

Income security: why unions should campaign for a basic income

Guy Standing*

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Summary

This article argues that because of the changing character of work and labour in the context of globalisation, progressives and particularly trade unionists could make a basic income a key part of their agenda. It considers the standard objections and then reviews the various advantages of moving in that direction, towards the realisation of a republican or claim right.



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Sommaire

Cet article met l'accent sur le fait qu'en raison des changements spécifiques du monde du travail et des relations professionnelles dans le contexte de la mondialisation, les progressistes et en particulier les syndicalistes pourraient faire du revenu de base un thème clé de leur ordre du jour. Il tient compte des objections habituellement formulées et passe ensuite en revue les divers avantages à prendre cette direction, c'est-à-dire vers l'établissement d'un droit républicain ou droit à la sécurité du revenu (claim right).



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Zusammenfassung

In diesem Artikel argumentiert der Autor, dass progressiv Denkende und insbesondere die Gewerkschaften angesichts des sich wandelnden Wesens der Arbeit und der Arbeitnehmerschaft das Konzept des Grundeinkommens zu einem Schlüsselement ihrer Agenda machen sollten. Er befasst sich mit den üblichen Einwänden und untersucht anschließend die verschiedenen Vorteile einer Entwicklung in diese Richtung, d.h. hin zur Schaffung eines republikanischen oder claim right.



* Director, ILO Socio-Economic Security Programme. This article is written in a personal capacity. All views are those of the author and should not be attributed to the ILO.

*'There is a tide in the affairs of men,
Which, taken at the flood, leads on to fortune'*¹

Anxiety, insecurity and uncertainty – these are the feelings expressed by a vast number of workers and many others all over the world. There is a growing consensus on the reasons – globalisation, consumer capitalism, inequalities of various types, employment insecurity and unemployment, flexible wages, erosion and restructuring of the welfare state, social violence and a lack of networks of social support².

Amidst all this, trade unions have found it difficult to maintain their appeal. Many of us lament the outcome, and feel sure that society needs strong organisations to protect and advance the rights of all its members, and that without them insecurities will multiply. Yet unions need to rethink how to appeal to people as they go through their working lives. As they do so, I believe unions should champion a basic income as part of a strategy for economic security and redistribution. Unions have always been at their most effective when they have appealed to a vision of the future, rather than clinging to achievements of the past. They should set out to be in the vanguard for such a strategy, which should focus on the distributional issues of the time. I ask readers to be as open as possible to new ideas and to fresh thinking about old ideas that they might have rejected at another time.

We are undergoing a Great Transformation, in the way the economic system functions and in the relationship between economic forces and society. In the past, as superbly shown by Karl Polanyi, each transformation has created a period of instability, as old systems of regulation, social protection and redistribution broke down. In stable periods, those help moderate the insecurities and inequalities, at least enough to make most people tolerate their lot, by 'embedding the economy in society'. Put briefly, when unions were last in a position of strength, between 1945 and about 1975, tripartism and the welfare state performed these three functions reasonably well. Since then, inequalities and insecurities have multiplied.

Whether the old system was good or bad, there is no going back. The challenge now is to identify the new systems of regulation, social protection and redistribution that will moderate the insecurities while not undermining the economic dynamism that is driving the global economy.

The global context

In reflecting on feasible and desirable reform of social policy, it is essential to consider two big questions that set the context.

To be stable and prosperous, every society needs a system of regulation, a system of social protection and a system of redistribution, to embed the economic forces in

1 William Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar*, IV, iii, 1.11-12.

2 For a comprehensive assessment, see ILO 2004.

society and to moderate the insecurities and inequalities faced by most ordinary people. The first question is: What are the appropriate systems for a globalising open economy world?

Here is not the place to try to provide a detailed answer. But it is important to realise what is not the answer and to see what options are feasible. First, in an open economy the most effective means of *regulation* against bad labour and social policies and practices is strong bargaining power for workers and others at every level of decision-making, which means *collective* bodies, not just individualistic quasi-legalistic mechanisms, although these are needed as well. It is obvious to most observers that such collective bodies cannot rely on the old models; unions need to broaden their appeal to citizenship rights and be champions of egalitarianism.

