A Social History of the Unemployed in Adelaide during the Great Depression.

Ray Broomhill

Submitted for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy, Department of History, University of Adelaide.

December 1975
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Summary                                        ii
Acknowledgements                               iv
List of Tables                                 v
Abbreviations                                  vi

* * *

Introduction                                  1

* * *

Unemployment in Adelaide

1. The Extent of Unemployment                  14
2. The Distribution of Unemployment

*  

Personal and Social Effects of Unemployment

3. Men Without Work                            67
4. The Long-Unemployed                         99

*  

The Material Standard of Welfare of the Unemployed

5. On the Dole                                 135
6. Getting By                                  170
7. Shelter                                    195

*  

The Single Unemployed and Dissent

8. The Single Unemployed                       241
9. Political Consciousness and Dissent         269

*  

Epilogue                                      285

* * *

Bibliography                                  290
SUMMARY

This is a study of the impact of the Great Depression of the 1930's on those who were unemployed in Adelaide. The focus is upon what unemployment meant to those without work - upon the problems they faced and their responses to those problems. The study is concerned with defining the extent of unemployment and the characteristics of those affected, with the personal and social effects on the individual and with the material impact on the unemployed's standard of living.

The unemployed person faced a continual struggle to find adequate food, shelter, clothing, fuel and other necessities. In Adelaide, not only was the level of unemployment higher than in other states, but the material standard of living of those on the dole was lower. A great many experienced considerable material hardship as a result of inadequate relief provisions and the harsh policies pursued by many of the state and private institutions with which they were forced into contact. The ordering of priorities during the crisis made it clear that the welfare of the individual was generally subordinate to the over-riding concern for political stability, economic orthodoxy and the protection of established financial interests.

Another major aspect of this study is the means by which individual persons managed to survive in the face of these difficulties. In the process of their day-to-day struggle for survival, people often evolved a remarkable resourcefulness and became very skilled at finding simple ways of getting by. However, while the unemployed shared many problems in common there existed a considerable diversity in their experiences and in their responses to those experiences. In certain cases, their suburb of living was important since in some
working-class areas of Adelaide a real sense of community existed which provided support for the individual in distress. Important also was the person's class, status and family situation prior to his unemployment and the length of time he was unemployed. Many remained without work for several years and as the Depression lengthened it became evident that those who remained unemployed faced an increasingly more hostile environment as the remainder of society returned to "normality".

An important concern of the study is to explain the relative political quiescence of the unemployed. Those who were without work did not, in general, form a cohesive group. Cut off from work they tended to become isolated and apathetic. The series of extremely humiliating experiences which followed often destroyed the unemployed person's self-confidence. As a result, the dominant response, particularly in the case of the long-term unemployed person was one of resignation and fatalistic acceptance of his situation. A certain number did not accept their situation and continued to struggle and resist the forces which threatened to overcome them. As a result of their passivity and resignation, the majority of the unemployed, however, were not inclined to become involved in political activity and, at best, sought personal rather than political methods of overcoming their problems. What political dissent that existed came mainly from single men who occupied the public-unemployed camps. Even with this group, however, political activity was limited to small demonstrations centred around minor grievances. Basically the unemployed were politically powerless and the state eventually had no trouble in dispelling any threat to "social order".