

Living on a Surplus

Idle Labor Exchanged for Excess Crops by California Cooperatives

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ON a March morning in 1931 W. T. Birchfield, an old Klondike gold-digger, veteran of the Spanish War, was wandering around the environs of Los Angeles looking for food for his family: A Japanese rancher permitted him to fill his sack from the vegetables rotting on the ground for lack of a market. With his load on his back the old miner hurried home, to share his good luck with his neighbors. Then and there was born the idea which in a few months developed into a well-organized undertaking through which the unemployed of Los Angeles County are striving by cooperation and barter of labor for food to pull themselves out of the demoralizing slough of inadequate relief.

The Unemployed Cooperative Relief Association, child of that first sackful of vegetables, had by mid-October 1932, thirty-one branches in Los Angeles County supplying food to some 120,000 people, with the number of affiliated groups increasing daily. Seven other California counties had effected organizations equally lusty, with state conferences to widen the base of cooperation. Late in the summer the County Food Administrative Council, local division of Governor Rolph's State Council, was cooperating with the already active and vital local units. An appropriation from the Board of Supervisors of Los Angeles County of \$10,000 for gasoline solved many problems, for gasoline is, it appears, about the one indispensable which can't be bartered for in one way or another.

It is not necessary here to follow in detail the course of events by which this movement grew to its present proportions. Throughout it was spontaneous, from the inside out, finding its challenge in the anomaly that able-bodied men should be hungry in a land of plenty. The first group, the Birchfield's neighbors, began by sharing the food collected in sacks. When W. T. Downing, owner of the Compton Moving Company, offered the group the use of an empty warehouse and an idle truck the movement took on form and substance.

This same warehouse at Compton is still the headquarters of Unit No. 1 of the Unemployed Cooperative Relief Association. Just inside the door hangs the sign, "He that does not work let him not eat." But the family that asks for food is fed first, with the work to follow. Three days' work, of three or four hours each, is the measure of food for a family for a week. If a man, after registering, fails to report for three consecutive days his name is dropped from the cooperative.

The day begins at dawn at Unit No. 1. Four secretaries are on the job registering new applicants, recording hours and kinds of work reported by members and checking food orders. Squads of workers with their foremen go out at seven o'clock daily to the tasks assigned to them. Some of these are contact men who scour the countryside for surplus food and arrange the terms of barter by which this surplus may be transferred to the cooperative storehouse. Sometimes the work squads will do general clean-up on a ranch, again they will harvest the best of the crop for the rancher in return for the seconds or thirds.

Here is a sample of the intake of produce at Unit No. 1 on a Saturday morning late in August.

1 crate beets	2 crates lettuce
2 tons cabbage	6 sacks onions
66 boxes celery	39 boxes peaches
4 lugs corn	5 crates radishes
12 boxes carrots	1 sack salt
3 sacks cucumbers	14 lugs tomatoes
70 boxes pears	1 1/4 tons rhubarb
15 sacks potatoes	11 boxes turnips

In this warehouse is an auto-repair shop, a shoe-repair shop, a small printing shop for the necessary slips and forms, and the inevitable woodpile where cast-off railroad ties are sawed into firewood. Down the street, in another building, women are making over clothing that has been bartered in. In another they are canning vegetables and fruit—Boy Scouts of the Burbank Unit brought in empty jars by the wagon-load. In the community kitchen the cooks prepare a midday meal for any members of the local unit who wish it, anywhere from 150 to 200.

Behind the bins of cabbages, oranges, squash, carrots and what-not, and the stack of Red Cross flour in the warehouse a detail of twenty men is piling a truck with oranges to be exchanged at Stockton for a load of potatoes. The use of trucks, obtained by bartered labor, has made possible a system of daily exchange between the units. Fish from San Pedro, citrus fruit from Compton, tomatoes from Wilmington increase the variety of food available at the centers of distribution.

WHILE the chief method of securing supplies is by bartering labor for produce large surpluses have been obtained by donation. The Rivera Fruit Growers and Packers Association donated 500 boxes of oranges to the Compton unit. Knudson's Dairy supplies daily 800 pounds of cottage cheese and 2100 gallons of milk. A twenty-three-acre farm has been lent to this Unit and is under cultivation. The Brea Unit also has the use of a farm. The four leading tire companies of Los Angeles, approached by the Cooperative Association, agreed to donate a quantity of tires. Negotiations are now on with other companies, notably a chain of men's clothing stores, for contributions of unsold stock.

This whole enormous exchange operation runs practically without cash. The total cash expenditure at Compton, Unit No. 1, for the month of September was \$38. Local officers receive no pay and they, like everyone else, are pledged not to sell the food they receive. One officer who broke this pledge is facing a term at San Quentin prison. It is extraordinary how little cash is necessary when there isn't any. Take for instance the matter of telephone calls which would seem to be a legitimate item of expense in so large a business. Not at all. In the first place the Association didn't have any money; in the second it had the bright idea of M. P. Rathborn of Pasadena, a war veteran, who organized the amateur radio broadcasters of the county to make known the surpluses and the needs of local centers.

Not as efficient perhaps as the telephone, but it works.