Second, for *social protection*, old-style social insurance schemes are limited, costly and possibly dysfunctional in societies characterised by labour market flexibility, economic informalisation and fluidity of labour force participation. Means-tested social assistance and behaviour-conditional schemes such as ‘workfare’ are even less viable if one wishes to promote universal social protection³. The shortcomings of those schemes should lead to a willingness to think about more universalistic schemes, even though there are other grounds for doing so as well.

As for the most appropriate system of *redistribution*, in a globalising economy progressive direct taxation can do little, and even progressive governments have abandoned it as a means of extensive redistribution. Indeed, fiscal policy has become more *regressive*, worsening inequality. Tax on capital has fallen, tax on labour has risen, while subsidies for capital have risen and subsidies for labour have fallen.

This leads to the second big question. Every great transformation hinges on resolving the social conflict over the distribution of the key assets in that particular era. In an era of crumbling feudalism, the struggle was over land; under industrial capitalism, the struggle was over the means of production, leading to a focus on nationalisation of the ‘commanding heights’ of the economy. What are the key assets in the era of globalisation? What are the assets over which young progressives of the world – to whom collective organisations must appeal if they are to thrive – will wish to struggle to obtain? Put bluntly, they are surely financial capital, the environment (quality space in which to live healthily) and time (quality time in which to develop through work and leisure, in control over one’s development), which together could promise economic security. The rationale for that choice is provided elsewhere⁴. Suffice it to suggest that if one accepts that these are the key assets of the era over which we wish to have more control, then we should assess policies and institutions by whether or not they offer us the prospect of obtaining it.

The modern world is characterised by the frenzied pursuit of profits and possessions. Income and wealth are increasingly concentrated in finance capital. If inequality is to be

³ For reasons, see Standing 2002, particularly chapters 6 and 8.

⁴ See Standing 2002 and 2004a.

reduced, all citizens must share in that, which means renewed interest in *economic democracy*. Economic rights and democracy will surely be at the centre of progressive thinking in the years ahead. Among the advantages of collective and widespread individual ownership of financial capital would be that social control, including control of ecologically irresponsible behaviour by corporations, would be exercised over blatant rapaciousness so memorably demonstrated by Enron and others in recent years.

Here is not the place to develop that line of thinking. It is the other key asset that is relevant here, namely quality time. There is a uniquely modern crisis, which is the commodification of human existence. Globalisation is not just the financialisation of capitalism, but is based on the spread of insatiable consumption manipulated by constant advertising. In this, the instrumentality of labour is triumphing over the ethics of work, which conjures up 'craftsmanship', creativity and reproductive properties. *The jobholder society* so feared by Hannah Arendt is gaining ground⁵. Jobs are mainly instrumental. For more and more people, there is something close to that old Soviet joke, 'They pretend to pay us, we pretend to work'. The emerging variant might be, 'They pretend my job is important, I pretend to believe them.'

To consume is the goal. Alongside the well-known aphorism, 'I shop, therefore I am', one should add, 'I labour, so that I may shop.' There is an underlying frenzy, to make more money, to labour longer and more intensively, to take work home and home to one's job. The intensification of labour is threatening our capacity to reproduce physical and mental health. It is not just the Japanese who are suffering from *karoshi* (death from overwork). There is also a modern disease of *presenteeism*, staying in a job 'at work' even when it would be advisable for health to take time off. Meanwhile, the losers are left 'licking at the windows' and 'bowling alone' in the malls, where teenagers and the elderly 'hang out'. Ironically, alongside labour intensification is a deepening passivity, epitomised by the watching of 'reality' TV and a sequence of entertainments.

This is an exaggeration, of course. But there is what might be called *existential stress*, an anxiety, an insecurity. More people feel that they are never satisfied, having insatiable needs, for money, for commodities. We are urged to be 'competitive' in almost everything. Education is valued only for the jobs that schooling and human capital may bring. I labour to have more, not to develop myself or my relationships, let alone to preserve and recreate the beauty of nature and society that our forebears have handed down to us. Purchase, possess, display, discard! These are the laws of global consumer capitalism.

