

UNEMPLOYMENT FROM INSIDE

THE fifth volume of *The New Survey of London Life and Labour*¹ and *The Unemployed Man*² are two books which deal with opposite aspects of life among the working classes in London to-day. The former describes the employed working man and relates the conditions of his employment, his wages and mode of living. The latter gives an account of the man without a job, the psychological reaction upon him of his position and the effect of the system of Unemployment Insurance in mitigating his pitiful state.

The New Survey of London Life and Labour is a modern version of the great survey initiated by Charles Booth in 1886, the results of which fill seventeen volumes under the general title of *Life and Labour of the People in London*. This grand inquest had revealed the horrible fact that during a period of unrivalled national prosperity as many as thirty per cent. of the inhabitants of London—more than a million men, women and children—were living at or beneath the bare level of subsistence. This discovery and the other revelations which emerged from Charles Booth's survey had a very pressing influence on subsequent social legislation. And to anyone acquainted with the social work of the last thirty years the importance of such a survey in estimating the necessity and incidence of reform must be too evident to require emphasis. The method of investigation employed by Booth was, for those days, exceptionally scientific, but the technique made use of in compiling the New Survey is of a kind to give more accurate results. This survey has been undertaken by the London School of Economics under the

¹ *The New Survey of London Life and Labour*. (P. S. King & Son, Ltd.; 17/6.)

² *The Unemployed Man*. By E. Wight Bakke, Ph.D. (Nisbet; 10/6.)

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directorship of Sir Herbert Llewellyn Smith, and this in itself would be a sufficient testimony to the efficiency of the investigators and the integrity of the work.

The present volume deals with food, drink and tobacco manufacture; the wholesale food markets; retail shops and shop assistants, the chemical industries; printing and book-binding; the leather and fur industries; the laundry trade, and finally water transport. In each chapter we are given a brief description of the processes of manufacture or labour concerned, of wages and hours, of the conditions in which men and women work and their effect upon health, and of the different organizations and unions which exist to protect the interests of the employers and employed. It would be impossible even to summarize the facts set forth in each chapter. We are fortunately left with the impression that conditions generally are beyond comparison better than what they were in Charles Booth's time, but this does not mean that they are satisfactory. The increasing tendency to employ female labour and juvenile labour—a result of mechanization and the low standard of wages paid to these classes of employees—the decrease in the number of workmen employed in skilled trades, certain instances of prolonged hours of work, especially in the confectionery trade and in the baking houses where working weeks of sixty, seventy and even eighty hours are said to obtain, point to the necessity for new legislation. It is a significant fact that now, as in Charles Booth's time, the worst conditions as to hours and wages are still to be found amongst the small independent concerns.

The New Survey of London Life and Labour is an indispensable encyclopaedia for the social student and worker. It is a mine of well-collected and co-ordinated facts from which we can draw a very full picture of the working man in action. But 'when the day's work becomes a search for work the whole manner of life changes.'

It is with this latter state of things that Dr. Wight Bakke's fascinating book—*The Unemployed Man*—is concerned. Dr. Bakke is a Research Fellow of Yale Univer-

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sity who came to England in June of 1931 to obtain materials for a thesis upon the effect of Unemployment Insurance on the willingness and ability of workers to support themselves. To carry out his object he established himself for nine months in the lodgings of a working-class family in Greenwich and participated as far as possible in the day-to-day life of the workers. He chose Greenwich because that district presents a fair average of the conditions in an industrial area where unemployment exists. Greenwich is a working-class community, and the work of most of its members is carried on within the borough itself. Furthermore, every type of workman from the poorest casual worker to the skilled artisan is employed in that district. The results of his investigations in Greenwich were checked by shorter visits to the other London boroughs, and to districts of South Wales, Lancashire, and Yorkshire.

The first thing that strikes one about this book is that it is a complete justification of the Unemployment Insurance System in England. Various suggestions are made by the author for improving and extending the operation of the system, but as to the objections, so often heard, that it makes a workman lazy; that it stimulates a dishonest ingenuity in endeavours to 'beat the Exchange'; that it leads to pauperization and induces the workers to regard themselves naturally as public charges, Dr. Bakke sweeps away these imputations with ruthless efficiency and undeniable cogency. Such assertions, he declares, are based either on the ground that it 'stands to reason,' or upon the evidence of hearsay, and his personal acquaintance with the unemployed as well as his knowledge of the statistical data concerning them is sufficient assurance that his own view is the right one. One set of statistics, quoted at length from the Ministry of Labour investigation into possible abuses of the system, and which Dr. Bakke's researches verified, is so impressive that it should be summarized here. The investigation was to ascertain the number of persons who looked upon Unemployment Insurance as a living, and it was one of nine such investiga-

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tions, all of which showed similar results. The number of claims examined from all parts of England was 192,480. Of these seventy-eight per cent. were, at once, passed as being indubitably genuine. The remainder were subjected to a searching examination which revealed that only '2.7 per cent. of all the recipients of benefit and 1.3 per cent. of the men recipients could be disallowed on the basis that they were not making genuine efforts to get back into employment.' And this percentage, according to Dr. Bakke, consists of unskilled labourers whose wages are below, or do not by much exceed what they can draw from unemployment benefit, and whose work brings no satisfaction beyond the money wage.

This book explores the physical and mental effect of unemployment upon the worker and the extent to which these effects are mitigated by Unemployment Insurance. It is a relief to know that owing to this system there has been far less physical suffering from want among unemployed workers than might have been expected, and that on the whole their physique has not been impaired. As to the mental effect of unemployment, the receipt of benefit cannot compensate for the loss of a job, nor does it prevent the demoralization that attends the lack of any occupation. Nevertheless, there can be no question that Unemployment Insurance gives the worker a sense of security without which his condition would be hopeless indeed, and for that reason it places a barrier between him and the feelings of discouragement and despair which are the essential characteristics of pauperism. It has also acted as a powerful deterrent to the germination of Communism amongst the unemployed. That doctrine holds practically no appeal for the average English working-man. His attitude is well exemplified by the words with which a young man, who had been unemployed for six months, questioned a fellow-worker who was wondering whether some new form of government would not be better.

'It all comes down to this, mate If this country was to turn Communist would this country be England? Now answer me that.'

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Such an attitude, however, might well change if the unemployed workman felt that the State had no concern for his tragic condition, for undoubtedly Communism exercises a strong appeal to the abandoned and desperate.

The book ends with various appendices of considerable use. They contain a summary of the British Scheme of Unemployment Insurance and an explanation of the continuity rule. I think no student of social problems should fail to read this book, the value of which, both because the information it contains is mostly first-hand and because it is written by a highly-trained and impartial observer, is difficult to over-estimate.

EDMUND HOWARD.