

## THE PROBLEM OF UNEMPLOYMENT

By Lewis H. Berens

The first fact that forces itself upon the attention of the impartial student is that unemployment is not an accidental and temporary, but a continuous and chronic problem. It persists in what are called "good times," and in what are called "bad times," in years of plenty, of expanding industrial and financial activity, as in "the inevitable slump." The unwillingly unemployed, like the poor, we have always with us. Always in our midst we have men and women, aye, and little children, seeking an outlet for their services, but unable to find it, competing and beating down earnings in almost every employment, forming, in fact, that "unemployed margin" and "reserve of labour" without which, as a high authority recently warned us, "the modern system of industry will not work"—and which, consequently, must be removed before another and more equitable system of industry can find room and opportunity to develop in our midst. Surely, the most sad, the most pathetic, the most tragic, the most ominous and threatening spectacle any civilisation, any system of industry, can present, is that of men able, competent and willing to work, but, in the midst of work loudly crying to be done, unable to find work to do, and perishing of want in the midst of plenty, to which their own past labours have often generously contributed. Yet, fluctuating though it may in number and intensity, this is the sight continuously presented to our view. Hence it is that, though other causes, such as change of fashion, illness, and so on, may occasionally act as additional contributing causes, the continuous persistence of unemployment itself must necessarily be attributable to some constantly acting cause, which must be discovered and removed before the evil itself can possibly be removed from our midst.

Some may profess to consider our national policy of Free Trade the cause of the unemployment evil, and consequently suggest a measure of Tariff Reform, or Protection, as the practical remedy. But seeing, as already pointed out, that the same evil persists in countries enjoying the advantages, or disadvantages, of Protection, *e.g.*, Germany and the United States, Free Trade cannot be accepted as the cause or Tariff Reform as offering any practical or permanently effective remedy. Others may attribute the evil to over-population, and suggest emigration as the remedy. But the evil manifests itself in countries of enormous area and boundless resources sparsely peopled by a population of about the number of one of our large towns,—*e.g.*, Canada and the States of Australia. On the other hand, an emigration which has reduced the population by about one-half, has failed to remove the unemployment evil in Ireland. Hence, the facts compel us to reject over-population as the cause, and emigration as any effective remedy. Over-production, due entirely or in part to the use of machinery, may be suggested as the cause. Over-

production, however, might account for all of us having too much wealth and too much leisure; but it cannot be invoked to account for the fact of some of us being unable to produce more wealth for the satisfaction of our own unsatisfied wants. Machinery is a potent factor to produce wealth and leisure, but not poverty and unemployment.

Rejecting, then, as the facts compel us to do, the unwarranted assumptions and unverified conclusions of swift logicians, let us further examine the real evil to be remedied.

What is it for the lack of which the unemployed are suffering? Work? Not a bit of it. What they lack and what they need is that which Nature normally yields, has yielded, and is still ready to yield in abundance at the call of human labour, *viz.*, wealth. It is this the unemployed need, and for the want of which they are perishing and deteriorating in our midst. For wealth consists of material things produced by human labour, and capable of satisfying human wants, ministering to human desires. Give to the unwillingly unemployed, as we already give to the willingly

unemployed, an abundant supply of all such things, without work, and the unemployment evil, as we know it to-day, will vanish, and we shall hear no more of the sufferings of the unemployed. Hence, the real question at issue is as to what prevents the unwillingly unemployed from exercising their own labour to produce such things for themselves without being beholden to anybody, or lessening the wealth already in the possession of others.

Reasoning in the abstract, the problem seems easy of solution, and the effective remedy plain and obvious. As an early English Political Economist well expresses it: "Land is the mother, and labour the father of all wealth." If this concise statement be accepted as true, and few attentive to the subject will venture to deny its truth, then it follows, as a matter of logical necessity, that the unemployment evil, the spectacle of unwillingly unemployed men lacking wealth, though able and competent to draw it forth from its natural

sources, can only be attributed to labour being denied access to land.

Productive work is simply the application of labour to land, or to materials already drawn forth from "this field of all labour and source of all wealth." In other words, productive employment consists in drawing forth from land the raw materials Nature provides, or can by labour be induced to provide, and shaping them in accordance with human desires. Land without labour, to collect its natural fruits, or to make use of its inherent powers, may be useless. But Labour without land is helpless, and must perish for lack of employment, for lack of those very things it could otherwise produce in abundance. If the unemployment evil did not exist, we could at will produce it by withholding from labour the use of the land. Hence, this may be accepted as the cause of the unemployment evil. Conversely, we could at will remove it by securing to labour the use of land. Hence this seems the one practical and permanently effective remedy against the disease of unemployment.



LEWIS H. BERENS, 1855—1913.