

PROP. 13:

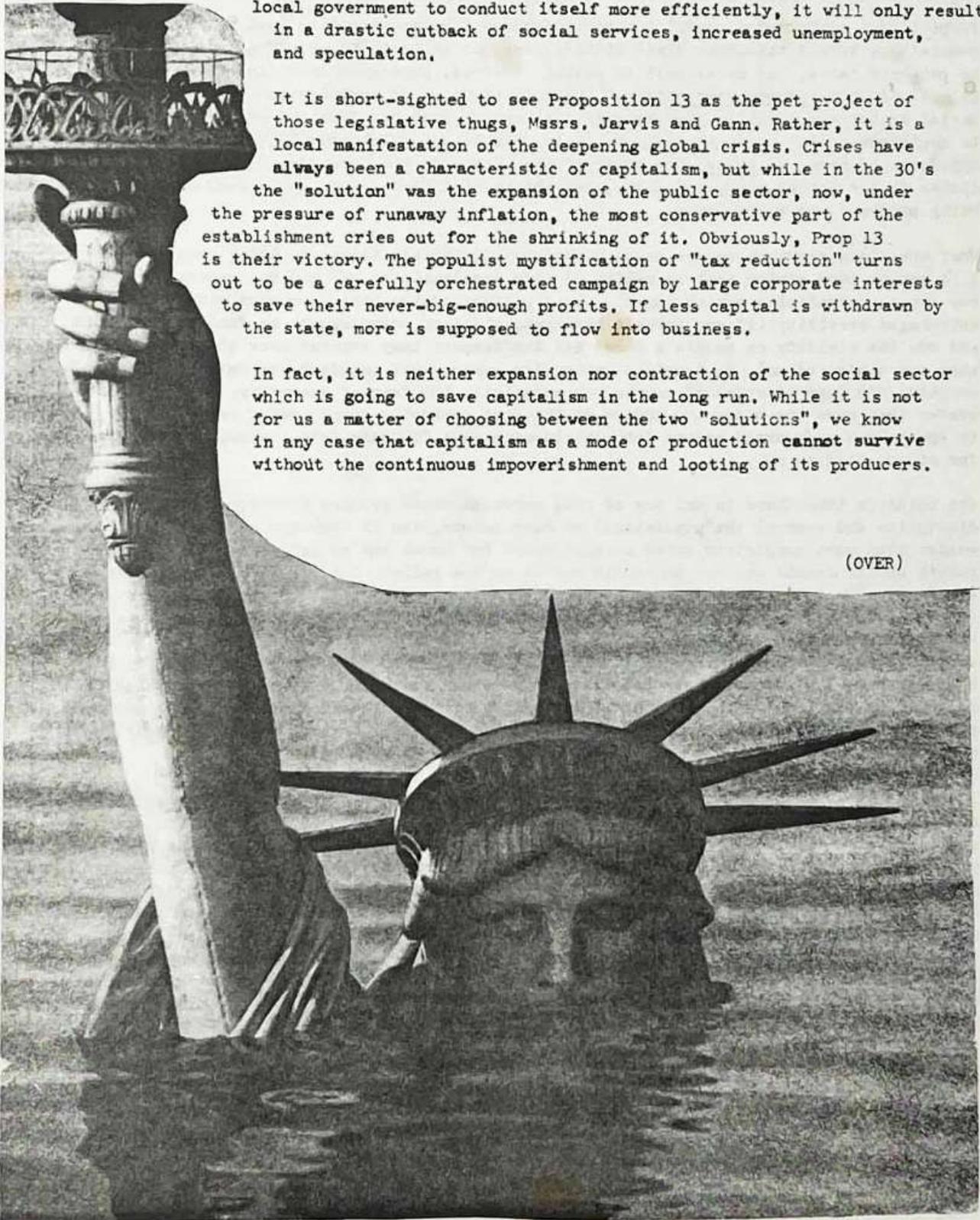
HOW DO YOU SPELL RELIEF?

Proposition 13 promised to be everyone's lucky number, and victory was assured long before the electoral song and dance had begun. The groundwork for the passage of this measure was laid out over the past several years when rampant real estate speculation more than doubled assessed values and consequently, property taxes. Under the pretext of forcing local government to conduct itself more efficiently, it will only result in a drastic cutback of social services, increased unemployment, and speculation.

