

Anti-working class snake oil?

Jane Lethbridge *considers some of the arguments put forward by those advocating a universal basic income*

A Universal Basic Income (UBI) is: 'A cash benefit that is: universal – paid to everyone in the population; individual - paid to each adult rather than as a single household payment; and unconditional – paid without means testing or conditions with regard to family or employment status (McLean, 2016).

UBI has recently become the focus of attention from both right- and left-wing politicians and activists, triggered by the increased use of digital technologies and the projected loss of jobs, particularly white-collar jobs. International organisations, such as the OECD, and the entrepreneurs of Silicon Valley are all interested in UBI. Both these groups are informed by a similar analysis of the future of jobs within the digital economy. They see existing models of social protection, which are based on contributions and entitlements to social security benefits as not 'fit for purpose'. Existing social protection systems are based on universal / solidarity values where workers make contributions and are then eligible for social security benefits. This relationship between contributions, shared risks and benefits has been the basis of the Welfare State since the mid-20th century and is increasingly under threat with governments promoting greater individual responsibility for social protection. UBI, if used alone and without fully-funded publicly-delivered public services, is part of this welfare reform, which is destroying the Welfare State.

Silicon Valley entrepreneurs are interested in UBI because it would make the insecurities of working for employer platforms (the 'gig' economy) like Uber

and Deliveroo less threatening. They are also hostile to the Welfare State because they believe that if state institutions responsible for welfare programmes were dismantled, the money could be used for their own business expansion. They argue that reduction and increased insecurity of jobs could be offset if workers learn how to code, receive a basic income and become entrepreneurs.

The renewed interest in UBI is coupled with the growth of economic insecurity throughout the world, with an increase in precarious work, which is not just about lack of control over work and pay but includes a lack of protection against dismissal and unfair working practices. The individualism of UBI, which provides an income to every citizen, places much greater emphasis on individual responsibilities and will not solve the problems of precarious work. Once each individual receives an income from the state they may have to organise other forms of social support themselves, which until now has been an integral part of Welfare State reforms. For women, this will result in their return to caring and other household work and a retreat from the paid workforce, which has been central to the expansion of women's independence.

Monotonous

The importance of work and the role that it plays in the lives of individual workers is frequently left out of an analysis of UBI. There is an assumption that if people are released from low skill, monotonous jobs then their lives will be improved. Braverman (1974),

updating Marx's analysis of the labour process, wrote that labour power has become a commodity and is organised according to the needs of the purchasers (employers) rather than those providing it (workers). Employers aim to reduce the cost of labour and the commodification of work results in a fragmented labour market. Workers have less control over the labour process. Consequently the sense of value and meaning within work is lost. There is no recognition of the sense of purpose that meaningful work can bring. As William Morris wrote: 'All men should have work to do which shall be worth doing, and be of itself pleasant to do and which should be done under conditions as would make it neither over-wearisome nor over-anxious' (1884: 98).

Dignity

There has been limited discussion of what meaningful work might be in the future. Adrian Madden (2016) distinguishes between the meaning of work, the meaning in work (dignity / decent work) and meaning gained from work: 'For organizations seeking to manage meaningfulness, the ethical and moral responsibility is great, since they are bridging the gap between work and personal life' (Madden, 2016).

The recognition of what meaningful work can give to the individual has to be incorporated into debates about UBI. Instead of celebrating the possibilities of endless self-improvement – through an educational entitlement perhaps - discussion could focus on how to distribute existing jobs more equitably. The New Economics Foundation has estimated that if everyone worked for 21 hours per week, this would eliminate the part / full time work distinction which negatively affects women and would also create jobs.

With continuing Welfare State reforms, UBI is being presented as a solution to a set of problems that require a much more comprehensive vision. In questioning the future of work and of workers (Gorz, 1980, Standing, 2011, Standing, 2016), UBI should only be seen as part of a set of solutions for an expanded social infrastructure which can be addressed by providing public services to meet the changing needs of individuals at different times of their lives. This would include a wider range of social rights and interventions such as child care, care for older people / people with disabilities, access to a comprehensive national education service and other policies which are not just income-focused. It will require some fundamental changes in attitudes to work and how people use their own time. Cooley suggests: 'The educational, cultural and other facilities simply do not exist in Britain to allow people

to enjoy leisure fully, nor are the economic resources available . . . Furthermore, the cultural background gives no basis for this.' (Cooley, 1987: 30)

Without these wider changes, a UBI will lead to continued low pay subsidised by the state. Arguments for the importance of work are needed at a time when many jobs are being abolished. UBI is not an easy solution to technological change.

References

- Cooley, M. (1987) *Architect of Bee? The Human Price of Technology* London: Hogarth
- Gorz, A. (1980) *Farewell to the Working Class: an essay on post-industrial socialism* London: Pluto
- Madden, A. (2016) 'Meaningful work . . . work in progress', presentation to Work and Employment Relations Unit (WERU), University of Greenwich, June 2016
- McLean, C. (2016) . . . *and justice for all? Basic income and the principles of gender equality* IPPR, <http://www.ippr.org/juncture/and-justice-for-all-basic-income-and-the-principles-of-gender-equity>
- Morris, W. (1884) *Art and Socialism*, p. 98
- Standing, G. (2011) *The Precariat: The New Dangerous Class* London: Bloomsbury
- Standing, G. (2016) *The Corruption of Capitalism* Biteback Publishing.