

THE FREE SYSTEM

A photograph of a man with a long, flowing white beard and a green knit beanie. He is wearing a blue quilted vest over a red long-sleeved shirt. He is standing in a forest with bare, thin trees in the background. The lighting suggests a bright day, possibly with some overexposure in the upper part of the image.

THE PRICELESS ECONOMIC SYSTEM:

ALL WORK IS VOLUNTARY

ALL GOODS AND SERVICES ARE FREE

ERNEST MANN

THE FREE SYSTEM

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THE FREE SYSTEM
by ERNEST MANN
(Lawrence F. Johnson, 1927–1996)

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Cover photo by Carol Christiansen, from the
Morrison County, MN Historical Society

Would you work for free if you could have everything you want for free?

Will you reason and ponder on this concept with me for a few minutes? Let's try to figure out what would happen at work if no one took pay.

How would the "boss" and the other workers treat us if they knew we didn't have to work with them? If they knew that we had everything we needed and could quit at any time? If they knew that the other places of work would be glad to have us? Just how would we be treated?

"Yes," you might say. "We would be treated mighty fine. But who would work if he/she didn't have to?"

Please reserve your judgment on this point for a little while and let's try to visualize what jobs would be like if we had the choice of who we gave our time to.

If we all worked without taking pay (and I don't mean we would use barter or work credits either), we could get a

job anywhere we wanted one. Workers would always welcome new help. The more help they had, the less they would each need to work. Each worker would then have control over what is produced and how it is produced. If we thought a product or a job was unbeneficial, wasteful or harmful to ourselves or to our environment, we could just quit and take our energy to a job that we felt was essential and non-destructive. Designers would no longer be forced to design planned obsolescence into products. It would be to their advantage to design products that would be the most beneficial, the most efficient and the most durable. This way they wouldn't have to redesign them in a short time. This of course would cut down working hours not only for themselves but for workers in general.

Would the people quit the jobs that they thought were unnecessary? Do you think that at least 50% of our present jobs are not truly need-

ed? If this is true and these people switched over to essential work, we could immediately cut our working hours in half. Like we could work a four-hour shift each day or maybe work only two days, ten hours each and take five days off each week. I may be way off with this 50% guess, but surely you will agree that we have one hell of a lot of senseless, wasteful, destructive and make-work jobs. We should be able to produce abundance under the happy working conditions that would ensue when we have control over our jobs.

You might ask, "Who would do the 'shit' jobs?" Because people have such a wide range of aptitudes and attitudes, there may be people who would be happy at each job. However, we would have control over our job so that we could invent better

ways of doing it. We may be able to eliminate many of the shit jobs. For example, we may find a way to use human waste to heat our houses, or to dry and package it for fertilizer, thus eliminating our whole sewage system.

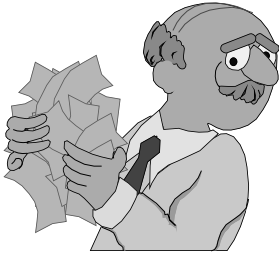
Some people have said, "Now just wait a minute.

Wouldn't lots of people take more than their share?"

With our present knowledge of agriculture and technology, we are easily able to produce too much. With abundance there will be no motivation to take more than we need. People

who do will soon learn that too much is a burden. Some of us are already learning this. The more stuff I have, the more stuff I must buy to take care of and house that which I already have. In other words, it costs money, Baby, and it takes "time" to make money. I now prefer to have more time instead of more





things.

Perhaps you will say, "But we must have money to motivate people to work."

Oh? Will you agree that even under the present pay system today, there are some people who are working because they like their work, not because they need the money? They of course are treated better at work by their boss because the boss knows that this financially independent worker can quit at any time. This worker is also a better worker so the boss wants to keep him/her and therefore must treat him/her right. Being treated better, this independent person can then enjoy the job more.

Do you think that we could get good feelings from knowing that our work helped

to make this free system possible? Would we get good feelings because we knew that no one needed to starve or steal any more? Would we get good feelings because we were allowed to apply our creative abilities at work? Would other merits of the free system, i.e. no money hassles, abundance of necessities, no wage hassles, friendships and fun at work, give us enough good feelings so that we would even be willing to do some of what we now call the less desirable jobs?

