Hunting for dangerous subversives after the Memorial Day clash, Chicago police gave Harry Harper the shakedown. As hospital personnel stripped him of his clothing, the bloodied and disoriented steelworker heard the officers ordering the attendants to “Look for communistic literature.” Searching his wallet, they would have found nothing more than an identification card with a request to notify a priest in case of an accident.\(^1\) That would have done little to impede the pursuit of red agitators. Neither would the fact that Lupe Marshall’s purse contained a notice of the march but not a single treatise on violent revolution. Determined to impugn the motives of the marchers, the authorities and the steel companies launched a red scare that rivaled the Haymarket hysteria of 1886.

In this case, however, the reaction was aimed not only at organized labor but at its patrons in Washington. Meanwhile, SWOC waited for the Roosevelt administration to intervene. The steelworkers’ anguish was matched only by their trust in the benevolence of Franklin D. Roosevelt. “Sometime ago I wrote to you about losing our home and you saved it through the HOLC,” wrote Mrs. Ralph Barker of Warren, Ohio. “That was just before the election and to show you that we appreciated it we got out and worked for the President and now we are in more trouble.” With her husband still on strike after eight weeks, Mrs. Barker worried that they would lose their home. “We thought the President would step in and settle it as he has always believed in unions….Isn’t there something that the President can do that they will have to take the old men back[?]”\(^2\) The sinking idealism was all too
evident. Confronted by hostile public officials, subjected to an expanding red scare, and faced with a united front of steel companies unwilling to budge, the steelworkers appealed to the federal government for assistance and justice. Steadily, the union moved from a strategy of mass protests to fawning reliance on the Roosevelt administration. It did not bode well for the achievement of industrial democracy. It was the beginning of a larger test of leadership, and not just that of the president.

While the families of the missing marchers “clamored at the doors” of the local hospitals, “some of them hysterical as they tried in vain to push past police guards,” Governor Henry Horner called an emergency meeting at the Southmooor Hotel in South Chicago. Only hours after the disastrous march, CIO Regional Director Van Bittner met with Chicago’s political establishment. SWOC staff worker Sam Evett attended as did Nick Fontecchio. It soon became clear that the meeting was designed to pressure Bittner and the CIO into submission. Republic Steel Plant Manager James L. Hyland, U.S. Attorney Michael Igoe, Assistant U.S. District Attorney Warren Canaday, Captain John Prendergast, Captains Mooney and Kilroy, as well as Federal Labor Conciliator Robert Pilkington and State Director of Labor Martin Durkin also attended the meeting. None of the ground-level SWOC leaders were included, nor were any American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) lawyers or representatives of religious organizations that might have been sympathetic to labor. Closely tied to the Chicago Federation of Labor, which represented the interests of the craft union–oriented AFL, State Director of Labor Durkin could hardly be considered sympathetic to the CIO.3

If that were not enough, the governor also permitted three members of the Steel Workers’ Union of America, an organization loyal to Republic Steel, to attend the conference. Claiming that they represented a majority of workers, the union leaders insisted that their position should be represented in any peace settlement. Bittner dismissed the organization as a company union, but their appearance at the conference gave them a degree of legitimacy that only eroded the SWOC position. It was also at this meeting that Chief of Uniformed Police John Prendergast took Van Bittner aside and tried to convince him that the average police officer empathized with industrial workers. “None of us were born with a silver spoon in our mouth,” Prendergast told the CIO director. The captain failed to mention that none of the police were born Croatian, Serbian, Italian, or Mexican, and only a very few were African American. Chicago police officers hailed from the same