

Self-Help for Jobless Sinbads

By W. D. Hoffman

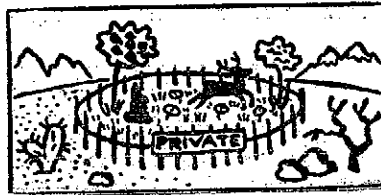
"Make Jobs or Perish," warns the title page of a booklet just reprinted from Survey Graphic, written by J. Russell Smith, professor of economic geography at Columbia University. It adds: "This is the story of a group of people in Richmond, Va., and the way in which they have faced the facts of unemployment. In their experience this distinguished economic geographer sees a lesson that America must learn—or else! . . ."

In the Richmond experiment the unemployed united in a self-help group called the Citizens' Service Exchange, formed in January, 1933. It started as a salvaging institution—salvaging materials, salvaging humans. It was found all the members had to offer was work. Each was to put up one week's work of 40 hours for a membership. The first piece of work was repairing an abandoned building; artisans put it in order for the use of the Exchange. Calls went out to the Red Cross to "share what you can spare," especially clothes and shoes. Sixty truckloads came. Another call went out for sewing machines and 23 came. Thus the experiment was put under way.

The chief objectives at the beginning were to furnish unemployed

families with fuel, shelter and clothes. Old trucks were patched up to haul workers out to chop wood (donated) and to haul the wood back. Empty houses were taken for a period of time and reconditioned to pay the rent. The workers were paid for this work in scrip, and the houses were rented to them for scrip. Surplus products from the U. S. Government—hides from slaughtered cattle, wool, etc.—came to the Exchange as donated raw materials. From cobblers to carpenters and seamstresses the enterprise was soon using unemployed barbers, beauticians and the like. One pitiful discovery was that many were "industrial invalids," so long unemployed they could not work at all, or to little advantage.

And how has the Richmond experiment worked? It is still in operation. It has salvaged many on the verge of despair, sent them forth to take jobs in industry. In this it has been worth while. Yet as a self-help unit, standing on its own bottom, it has failed. Financially it is



going further and further into the red. It depends on outside donations—charity. Its support comes in the form of "gifts." In 1936 it was supported chiefly by the Richmond Community Fund (Chest), and the Federal Emergency Relief Administration, about half and half. Tragic as is the fact, it, like most self-help institutions, has solved nothing. Its salvaging operations with old clothes, old shoes and donated cast-offs, has actually reduced the standard of living of its members, forcing them to be satisfied with cast-offs and patch-ups in a land where machinery is disgorging more bright new raiment than can be sold.

Why is this so? Partly, as Prof. Smith concludes, because the self-helps have not been permitted to sell their surplus outside where they would compete with "profit" business. "Probably," he says, "the most significant thing about self-help cooperatives from the industrial viewpoint is that a number of them have succeeded so well that they had to be killed. In a number of cases they have been stopped (assassinated) by the action of the owners of profit businesses who feared the abundance that the self-helpers were producing. This gives us compulsory unemployment in the interest of profits—a new and peculiarly destructive kind

of slavery—more destructive than chattel slavery."

Of course, in an economic order in which the battle for "profits" is so ferocious, there would be resistance to competition from self-helpers in the limited market that now exists. There is so little purchasing power that a dog-eat-dog condition exists everywhere. "Profits" by and large are precarious enough as it is. And what are these "profits"? The return to enterprise, if legitimate—the wages of management. No one can quarrel with these.

But in the term "profits" we have come to associate other elements, as the return to the monopolist, the collector of special privilege-levies of many varieties. "Profit business" is a myth unless we look into its component parts and see wherein the exploitation really lies. Business in the main is on the ragged edge of bankruptcy itself, in about the same position as labor. Both are fighting to survive in a world in which millions cannot buy because they cannot produce wealth (purchasing power). Our bankruptcy statistics show this.

The self-help cooperatives have failed principally because they are locked out of the sources of raw materials. These they must get by meagre donations or not at all. Most of their labor is expended on patchwork or services to one another. Essential wealth they cannot produce in quantity because access is denied to our planetary storehouse. Like the masses of the people, they stand disinherited at the start.

They have no share of ownership in our lumber resources with which to house themselves; our coal and iron beds with which to heat themselves and fashion implements; our cattle, corn and wheat domain with which to feed themselves.

They own no share in our pools of oil from which they could extract fuel to move about, nor any share in our transportation routes, rivers, harbors, terminals. There is no interest in our national resource of falling water, the power sites.

They own no part of the choice focal points of populations in the great cities where all of the people combine by their presence to make trade yield vast ground rentals.

For all of these essential doors of

access to Nature the full yield possible is demanded of them before they can go to work. They are whipped before they begin. They are trying to survive up in the air, without their feet on the ground. They are in the position of the negroes under chattel slavery who might inaugurate self-help among themselves, one mammy baking the corn-bread in return for the weekly washing of the ragged garments of slaves.

And of course they do not have adequate capital, the tools and machinery needed to produce the things our standard of living has given to the few. This capital, too, can only come out of the ground through application of work or brains to Nature.

Self-help? Cooperation? Excel-

lent. But these must go beyond performing services for one another. That may buck up the morale of the dispossessed, mending their rags, shining their re-soled old shoes, barbering their distraught faces, offering social intercourse and cheer. Even misery loves company. Rendering services, however, may delay but will make inevitable the advent of Fascism, which Professor Smith properly fears. One cannot expect the jobless to forswear a comfortable existence forever. When the Earth is locked up, at an excessive fee for access, self-help and cooperation can survive only as all the dispossessed now survive—through the pitifully inadequate donations from the House of Have.