For many Chicagoans—at least for the 65 percent of the city’s electorate who had cast their ballots for Franklin Roosevelt’s re-election—1937 started on a note of cautious optimism. Although the Great Depression continued to exact a heavy toll, FDR’s second term offered the possibility of expanded New Deal reforms that might help the region and its residents move toward better times.

Works Progress Administration (WPA) funds already paid artists to practice their crafts and researchers to survey the city. Public Works Administration (PWA) projects provided jobs and new housing. PWA funding and employees contributed to the Metropolitan Sanitary District’s effort to upgrade the region’s sewage system. Federal funds were also helping to improve the city’s transportation network, from Lake Shore Drive to the expansion of Municipal Airport to accommodate larger passenger planes. Perceived governmental support helped to revitalize the labor movement, as workers, sometimes crossing racial boundaries, organized for better wages and working conditions.

Early in the year, strikes among electrical workers and taxi drivers left the city dark and still. Groups as diverse as the Chicago Tunnel Transport workers, the employees of Fan-Steel and the Chicago Mail Order Company, and the waitresses at de Met’s Tea Rooms staged sit-down strikes to achieve their goals. On Memorial Day, the entire nation was shocked when police injured...
90 strikers and killed four at a march targeted at Republic Steel. Unionization efforts spread and some unions, like the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, succeeded in gaining recognition and concessions from their employers.

FDR’s decision to cut federal spending in response to improved economic conditions early in the year plunged Chicago and the nation into recession as the year waned. Unemployment climbed as federal jobs disappeared and businesses faltered, returning Chicago families to the frightening levels of need experienced in 1929–1930. Relief requests increased so sharply that payments had to be reduced to well below what the state had determined was necessary for a minimum standard of living. The impact on already suffering communities such as the African American neighborhoods where unemployment had previously reached as high as 50 percent was devastating.

By October, when Roosevelt came to Chicago to celebrate the completion of Lake Shore Drive and, belatedly, the centenary of the city’s incorporation, politicians and voters were acutely aware of the need for solutions to end the depression. Few, however, fully appreciated the relevance of the president’s topic that day: the threat to world peace posed by certain nations. The war he talked about avoiding would eventually break the depression and move Chicago, the region, the country, and the world in new directions.

Janice L. Reiff

May: FDR signs Neutrality Act
June: Illinois passes law providing unemployment insurance
July: Japanese and Chinese troops clash in North China, begin undeclared war; Farm Security Administration created
September: National Housing Act signed; Chicago Housing Authority created soon thereafter