It all leads to a *time squeeze*. And when youth look forward to what their parents or peers are doing, they are surely correct if they think this is no great deal. What sociologists might call *existential anomie* arises, since more and more people do not belong to a functioning community, of people who are working as a unified 'class', or as an occupational group, as a union, as a guild, as a cooperative or whatever. Since they do not belong to such a collective community in which there is a spirit of *social solidarity*, there is no

5 See Arendt 1957.

regulation of opportunism and social irresponsibility, and there is weaker reciprocity between the old and the young, the married and the single, and between religious and ethnic groups.

This too is an exaggeration, is it not? All right, but the dominant trend is towards a combination of insecurity, stress and anomie, a frenzy of labour (money making) in a context of social and political passivity, a modern form of 'bread and circuses', of MacDonalds, malls and watching matches.

How have the mainstream political elites responded to this era of social and economic insecurity and rising inequalities? The main responses have been Third Wayism, on the social democratic side, and Compassionate Conservatism, on the Christian democrat side. The former emerged in the 1990s when new social democrats yearned for power but were traumatised by a succession of electoral defeats. It was a timid response, accepting the market state. They no longer presented a vision of redistribution, but one of accommodation, offering 'globalisation with a human face', reflecting an eagerness to grasp at a 'consensus', 'social partnership', 'social dialogue' and similarly vague non-threatening slogans. There was emphasis on 'social integration', in which the lukewarm left did not oppose the individualistic consumerism unleashed by the neo-liberals but tried to appeal to the conscience of the winners of the competitiveness to allow a moderation of market forces, in the guise of poverty relief.

In effect, the new social democrats adopted the liberal position of John Rawls, the most influential political thinker of the last quarter of the 20th century, in saying that the primary social goal was the reduction in 'poverty', focusing on the groups perceived as the least well-off. They did so through a moralistic model in which they have made 'socially responsible' behaviour by 'claimants' the condition for 'entitlement' to public benefits. Some preached 'rights' but practised 'entitlements'. There was the language of pluralism and diversity, but the politics of conformity and norms⁶. In the 1990s, social policy became more judgmental, a peculiar development for those on the political left.

Third Wayists expected the state to achieve social integration and market clearing (even Full Employment, which can still be heard from time to time), whereas their Compassionate Conservative competitors for the political 'median voters' say this should be done by 'civil society', those religious, commercial and other NGOs that are playing an increasingly prominent role in social policy.

This is where we are in the first decade of the 21st century, mired in insecurity and inequality, with no prospect that these are being remedied, in which the mainstream political programmes are offering a moralistic, paternalistic set of policies, with lower taxes, more subsidies for capital, and other inducements to invest.

⁶ I recall one adviser saying in a 'retreat', 'If they do not conform to socially responsible behaviour, they should be denied benefits and access to public services.' It is a short step to add 'and even citizenship'.

Anybody who feels uncomfortable with the two variants of the mainstream political response to globalisation should surely want to offer an alternative that could achieve basic security for everybody and a sustainable reduction in inequality. It is within that context that a basic income as a citizenship *right* should be considered. The following reviews the main arguments against and for moving in that direction, focusing on how it would help to promote *work* in its most positive, desirable sense.

What is a basic income?

Trade unionists, as well as all those who count themselves as *egalitarians* and advocates of *social solidarity*, should support a basic income as a right of a good society in which dignified work could flourish. Traditionally, there has been reluctance to go in that direction. However, times have changed.

In 1984, a group of young social scientists, all supporters of trade unions, set up an organisation called BIEN, the Basic Income European Network. Since then, it has attracted a wide cross-section of members from all over the world. Membership does not oblige anybody to adhere to a particular view. But in practice, most members believe in the desirability of moving towards a society in which everybody has a right to basic income security. Although some members might disagree on details, the following defines roughly what we mean.

Most importantly, we are talking about basic security as an economic and social right. This is essentially a republican or claim right, developed by Rousseau, Thomas Paine and others. A claim right implies that policies and institutions should move *towards a realisation* of that right. A right – and this is important given the way social policy debates have evolved in recent years – is unconditional in behavioural terms. You do not have a right if you have to do x, y and z in order to have an entitlement. That is not a right. A right is a right.

Second, we are talking about basic security. Basic means it must be meaningful, not a gesture, but not so much that it leads to indolence and loss of motive to function. Above all it must be enough in order to be able to make rational choices. It must be basic and it must be meaningful.

