

THE LAND OF "MAKE BELIEVE"

By Harry Gunnison Brown

America is, in some degree, a land of formulas, pretense and "make believe." Blue laws, though seldom or never enforced during perhaps a hundred years, have nevertheless been left on the statute books for generations. The prejudiced groups which believed in them have apparently enjoyed a certain moral satisfaction from knowing that the laws were in existence—when they have bothered to think about the matter at all—and so have been ready to oppose their repeal. No doubt mere inertia has played its part, but it is probable that fear of prejudiced groups has been influential in preventing legislators from repealing these laws anything like as soon as they otherwise would have done. Prohibition, whatever might be its benefits if effectively enforced, developed the trades of the bootlegger and the hijacker and was notoriously evaded and violated. Yet there were, to the last, many enthusiasts for prohibition who apparently had a sense of victory and moral satisfaction from the mere presence of such a law on the statute books, regardless of how little it was adhered to in practice.

I have it on what I believe good authority, that the union carpenters of one of our largest cities—and conditions must obviously be the same in other cities—refuse absolutely to entertain the idea of lowering the official union wage rate, notwithstanding the fact that every single one of the union carpenters who is actually employed, is working for less than this standard rate. There is apparently a virtue here, too, in "make believe." I am told, also, that where, in work done for the government, the standard wage rates are required by statute, presumably to satisfy the "labor vote," workers are, to a very large extent, mulcted of this excess of the standard wages over demand-and-supply market wages, by foremen or other hiring agents, to whom they pay rebates for the privilege of getting and keeping their jobs.

This suggests a question as to a possible result of the new wage-hour

law, in so far as wages are fixed above the natural market level. Can such a law be enforced? Will not rebates to foremen and other employers' agents, or other and similar devices, go far to prevent the law's supposedly intended benefits from being received by those who are employed, and will not even its partial enforcement inevitably cause a very large volume of unemployment?

Have we not, in this wage-hour law, another typical case of pretense and "make believe"? Is not Congress just trying to satisfy the superficially-thinking "liberal" and labor groups by assuring them that it has now, in the case of wages, "passed a law about it," thereby "guaranteeing" a fair living to all the wage-earning class? Yet there is no likelihood that the law can be at all fully enforced and there is every reason to believe that its enforcement—even a rather incomplete enforcement—must cause wide-spread unemployment. Or will it show its effects, in part, in a great decrease of interstate business, to which the law applies, and substitute local production for a local market, with consequent small-scale and inefficient methods, and higher prices to con-

sumers along with low wages to workers?

Why don't our legislators consider the land question? Why don't they do something about the land speculation that forces concentration of workers upon smaller space and forces the use of poorer and less well situated land, so necessarily reducing the level of real wages at which men can be employed? Why, in short, do they pass laws which merely pretend to raise wages; while they steadfastly refuse to consider a taxation system which would make higher wages really possible? Why ignore the fact that taxes on the various goods and services workers must buy, now take from these workers a substantial part of their wages, while the untaxing of land makes land expensive for business and for homes, breeds tenancy, and reduces the productivity of labor? Does our boasted free education leave our people as fundamentally unintelligent and as susceptible to "make believe" as if they had no education at all? And will it therefore continue to be the case that success in politics flows, not from real understanding and not from getting at the causes of our economic evils and seeking to remove these causes, but from pretense and plausible quackery and "make believe"?