



Killing the Poormaster: A Saga of Poverty, Corruption, and Murder in the Great Depression

Holly Metz

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On February 25, 1938, in the early days of the welfare system, the reviled poormaster Harry Barck—wielding power over who would receive public aid—died from a paper spike thrust into his heart. Barck was murdered, the prosecution would assert, by an unemployed mason named Joe Scutellaro. In denying Scutellaro money, Barck had suggested the man’s wife prostitute herself on the streets rather than ask the city of Hoboken, New Jersey, for aid. The men scuffled. Scutellaro insisted that Barck fell on his spike; the police claimed he grabbed the spike and stabbed Barck.

News of the poormaster’s death brought national attention to the plight of ten million unemployed living in desperate circumstances. A team led by celebrated attorney Samuel Leibowitz of “Scottsboro Boys” fame worked to save Scutellaro from the electric chair, arguing that the jobless man’s struggle with the poormaster was a symbol of larger social ills. The trial became an indictment “of a system which expects a man to live, in this great democracy, under such shameful circumstances.”

We live in a time where the issues examined in *Killing the Poormaster*—massive unemployment, endemic poverty, and the inadequacy of public assistance—remain vital. With its insight into our social contract, *Killing the Poormaster* reads like today’s news.

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