Third, for basic income security, the income must come in a form that is non-paternalistic. It should not be given to you as a discretionary gesture, in the goodness of somebody's heart; it is not charity. It must be in a form that you can decide how to use it. It must be individual and must be equal, with supplements for those with special needs, for disabilities or frailties. It must be in a form to enable people to make rational choices.

Fourth, the basic income should be regarded as the base of a system of social protection, on top of which should be supplements for special needs (such as disability) and a social insurance social security, as well as collectively bargained occupational benefits.

Fifth, the move to a basic income should be seen as evolutionary, a form of continuity, not nearly as radical as some enthusiasts convey and many critics seem to believe. In

many countries, many of the elements exist already and others are emerging. A key factor is the integration of the tax and benefit systems, which is fast being achieved. Most of those who believe that a basic income should underpin a redistributive strategy advocate a step-by-step approach, weaving the patchwork of existing schemes into a universal base. Several transition routes have been proposed, and some see it coming ‘through the back door’⁷.

Some advocates believe the amount paid should be low initially, building up to a decent level as it became accepted. Others believe that the basic income should be paid initially to selected social groups deemed particularly vulnerable to poverty and insecurity, gradually extended to others. That is the route that has been taken in Brazil, with its *renda minima* and *bolsa escola* schemes that have evolved into the *bolsa familia* under President Lula. Others, such as Sir Tony Atkinson, have advocated a *participation income* as an intermediary step towards a full basic income, in which some community work would be a condition for entitlement to the basic income, thereby helping to legitimise the concept with the middle class. The key point is that policy-makers can take a gradualist approach, befitting the cautionary nature of modern politicians and their advisers.

Finally, the name should not distract from the essentials of the idea. The point is that we are talking about a fundamental economic right. Other names sometimes used include citizenship income grant and social dividend. In South Africa, where the trade union confederation COSATU is actively campaigning for it, the term Basic Income Grant has been adopted⁸.

With those definitional elements in mind, there are also two policy principles that should guide us in thinking about re-distributive and protection policies. The first, drawing on John Rawls, is what might be called the ‘security difference principle’: *A policy or an institutional change is socially just only if it improves the security of the least secure groups in society.*

The second principle is what I call ‘the paternalism test principle’. This has been neglected by social policy advisers and politicians in the last ten years in Europe and elsewhere. The paternalism test principle goes like this: *A policy or an institutional change is just only if it does not impose controls on some groups that are not imposed on the most free groups in society.* That, of course, relates to workfare and a number of other policies that have been evolving.

7 See Atkinson 2004.

8 I have also proposed the term Solidarity Grant to emphasise the post-apartheid context. For a review of costs and benefits, see Standing and Samson 2003. In South Africa, besides the unions, a very broad coalition of groups are campaigning for a basic income, including women’s groups, the Churches, representatives of the disabled and members of several political parties.

The 'cons'

Before considering the advantages of a basic income, and the reasons for unions to take a leading role in its advocacy, it is worth dealing briefly with the main objections that have been made over the years. Since this has been done in depth elsewhere, this section will be relatively brief, reviewing the objections in summary form.

Claim 1: *A full basic income has not been introduced anywhere, so it cannot be correct.*

Response:

- (i) This objection has been made to every progressive reform, and as Hirschmann showed, claims of futility (it will not work), jeopardy (it will endanger other goals) and perversity (it will have unintended consequences) have almost always been made, until the reform has been introduced, after which those claims somehow evaporate⁹. In the months before Mitterrand introduced the *Revenue Minimum d'Insertion* in France all his advisers and commentators said it could not be introduced; a few months later it was accepted by almost everybody.
- (ii) Moves towards a basic income have been introduced. Besides the RMI in France and elsewhere, there is the Alaska Permanent Fund, which pays out an annual dividend to every resident of the State, and there are the bolsa familia and similar schemes in several Latin American countries.