You may say, "yes, but what about those lazy so-and-so's who are always on welfare?" In our present pay system, money has not been enough of a motivator to get these people to work. In the free system these people will see the rest of us getting all of



If you take pay...

the good feelings from our work and they may want some of them too. They will be as welcome at a job as anyone else.

Some people tell me, "We shouldn't be producing so many machines. Maybe none at all." These people may or may not be right. This will surely be one of the things that we will learn if we have a choice about how and where we donate our labor.

"Well," you may say. "This all sounds very nice, but how are you going to get the rich guys to let go of their factories, oil wells, copper mines, apartment buildings and thousand acre farms?"

We could buy them all out. They could name any price they wanted and we could just print more money and give it to them. Then we could all change over to the "Free System". This may

sound very foolish, but actually it is not as foolish as the "Pay System" that we have been operating under. We have been led to believe that it is Capital which builds mining, refining, production and transportation systems. That capital builds stores and housing complexes. But if you reexamine the facts you will see that it was people's labor which mined, refined and produced everything. Capital was the "distraction" which allowed a few people to be in control of the many. Money and its various accounting systems are part of the distraction which currently keeps us too busy to see the solution. It was the labor of the many which built all industry, therefore industry belongs to all the people who built it, not to the magicians who concocted capital and money. Actually, industry belongs to all people

because we must take into consideration all of the support industries which supply food, clothing, housing, medical care, entertainment, transportation, and so on to the workers who did the actual construction of the facilities and of the machines. So really, everyone owns part of everything. Or perhaps we can say that no “one” owns industry. If this is true we don’t really have to pay anyone for it because we each had a small part in the building of industry. So let’s just share the use of it.

You may say, “This may all be true, but the fact remains that the Super Rich now own and control big industry. So they are not going to let go of it.”

Yes, the super rich people now control industry but they retain control only because we allow them to. The super

rich are nowhere to be seen. They are in hiding. It is only those of us who take pay from them who do the actual work of industry. Even their lieutenants of industry, e.g., corporation presidents, factory superintendents, foremen, and so on all take pay for their work. The armed guards, the policemen, the soldiers, the Mafia and the courts and politicians all take pay for their work. It is merely a matter of showing these lieutenants, gunmen and stooges the fact that they will have everything that they want with the free system but they won’t have the hassles that they have now. They will no longer “have to” obey orders. Then undoubtedly you can see that the rich people (less than 1% of the world’s population) will not be able to stop the 99% of us from changing over to the free system.

...you must obey

Certainly some of these rich people are very intelligent humans or they could not have gotten where they are. Surely they will be able to see that they can still utilize their abilities as bosses (coordinators, leaders) of the world, but under the free system they won't have all the hassles that they have now. Some of them must fear for their very lives (and their children's lives) under their present world-wide exploitation (pay) system. We would willingly give them power under the free system as long as they led us in ways which were "pro-life". The pay system is "anti-life". It is for profit, not for people. Besides that, they may not have a need for power when they can have everything that they want for free and without hassles.

You may ask, "OK, so why don't we just change over to this free system now, if it's so darned good?"

I'm ready to change over, and I know a few more people who would too. I don't know

why the rest aren't ready. Perhaps I'm a very poor explainer of the free system. I'm not a good writer and I know it. Almost anyone can write better than I, if they set their mind to it. Some people have such a great command of words that they can create beautiful pictures with what they write. I hope that they will soon take over this job for me. I would prefer to spend all of my time in research to discover new truths, better ways of living together on this planet, better ways of living with myself and to explore the other 90% of my mind.

But in the meantime this is work that I think must be done, so I'm doing the best that I can. I think that I'm making some headway as I see others beginning to help in ways that they choose. You are reading it and that is encouraging. Everyone's help is needed.

Something strange has happened to most people. They know that overdosing on food, drugs, dope, alcohol or

tobacco is bad for their health (may even kill them) but they continue to do it. They also know that the government is wasteful and crooked. They know that big money runs everything. They know that wars kill people. They know that prisons don't rehabilitate. But they allow them all to continue. Have people given their will power and their logical reasoning abilities away to the people who control the media? Are they operating on remote control? On blind faith in whatever powers that be?

