



JOBS, HUMBUG!

Having jobs can be as much a basic cause of social and economic problems as a solution to them.

“Having a job” looks at providing for our needs solely through the means of institutionalized work—working for someone else. There are alternatives. Among them, working for oneself (self-employment), providing for our own needs (self-reliance), or not working (self-restraint). All have very different social consequences which are usually ignored when we look at employment in the narrow, institutional way.

Self-employment means that division of interests between worker and management is avoided along with the attendant and real accusations of featherbedding, irresponsibility, profiteering off the workers, etc. Self-reliance means that the producer/consumer split is avoided along with the resulting inability to know how things work, if they're well-made, price-gouging, etc. Self-restraint means that the division of interest between present and future generations and between

us and our surroundings is lessened. Demanding less (and having to work less to satisfy those demands) also means avoiding unnecessary production and consumption of resources that we share with our surroundings and our grandchildren.

The “job” relationship that is so common in industrial society puts us in a real double-bind. We're supposed to be efficient, productive, and work for the interests of our employer for a certain period, then abruptly turn around and be profligate consumers, buying for whim, vanity, luxury and prestige. At the same time we're trapped into an effective divide and conquer strategy by commercial interests. By dividing us into working and consuming modes—neither of which we control or can bargain as equal partners—we get milked coming and going. As consumers we can only judge price, not what costs of production were externalized in forms of pollution, tax avoidance, workers exploitation, etc., that we have to pay the consequences of elsewhere. As workers we can usually only bargain for dollars—a logger or coal miner can't usually act against stripmining our forests, soils and minerals.

Thinking more broadly than jobs, and avoiding jobs both personally and through governmental policies that encourage alternative means of satisfying our needs can be a positive approach to a better quality of life, with substantial social and economic benefit. Self-confidence grows with self-reliance. The more we are responsible for satisfying our own needs, the less we're trapped in the frustrations, anger and distrust that fills the marketplace and workplace. Unnecessary production is avoided when we don't buy. Make-work jobs like CETA no longer can be looked at as “creating employment.” Self-reliance minimizes taxes. Real needs are more effectively met by the person having those needs.

A self-reliant economy, by all appearances, is both more effective economically for the people involved and more resistant to exploitation by outside interests than an exchange-based economy.

Small-scale, employment-intensive technologies are valuable in the specific trade-offs against centralized, energy and capital-intensive technologies, but they also allow these basic and important changes in the patterns of work and need to be more thoroughly considered in dealing with employment problems. —TB