Claim 2: *A basic income would cost too much. It would require higher taxes, crowd out public and private spending and would affect foreign confidence in the economy.*

Response:

- (i) A basic income would replace many existing schemes, implying that to a large extent it would be merely a matter of substitution of expenditure.
- (ii) Part of any increase in net public spending would be due to the fact that while all governments have a public commitment to the eradication of income poverty, they actually operate schemes that underspend, in that there is a low take-up of monetary benefits supposedly available. This is the case with almost all means-tested benefits.
- (iii) The cost argument usually comes down to a matter of *priorities*.
- (iv) The claim that spending on a basic income would raise public spending that would lower international confidence in the national economy is often disingenuous, as in South Africa. Cutting poverty effectively would be a good way of inducing lower crime and more social stability, so inducing greater foreign confidence.
- (v) Various costings have been made, in both affluent and developing countries. They have shown that even on restrictive assumptions, a basic income is affordable, and would at most involve a small increase in public spending or/and a modest rise in tax rates on above-average incomes. For instance, in South Africa a modest basic income could be paid by simply reversing the tax cuts to upper-income groups since the ANC came to power. In Turkey, a basic income could be paid from merely an extra 1% of GNP being allocated to social protection expenditure¹⁰.

9 See Hirschman 1991.

10 See Bugra and Keyder 2004.

- (vi) Most existing social security schemes, such as unemployment benefits, produce ‘poverty traps’ and ‘unemployment traps’, by which legal income-earning work is deterred because the recipient of the means-tested benefit would gain little or nothing by taking a low-paying job. A consequence of the spread of such schemes has been a growth in the extent of the black economy, resulting in lower tax takes. A basic income would almost certainly reverse that tendency, resulting in more tax revenue, thereby lowering the net cost of the change.

Claim 3: *A basic income would increase cost-push inflation.*

Response:

- (i) Most of the responses to the cost argument would apply here too.
(ii) A basic income would induce a switch in the structure of demand towards domestically produced wage goods, away from imported goods, thus tending to raise the exchange rate, dampening inflation.

Claim 4: *A basic income would undermine the ‘reciprocity principle’, the claim that only those making a contribution to society deserve society’s support.*

Response:

- (i) This ‘principle’ is arbitrary, never being applied to the idle rich or to those with inherited wealth, who are never required to put anything back into society.
(ii) There is no reason to suppose that only paid labour is ‘making a contribution’; other forms of work, such as care and community work, should count, even if one thought such a principle was justifiable.
(iii) It is a paternalistic claim: Who determines what count as duties, and to whom should they be provided to count?

Claim 5: *A basic income would be a disincentive to work, encouraging idleness and ‘dependency’.*

Response:

- (i) The vast majority of people want to work and better themselves; it is an insult to think they would be satisfied with a modest basic income.
(ii) A basic income would put pressure on firms to make jobs more attractive, rather than rely on fear and the necessary to accept poor working conditions.
(iii) It would facilitate labour force participation by the lowering the cost of job search. An instance is the experience with the Brazilian *bolsa escola*. Evaluations show that what amounted to a basic income for women with young children led to an *increase* in their labour force participation, as well as a reduction in child labour and female poverty.
(iv) As noted with respect to the cost claim, by reducing ‘poverty traps’ and ‘unemployment traps’, a basic income could *increase* legal labour supply from among the unemployed and those on the margins of the labour force.
(v) In the USA, some years ago a *negative income tax* (NIT) was introduced experimentally in pilot communities. Political prejudice soon intervened to end them, before the pilot tests could be evaluated, reflecting the apparently liberating effects

of the policy among the poor, which certain conservative groups disliked¹¹. But the political killing of the experiments did not occur until a large amount of data had been gathered on the effects of the NIT on workers and their families. It was a shame that trade unions were insufficiently interested to mobilise in defence of the experiments, which possibly reflected their fear of the liberating potential of giving workers real economic freedom. Anyhow, the data were later subject to an extraordinary number of separate evaluations. The results showed that the cynics were wrong. A review of 345 studies found that there was no significant overall effect on labour supply one way or the other¹².

- (vi) Because the effect on higher-income groups could be at most a small decrease in hours worked for income, the measure could actually induce some work sharing, to the benefit of workers and the labour market.

Claim 6: *A basic income would result in lower wages, because employers would feel that they could pay less.*

Response:

- (i) Wages are determined mainly by bargaining power, and if a person is insecure he or she will put up with pathetically low wages. A basic income would at the very least improve a person's sense of security, and thus strengthen his or her bargaining position. Moreover, 'efficiency wage' considerations mean that if an employer pays sub-standard wages, workers will adjust their effort and commitment accordingly. There is no reason to assume that a basic income would have any negative effect on wages; it could help to raise them, particularly at the bottom end of the labour market.