Perhaps people are so hypnotized by radio, TV, music and all the other media that they dare not think brave new thoughts any more. The media lead our thoughts. People act like puppets. When we are listening to, reading or watching the media they lead

our thinking into lines of thought that profit them, right? We are giving them large chunks of our time (our lives). They gobble them up and shape our minds into insatiable consumer-worker minds. WE ALLOW THEM to hold our attention (even as we allow magicians) while they tap nearly every drop of our energy until we die. They feed our minds fear and a whole lot of other stuff to keep us manageable and ductile. Many of the songs have hypnotic effects. It is difficult to stop humming the tunes and thinking the words. It is said that if we hear something often and long enough we will eventually believe it. This is also the principle of repetitive advertising. So if you would like to know how they want you to act, feel and think, listen care-

**With abundance
there will be no motivation
to take more than we need.**

fully to music. They hold our attention with money hassles, artificial sexual stimuli, machines (the playing with and the maintenance of), sports and other trivia. This keeps us too busy to do any creative thinking along lines which could lead to a workable solution to our topsy-turvy social order.

A few of us have stopped allowing this conditioning to enter our minds. We have simply discontinued watching, reading or listening to it. Consequently, we have lost the desire to buy, buy, buy. Now we need to spend (work) very little to support our real needs. We are more able to clearly see the pay system for what it is and to see the free system as a valid alternative.

"It all looks logical," you might say. "But the economy would collapse and we would be in a state of chaos."

Oh! I almost missed something. Our change-over plan has a built-in safeguard. People must understand the free

system before they will want to change over.

The key is understanding and then having the desire to change over. Enough people are now working at the essential jobs. Right? It's the people who are working at the non-essential jobs who will quit and begin helping in the essential jobs.

Yes, the unnecessary industries will collapse. We will indubitably find uses for these facilities which will be beneficial for people. So you see the necessary work will continue but with a lot more help.

As for chaos: As I just stated, we have enough people doing the essential work right now. We would have a flood of new workers to train right on-the-job. We would have some people switching jobs within the essential industries.

Some bosses couldn't make it in the new coordinator roles. Coordinators would be found. Plenty of people would be willing to try it. We'll talk and think about it plenty

before the change-over date so that the details will all be decided beforehand. We can then have an intelligent planned change-over.

So this is where we are now—informing people of an alternative to the world-wide pay system.

We need all the help that we can get. We cannot force the free system on anyone. If

it is “an idea whose time has come,” I trust that thinking people will support and help promote it.

The principle of the Free System, ALL PEOPLE WORK FOR FREE AND GIVE THEIR PRODUCTS AWAY FOR FREE, is so very simple that everyone should be able to understand it.

Let’s make it happen!



Ernest Mann

**Would you work without pay
if you could have this free system?**

Getting To Know An Ernest Mann

by Mary Warner
Manager of the Charles A. Weyerhaeuser
Memorial Museum, Little Falls, MN

Let's examine that Ernest Mann for a moment. Ernest Mann is a pen name, and a very effective one at that. It lends itself well to the double entendre and aptly describes the man who adopted it.

I ran across the story of Ernest Mann in the Murders Box at the Morrison County Historical Society. His real name was Lawrence "Larry" F. Johnson, and he was beaten to death by his grandson Eli Johnson on March 13, 1996. The *Morrison County Record* covered the story at the time, but didn't mention Larry's pen name or delve into his life philosophy. The only description offered about Larry in the primary article on the case came from Tim Wright, assistant manager of Suburban Mobile Home Park in Little Falls, MN, where Larry was living at the time of his murder. According to Wright, "[Larry and Eli] were peaceful enough people. Sometimes Larry did carry things on his head. Once I saw him carrying his laundry basket on his head, and once he was carrying his bag of groceries on his head." (*Morrison County Record*, March 24, 1996)

But Larry was so much more than the man who carried groceries on his head. According to a feature article on Larry in the *Twin Cities Reader*, a Minneapolis librarian called him "the grandfather of the 'zine movement." (*Twin Cities Reader*, April 24-30, 1996) The *Christian Science Monitor* referred to him as "a sort of urban Thoreau." (*Christian Science Monitor*, May 16, 1990) The *Minneapolis Tribune* published an article on him in 1978; The Banneker Center for Economic Justice in Maryland holds a collection of his work; and an online search reveals that Larry Johnson is well-known among counter-culture groups. How many local people know anything about Larry's self-appointed work or fame in the wider world?