The rapid multiplication of independent units growing daily more inter-dependent naturally called for the organization of a central county council and for the definition of the aims of the local units. The Los Angeles Council, made up of three delegates from each unit with a forceful and adroit president, C. M. Christoffersen, who in happier days was a building contractor, now has an office in the Daily News Building but holds its weekly meetings at different centers. A meeting in mid-October in a vacant store with the delegates sitting on empty boxes is typical of the virile and effective democracy which prevails. The discussion, lasting nearly four hours, was earnest and vigorous, turbulent at times, but never out of the chairman's control. The agenda included:

Reports of committees dealing with bread, groceries, milk, fish, gasoline, oil and broadcasting.

Disputes regarding the failure of the Fish Committee to secure adequate cooperation with the San Pedro unit in putting fish in cold storage at proffered facilities at Wilmington. Issue of rights of local units vs. central organization fought out. Referred to executive committee.

Proposal to protect against the use of script by some cooperating groups. Heated discussion regarding the scope of activity of the movement. Decision to drop the subject. Principle established of each local representation voting as instructed by its unit.

Recall of vice-president charged with ineffectiveness petitioned by seven units. Debate on procedure. Principle of fair trial before judicial committee established. Matter referred to executive and arbitration committees.

Announcement of dance and concert for unemployed in Los Angeles and at Huntington Park. Unemployed musicians to supply the music.

The purpose and philosophy of the whole movement is clearly set forth in the preamble to the constitution of the State Council:

This organization is formed for the purpose of cooperation of the membership associations and to aid in their work. To observe the laws of the nation, state, and/or community and render all aid possible. To do unto others as you would have done unto you, pass not judgment on anyone or anything without a fair and impartial trial: to protect and assist in maintaining a living wage for all able and willing to work: to protect and assist all existing business establishments, in securing a reasonable return on their investment. To protect and assist in maintaining a reasonable standard of value for our national medium of exchange. To maintain the highest efficient production possible. Conservation of all food and other products now or hereafter permitted to become waste. To sacrifice all personal feelings for the good of the whole. To feed, clothe, and/or otherwise care for the widows, orphans, cripples and other unfortunate non-producers. To trade man-power hours for the necessities of life when and wherever practicable, by using man-power hours as far as is possible in lieu of money until the present depression and money shortage adjusts itself. To adhere to a simple plan of operation as far as is possible, permitting a rapid expansion or contraction as conditions require.

The setting and working of this cooperative adventure, a product of the abnormal times, is reminiscent of the principles and experiments of Robert Owen in the early part of the last century during one of the first of the modern style depressions. Owen proposed exchanges where food and clothing would be bartered for labor, and self-supporting cooperative agricultural communities. He deprecated class warfare and urged the workers not to fight capital, but to cooperate and to produce. His experiments failed but the foundation of the cooperative movement was laid.

Owen's principles of cooperation and harmony were

challenged in 1833 by the syndicalist group which had an entirely different approach to the questions at issue and advocated the general strike and direct action in taking over the control of industries by the workers. So too in 1932 the cooperative movement in Los Angeles County is more or less challenged by a totally dissimilar association known as the Unemployed Council of Los Angeles which has a headquarters and several branches.

The history of this movement is, so far as general knowledge goes, somewhat meager. The Lawndale Branch, led by the Rev. John E. Hester, graduate of the Chicago Theological Seminary, gained considerable prominence in September when it arranged a meeting at a local highschool where representatives of public and private charities were to appear to hear the testimony and complaints of the unemployed, this after the manner of the Chicago public hearings of the unemployed (see *They Speak Up in Chicago* by Karl Borders, *The Survey*, March 1, 1932, page 663). Just before the meeting the local school board revoked the permit to use the building on the ground that the Lawndale Branch was associated with the Unemployed Council of Los Angeles which it termed a communist organization. In early October this Council figured in a lively street demonstration when the police broke up a hunger march on the County Welfare Department. Through the intervention of deputy sheriffs a few of the marchers reached their destination and presented not their petition but their demands.

THE nature of these demands, the will to leap over the slow processes of change, is what lends this movement its significance. They are based on the premise that "the natural resources and the productive capacities of the county certainly enable everyone to have plenty if it were not for idle unemployed, idle factories, mills, mines, workshops and farms." The document presented to the Public Welfare Department of the Board of Supervisors of Los Angeles County, popularly known as the County Welfare Department, stated first, "Our immediate demand is adequate food relief," followed by criticism of the methods of the department and such specific demands as "coffee and shortening in every order where desired. Cash allowance for fresh meat for all families." Free medical and dental care for the families of all unemployed and partially employed, adequate housing with no evictions and free gas, light and water for those unable to pay, were specified. Further, "We are interested in the solidarity of all workers, native and foreign-born, white and colored, and demand that there be no discrimination." And finally, "We demand steady work for all unemployed workers at a minimum of \$4 per day in cash, five days a week, working not more than eight hours a day. In case there are more than three dependents in a family \$3 a week to be paid for each additional dependent in the family."