It is short-sighted to see Proposition 13 as the pet project of those legislative thugs, Messrs. Jarvis and Gann. Rather, it is a local manifestation of the deepening global crisis. Crises have always been a characteristic of capitalism, but while in the 30's the "solution" was the expansion of the public sector, now, under the pressure of runaway inflation, the most conservative part of the establishment cries out for the shrinking of it. Obviously, Prop 13 is their victory. The populist mystification of "tax reduction" turns out to be a carefully orchestrated campaign by large corporate interests to save their never-big-enough profits. If less capital is withdrawn by the state, more is supposed to flow into business.

In fact, it is neither expansion nor contraction of the social sector which is going to save capitalism in the long run. While it is not for us a matter of choosing between the two "solutions", we know in any case that capitalism as a mode of production cannot survive without the continuous impoverishment and looting of its producers.

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Perhaps the most pernicious effect of Proposition 13 lies elsewhere. We are in a situation (a predicament for capitalism) where jobs are needed because there are workers. It is in this context that social services become a field of political contention, where their very definition is no longer taken for granted. People are bound to be shuttled back and forth between unnecessary social labor (bureaucratic and administrative functions, in government and precisely in the service area) and the social service sector where they are "serviced" by the various relief agencies. It is not enough to decry the (real) contraction of this sector. It was constructed as an expansion-contraction mechanism for adjusting needs, and it is performing according to the plan.

Prop. 13 has performed a useful function, perhaps, in demonstrating that we are a dependent population, beyond the usual class distinctions. It has said to us: "What will it be: no to property taxes, but no as well to social services. Less government and fewer services or more of both. Choose your poison." There is the risk of intimidation here, because the social sector was built to operate with just enough autonomy from the state to allow it to represent social needs as such. So it is that we can be blackmailed by advocates and opponents of Prop. 13 alike. The voice of the latter is the more persuasive because it speaks to the social junky in us all, bearing in mind that a need is no less real for being produced and manipulated.

What are these services we are asked to defend? Let's call things by their proper names: 1. A health care system that is making us sick (medicalizing our bodies, psychologizing our minds, normalizing our children). 2. A welfare system that maintains misery and encourages servility (if you haven't been yet, visit an unemployment or food stamp center and see the timidity on people's faces and the despair they express over the processing they are subjected to). 3. A police protection system that manufactures delinquency, thus creating the fear of crime, of course, but especially the fear of authority. 4. A school system that saps the minds and bodies of the most energetic people among us, resulting in apathy and programmed escape into the labor market for some, into another service area for others. And so on...

The point is this: there is not one of these services whose primary function is not to discipline and control the "population" we have become, even if they are necessary. Little wonder that most people (who voted at all) opted for local tax relief, when relief from the public sector itself was not and could not be on the ballot. The first initiative that seems in order is to look squarely at this near-sacrosanct social sector, at its history (pacification of the working class, to start with), its function, and its relation to the state apparatus. We should hold closely to the assumption that wherever there is scarcity--a lack of something, be it bread, basketballs, or affection--that scarcity has been engineered. In fact, there is no scarcity in our society but that of capital investment due to the laws of the market, and a scarcity of intelligence among those who continue playing the game. Scarcity and rationing are means of social control in the hands of the ruling class.

The disintegration of capital appears as the disintegration of humanity only because society is reproduced as capital. Our unconscious cooperation in the reproduction of capital has created the present crisis, as well as poverty, war and boredom. The real problem is that we are too productive, too creative, and too inventive for the present social organization. We do not offer any "solutions". The social reformers can do that better. An organized assault against all the conditions of everyday misery is overdue. It is only our autonomous organization, beyond all political pseudo-solutions, that will overthrow a mode of social organization that is obsolete. The task now confronting us is to struggle against a state of affairs where life in the service sector or life in the "serving" sector point to the same thing: dying of hunger or dying of boredom.

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(Joint Action against Rampant and Vicious Ideological Stultification
and Group Against Naive Notions)