According to Larry, he dropped out of the Rat Race in 1969, at the age of 42, after spending ten years as a salesman and ten years running his own lucrative real estate business. Prior to that, he had enlisted in the Navy to serve in World War II, studied economics at business college, and had a wife



and three children. By all of society's definitions, Larry was a success.

A pivotal event related to one of his real estate holdings in Stearns County inspired him to give up his socially acceptable life and adopt the life of a thrifty semi-nomad. In the fall of 1969, he travelled to Georgeville, MN, to collect the overdue rent of \$100 from a group of hippies. The hippies explained that they weren't going to pay rent because "property is theft" and invited Larry to hang out with them. The event was transformative. "By 1972, he had sold all of his property, let his 16-year-old daughter Lynette 'go out on her own,' gotten an amicable divorce from his wife of 25 years, begun protesting the Vietnam War (mainly because his two sons were of draft age) and been publishing the *Little Free Press* for three years." (*Twin Cities Reader*, April 24-30, 1996, pg. 15)

He had made enough money through his business ventures to travel the world, practice his new philosophy of a low-consumption lifestyle, enjoy his freedom from being a "wage slave," and produce his 'zine. His geographic anchor points were Minneapolis and Morrison County, both of which he returned to again and again over the years. At one time he owned a wooded piece of property in the Cushing area.

Between 1969 and 1996, Larry, writing as Ernest Mann, published 138 issues of the *Little Free Press* on an erratic schedule, with the final issue being released a week before his death. The 'zine was his primary vehicle for expounding upon life and his economic theory, the latter of which he initially called the Free System, but eventually renamed the Priceless Economic System (P.E.S.). The premise of the P.E.S. is simple: "If everyone stops taking pay for their work, there will be no monetary cost of production. All goods and services can then be free of charge. Thus, people will have no need for money, so they can work without pay." (*Free I Got*, Ernest Mann, pg. 41)

While it's an idealistic philosophy that depends upon the goodness of human beings, Larry so firmly believed this that he put it into practice after retiring. He lived in places that were free or had very low rent; he spent as little as he could on groceries; he divested himself of most of his possessions; and he stopped consuming popular media.

The Priceless Economic System was also in operation during his work on the *Little Free Press*. Though it cost \$200 to produce (in 1976 dollars), Larry distributed it for the price of postage and would provide it for free to those who couldn't afford that. He also allowed others to freely reprint and distribute the 'zine long before the Creative Commons license was invented. The 'zine was typically printed on two sides of a legal-sized (8 ½" x 14") sheet of paper with four columns on each side.

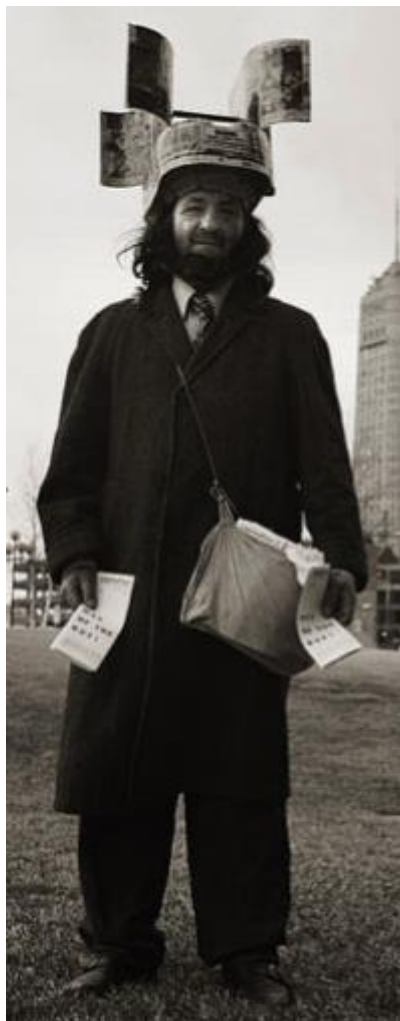
Eventually he gathered his writings from the *Little Free Press* to produce two books, *I Was Robot (Utopia Now Possible)* (1990) and *Free I Got* (1993). It was the longevity of the 'zine that caused Ernest Mann to be called "the

