

Cripples Ask Aid of Hopkins

25 1936).JPG



Protesting against what they declare to be "discrimination" and an "unsympathetic attitude" on the part of WPA officials, a delegation of 33 New York cripples, representing the League for the Physically Handicapped, journeyed to Washington in an open truck and besieged the office of Federal Relief Administrator Harry Hopkins, to plead for jobs. He told them that if their complaints were justified, which he doubted, the wrong would be rectified.

Reference Link: <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn92073203/1936-06-25/ed-1/seq-2/>

The Skyland Post, June 25, 1936, p.2

Alt Text

Cripples Ask Aid of Hopkins

The black and white photo shows around 20 men and woman gathered on the street. Some of them are standing on the back of the truck and others are standing below on the street holding signs that say "Handicapped People Must Live! We Want Jobs & Security"; "League of the Physically Handicapped"; and "We Want the Promised 5000 Jobs"

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NEW YORK GROUP MAKES JOBS PLEA (EVENING STAR, AUG 14 1937).JPG

NEW YORK GROUP MAKES JOBS PLEA

**Delegates, Many on Crutches,
Ask Aid From
W. P. A.**

A delegation representing the League of Physically Handicapped of New York City pleaded with W. P. A. officials today for special consideration in the allotment of Federal work relief jobs.

The 34 delegates, many of them on crutches or wearing braces, arrived in Washington before dawn today on a bus. They went to the W. P. A. headquarters at 11 a.m. and chose a committee of six which went in for a conference with Dean Brimhall, W. P. A. labor adviser.

The committee members protested alleged discrimination against physically handicapped persons in New York in the placement of relief jobs and current lay-offs. They said that although Col. Brehon V. Somervell, New York City W. P. A. administrator, had promised to give 7 per cent of new job placements to the physically handicapped, this had meant only about one new placement a month.

Members of the committee conferring with Brimhall were Harry Freedman, president of the league; Isadore Shulman, Alice Miller, Louis Ruzzier, Hyman Abramowitz and Louis Wexler.

Reference Link: <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn83045462/1937-08-14/ed-1/seq-9/>

Evening Star, Aug 14, 1937, p.A-9 (article is towards top of third column from the right)

Alt Text

New York Group Makes Jobs Plea

Delegates, Many on Crutches, Ask Aid from W.P.A.

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Teaching Notes:

Ellie - This is my favorite of your excellent albums to date! I am so happy to see these materials getting wider use.

I would add questions to the inquiry:

- What other groups were staging sit-ins in the 1930s?
- How do these stories change the common narrative that disability activists first began direct action tactics such as sit-ins in the 1970s in the wake of Civil Rights Movement and Antiwar protests?

A tribute to [Paul Longmore](#), San Francisco State University, who conducted the research on the League of the Physically Handicapped that you provide the link to. See the excellent resources at the [Longmore Institute](#).



Teaching Notes:

Let me add that I hope these albums inspire teachers to join the pilot of the free Reform to Equal Rights: K-12 Disability History Curriculum that Emerging America is piloting this fall. We are developing the curriculum with support from a Library of Congress TPS grant.

There is an orientation to the draft curriculum on September 28 from 4-5pm. [Sign up here for the orientation and for the pilot.](#)