Claim 7: *A basic income would reduce the pressure on governments to create jobs.*

Response:

- (i) In most countries, there is not much pressure!
- (ii) Jobs should be generated by the proper demand for labour and by the ability of ordinary people to demand goods and services that generate income-earning opportunities. Jobs created for their own sake are artificial, demeaning, usually unsustainable and often likely to induce inefficiency and 'substitution effects' (displacing others not in job schemes).

Claim 8: *Paying a basic income would involve useless income 'churning', paying out to everybody and then clawing it back from tax payers.*

Response:

- (i) There is always some churning taking place, but this would simplify the process and make it more transparent and equitable. Currently, much of the churning results in

11 A similar reaction has set in with respect to the Alaska Permanent Fund. The Republicans have set out to kill it and convert the financial assets into funds for a few favoured corporations, even though the Fund has proved immensely popular with the residents of Alaska and in spite of its success over more than a decade (Goldsmith 2004).

12 See Widerquist 2004.

‘middle-class capture’ of the benefits, because they are more able to operate the complex schemes that characterise social security systems.

- (ii) The increasing integration of tax and benefits systems is a global trend, even in many developing countries, making the churning arguments increasingly irrelevant.

Claim 9: The level of a basic income would be indeterminate and be politically manipulated, being raised just before elections.

Response:

- (i) This is a governance issue that could be dealt with by making the level independent of government through the establishment of an independent authority, as with monetary policy these days. Or it could be tied automatically to movements in national income or average earnings, as is the case with many state pension schemes.

In sum, the claims made against moving towards a basic income can be answered, if one wishes to do so. What is important is that prejudiced hostile reaction should be avoided, and that we should think of what sort of ‘decent work’ society we want to foster in the coming years.

The ‘pros’

There are several advantages of a basic income that trade unionists and progressives should surely wish to promote. They can be summarised, in no implied order of significance.

A basic income would be a socially just measure, giving substance to the UN Declaration of Human Rights, especially Article 23. It would give substance to that egalitarian principle mentioned at the outset, giving equal basic economic security. It also corresponds to what we have found to be the most widely supported feeling among people of all levels of social background, that everybody should receive an income adequate to enable them to survive¹³. A basic income appeals to people’s sense of fairness.

By providing basic security, it would also tend to strengthen a sense of *social solidarity*. The need to strengthen this cannot be over-emphasised at this historical point. Arguably, it has never been more threatened or fragile. Unless the means can be developed to strengthen various forms of social solidarity, all collective bodies, including trade unions, will have the greatest possible difficulty in appealing to potential members.

A series of psychological experiments was conducted in Canada, the USA and Poland, in which people were asked to choose which principle of justice they most favoured. A large majority chose ‘the floor constraint’, a basic income. And the majority grew when

¹³ This emerges from our People’s Security Surveys, so far conducted in 15 countries, involving interviews with about 48,000 adults (ILO 2004, chapter 12).

groups deliberated on the options, highlighting the importance of ‘deliberative democracy’¹⁴.

A basic income would also enhance *real freedom*. In the true republication tradition, to which most egalitarians (and, therefore, trade unionists) belong, freedom is not possible without independence for individuals. It would strengthen individual rights, which was why Thomas Paine supported it. What should be understood by all those Third Wayists is that real freedom is the only feasible and equitable way of inducing socially responsible behaviour.

A basic income would also be a very suitable policy for responding to one of the major crises of the globalisation era and for redistributing one of those key assets identified in the introduction. It would encourage people to gain greater personal control over how they use time¹⁵. Anybody who counts himself or herself as on ‘the left’ should be keen for the poor and the vulnerable gaining more control over the key assets of society, and time is one of them.

By the same token, granting a basic income would help to legitimise forms of work other than labour, such as care work and community work. This is particularly important if we wish to see societies emerge in which more and more people can be workers in the richest sense of that term, combining a variety of types of work in a variety of work statuses.

By the same token, it would facilitate the more desirable forms of labour market flexibility. One way it would do so is by enabling those on the margins of the labour force taking low-productivity, and thus low-paying, jobs. It would also, as noted earlier, encourage employers to make jobs more attractive, because workers could bargain with greater confidence over working conditions and pay.