grandfather of the 'zine movement."

It was Larry Johnson's dedication to living his values, opposed as they were to standard society, that gained him a following and allows his 'zine to continue influencing people today.

Pretty impressive for a guy most local folks didn't know.

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"Ernest Mann" in 1979 — photo by Robert Holmgren

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Anarchism by *Peter Kropotkin*—Included in the 1910 edition of the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, this essay provides a thorough overview of the anarchist school of political philosophy in Europe and America prior to the first world war. By the author of *Mutual Aid: A Factor of Evolution*.

Anarchist Morality by *Peter Kropotkin*—In this classical study of revolutionary ethics, Kropotkin differentiates between traditional concepts of moral authority originating in primitive superstition, and the instinctive sense of mutual aid common to humanity and other social animals.

Anarchism: What It Really Stands For by *Emma Goldman*—“Anarchism stands for a social order based on the free grouping of individuals for the purpose of producing real social wealth; an order that will guarantee to every human being free access to the earth and full enjoyment of the necessities of life, according to individual desires, tastes, and inclinations.”



Marriage and Love and Jealousy: Its Cause and a Possible Cure by *Emma Goldman*—America's most famous anarchist and feminist attacks the hypocrisy of the marriage institution and its role in maintaining the capitalist system, and enthusiastically endorses free love, in an essay published in 1910 and the text of a lecture delivered in 1915.

Patriotism: A Menace to Liberty by *Emma Goldman*—“Leo Tolstoy, the greatest anti-patriot of our times, defines patriotism as the principle that will justify the training of wholesale murderers; a trade that requires better equipment for the exercise of man-killing than the making of such necessities of life as shoes, clothing, and houses...”

Prisons: A Social Crime and a Failure by *Emma Goldman*—“With all our boasted reforms, our great social changes, and our far-reaching discoveries, human beings continue to be sent to the worst of hells, wherein they are outraged, degraded, and tortured, that society may be ‘protected’ from the phantoms of its own making.”



Direct Action by *Voltairine De Cleyre*—Real change will not come about through political action, the author argues, as long as the ruling class holds the reins of power. Direct action, organized locally and coordinated widely, using the tactic of the general strike, has the most promise for achieving victory in the social revolution.

Anarchism and American Traditions by *Voltairine De Cleyre*—The libertarian basis of the American Revolution is shown to have much in common with the anarchist movement of the 19th century in this pamphlet by the activist Emma Goldman called “the most gifted and brilliant anarchist woman America ever produced.”

The Dawn-Light of Anarchy by *Voltairine De Cleyre*—“This is what the government is, has always been, the creator and defender of privilege; the organization of oppression and revenge. To hope that it can ever become anything else is the vainest of delusions. They tell you that Anarchy, the dream of social order without government, is a wild fancy. The wildest dream that ever entered the heart of man is the dream that mankind can ever help itself through an appeal to law, or to come to any order that will not result in slavery wherein there is any excuse for government.”

The Abolition of Work by *Bob Black*—A critique of the economy of compulsory production (“work”) and a call for a “ludic revolution” restoring to us the possession of our lives. This 1985 essay has become an underground classic in the world’s independent alternative press.

The Soul of Man Under Socialism by *Oscar Wilde*—an essay by the Irish poet and playwright, author of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. “With the abolition of private property, then, we shall have true, beautiful, healthy Individualism. Nobody will waste his life in accumulating things, and the symbols for things. One will live. To live is the rarest thing in the world. Most people exist, that is all.”

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**WOULD
YOU WORK
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