The contrast between these two movements is evident. The Unemployed Council bases its claim on the right of everyone living in a land of plenty to have what he needs. Its method is direct action though in this case the demand for the resources of a satisfactory life was made upon public charity officials. The actual structure of present society is ignored; the inherent difficulties of the present situation are not discussed. The Cooperative Relief Association, officially disclaiming any political motive or affiliation, emphasizes cooperation among the workers, harmony with existing economic groups and the bartering of labor for the necessities of life. Its program studiously

avoids starting anything that might compete with local merchants or manufacturers and has no provision that would lead us to expect it to continue when there is nothing to "chisel" and no surplus crops to gather. Yet there are elements in its method, organization and experience which raise questions, especially in the light of the statement by President William Green of the American Federation of Labor that half of the ten million now unemployed may never, because of technical changes, be able to find their way back into the industries of the country. Is it not pos-

sible that this spontaneous movement offers suggestions for the effective organization of relief in the years ahead?

Neither the cooperative nor the direct-action technique is distinctly American. Cooperatives function successfully in various European countries but have never gained much headway or interest here. The direct-action method savors also more of European than American tradition. The side-by-side development of these two movements so totally different in philosophy and operation offers an interesting prospect for the student of social change.

Taxes and Social Services

By LOULA D. LASKER

WITH the cost of local, state and federal government in 1931 reaching \$4,172,000,000 compared to \$692,000,000 in 1913—a rise of 502 percent compared to national income of \$37,500,000,000 and \$34,000,000,000 in the two periods, it is evident that the science of raising and spending public funds is a fruitful subject of study and research. Hence the importance of the National Conference on Taxation, Readjustment of Governmental Expenditures and Problems of Public Credit sponsored last month by New York University with the cooperation of some dozen national organizations. And for social workers, of particular importance, for a striking number of speakers held that public social services—used in the broadest sense—were the only field of production still capable of expansion under present conditions; the field, therefore, in which a "cure" for the depression must be sought. As David Cushman Coyle, consulting engineer, put it:

"Some new category of industry needs to be developed "Services" fill the bill. Health, recreation, education and art, the reclamation of delinquents and the segregation of the unfit, the beautification of city and country, the growth of research, exploration, experimentation—all these activities make up a vast field for varied and untrained workers. The field is limited only by the limitations of new power to think of new projects. The answer to the problem of technological unemployment is a continuous and massive expansion of cultural and quasi-cultural activities. The answer to the problem of destitution in an age of plenty lies in the employment of most of the population in the amenities of life. This conclusion is purely an engineering one.

Virgil Johnson, editor of *Business Week*, asked: "Must we go through with the grim, sardonic and delusive pursuit of higher private standards of life through lower public standards of living? . . . Ultimately I hope there will be a return of reason and sanity which will show us once more the real significance of public spending for the stability of our economic system." George Soule, an editor of *The New Republic*, held that "People in general would benefit more from goods and services provided them by government than from the extra goods which might be produced by private industry. Personally, if there is such a choice, I should far rather have such things as plenty of public parks and forests and the assurance of support in the event of illness, unemployment or old age, than a hundred extra gadgets." Said Harold S. Buttenheim, editor of *The American City Magazine*: "It may very well prove to be wise social policy to take an increasingly larger share of the total income for public works, constructive cultural and recrea-

tional services and other governmental purposes." And Russell Ramsey, director of the Taxpayers Research League, challenged the group in another way: "When we consider, for example, whether we can afford to spend \$106,000,000 annually for the care of the insane and feeble-minded, we have also to consider whether we can afford not to spend it."

In general the plea for wholesale horizontal cutting of governmental expenditures came from the more or less acknowledged conservatives—or might one say, the "die-hards"? Few doubt today that the days of the die-hards are numbered. But are social workers, in charge of the public social services, ready to lead if the chance is given them?

For five days conservative and liberal schools of thought clashed over the relative merits also of income vs. sales tax, over the preservation of wage levels vs. wholesale wage-cuts, and other matters that must be taken into account in formulating a rounded program of public finance.

TO attempt even briefly to summarize a half-hundred papers in a single page is an impossible feat. Suffice it to say there was more or less general agreement that taxes should be levied in accordance with three principles, namely: capacity to pay, in a manner so as not unduly to restrict business, and finally that tax legislation should not be attached as a rider to bills primarily for other purposes, or vice versa. But in the application of the first two of these principles, there was a wide divergence of opinion. At one extreme was Robert McCormick, editor of *The Chicago Tribune*, who called high taxation of business "larceny under the mantle of moralistic public purpose," and at the other Harold G. Aron, New York lawyer, who advocated the drafting of capital through an enforced loan during the emergency to pay the wages of a "national service" just as capital was drafted during the war for a military service.

Perhaps no startling new contribution was made, yet the conference had a decidedly constructive value in the very fact that away from the bitterness and bias of a more "wordly" atmosphere, when the public is in dire need of education on these burning problems of public finance, leading exponents of opposing schools were given an opportunity to put forth their different conceptions of a remedy on a neutral platform. The papers and discussion by a hundred experts will be published in a forthcoming volume on public finance which should be of great value to students of the subject, in legislature or academic halls or wherever they may be.