There are two other advantages that would be gained from a basic income. It could actually boost economic growth, by shifting the structure of demand so that spending on local goods and services would be increased and, in low-income areas, by improving health, nutrition and worker morale, by improving productivity. And it would save on administrative costs because it would be a simple system to operate, with less form filling, no discretionary judgments to be made by local bureaucrats, no appeals processes and a greater individualisation of transfers that would reduce the complexity of the tax-benefit system.

These latter considerations may be of minor significance in the overall strategy. The key points are that it would enhance real freedom, equalise basic security and facilitate a more flexible pattern of work. Thus far, I have emphasised the broader appeal of moving towards basic income security as a right. The link with the great challenge of unemployment is fundamental. The image of unemployment is still the one that crystallised

14 See Frohlich and Oppenheimer 1992. See also the results of the International Social Justice Project, summarised in ILO 2004, chapter 12.

15 This is explained elsewhere (see Standing 2004b).

in the Great Depression, of men made redundant and walking the streets forlornly being humiliated and desperate. That still happens almost everywhere. But the image has been jumbled with many others, ranging from a dubious one of teenagers lying in bed playing music to ‘housewives’ not really wanting a full-time job to alcoholics and socially ill ‘layabouts’ who are ‘unemployable’. All these images have been used by politicians and commentators to belittle unemployment and to justify transforming social policy into increasingly paternalistic and judgmental actions.

Unemployment benefit systems are being whittled away¹⁶. In their place, ‘workfare-type’ schemes have proliferated. Many forms of inequity have come with them. Unemployment traps have been pervasive, and many people have been put into short-term jobs that may not be in their longer-term interest. Of course, many local civil servants do a good job, many may have the best interests of their unemployed ‘clients’ in mind. But as long as those schemes are coercive or punitive – you lose benefits if you do not do as we ‘advise’ – they are or should be seen as eroding freedom.

Having policies to assist the unemployed is obviously desirable. But they must be genuinely voluntary and not be paternalistic or punitive. Having a basic income as a right would not ‘abolish unemployment’ or lead to a neglect of the need for policies to lower unemployment. It would help to improve rational job search and give people a greater sense of dignity and calm in which to make rational long-term career decisions.

Concluding reflections

This could be a wonderful time for the progressives of the world. Some periods are when defeat follows defeat, when the forward march is halted or temporarily turned back. Some eras see a rush forward, when new movements spring to life, fear changes sides, the rich and the powerful make concessions and a vision of something like utopia enthuses progressives almost everywhere.

Some eras are like those eerie stillnesses at sea as the tide is about to change. The strength of the tide going one way has run its course, but the run the other way has yet to gather strength. The cagey fisherman knows this is when the fish begin to bite.

We are at such a moment. Progressives made the running, intellectually and politically, between the late 1940s and early 1970s. The 1970s were a lull, in which reactionary ideas crystallised into a coherent strategy. The period between about 1980 and late in the 20th century was one of progressive retreat, when Thatcherism and Reaganism ushered in a period dominated by ‘neo-liberalism’, ‘the Washington consensus’ and ‘supply side economics’. Social democrats eventually responded but did so in a lukewarm, defensive manner, characteristically calling their modest agenda ‘the Third Way’, which generated the response of ‘compassionate conservatism’.

16 For further evidence on this international trend, see ILO 2004, especially chapter 3.

The anti-progressive tide has run its course. It may win some elections, and will be pushed further. But the insecurities and inequalities have become both revolting and corrosive, fostering instability and social reactions that threaten economic growth and human development. Intellectually, the progressive voice is becoming stronger, because those who want to speak are no longer afraid of being swept away. The timidity that produced the tinkering and euphemisms of social democrats in the 1990s is inadequate to the challenges of the era.

The lull between the tides is still there. Yet there is a huge opportunity to develop a new progressive vision, if we have the courage to take it and have open minds, even about views that have long been part of the progressive rhetoric. In particular, for the future of unions, we must rethink what it is about work that we want to promote and what form of security would best promote that. To do this, we must think radically. This is a historical moment, one that comes only every few decades. There is a risk that opportunities for progressive thinking will be missed. I have no doubt we are about to see a new spurt forward. A basic income should be part of that.

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