THE RIGHT TO REFUSE WORK

Nick Srnicek, Lecturer in Digital Economy
King’s College London
nick.srnicek@kcl.ac.uk

With robotics and machine learning advancing rapidly, our labour market looks set to undergo a significant transformation. Economists have warned that up to half of our jobs may disappear in the next two decades, automated away by a new wave of technology. Jobs in retail, logistics, and transportation are likely to take the brunt of the impact, while a growing healthcare sector soaks up some of these newly unemployed workers.

What can we do to prepare for this problem? One common solution that is proposed is more education. An easy political winner (who could be against more education?), it promises to give people the skills they need to get the high-tech ‘jobs of the future’. The problem with this proposal, however, is that most jobs of the future won’t require vast amounts of education. Forecasts by government agencies, for instance, suggest that most jobs in the future will only require secondary education, rather than any form of higher education. The ‘more education’ proposal also fails to deal with the lack of jobs. Even if we give people the skills to secure jobs, there still needs to be an economic system that is producing those jobs.

What then can be done? A radical and far-reaching solution is to provide a universal basic income (UBI), whereby the government provides everyone with a basic amount of money to live on. This would be an unconditional and universal grant—there would be no means testing, and everyone would receive it with no questions asked.

The utility of a UBI lies, first, in its ability to give everyone an income even if they can’t find a job. As automation and other capitalist pressures reduce the number and quality of jobs, alternative means of reproduction are all the more necessary. A UBI can help in building these alternatives to wage labour. Moreover, a UBI can effectively eliminate poverty by ensuring that people have enough money to pull them above the level of destitution. As it stands today, there are an increasing number of people in poverty and relying on food banks. Many of them are part of the ‘working poor’: people that are working low-wage, full-time jobs and yet still unable to make enough money to thrive. A UBI can effectively top up their incomes and pull them out of the vicious cycles of hardship and unemployment. The exact amount of a UBI will vary from region to region, but a minimum should be near to the local poverty level—this ensures the ability to survive.

The most important reason to consider a UBI, however, is the radical shift in power that it enacts. Currently, power lies with employers, and not with a large group of workers desperately seeking jobs to make ends meet. The situation is ripe for
capitalists to take advantage of workers’ desperation, forcing them to work long hours under poor conditions and for low wages. With a UBI, by contrast, workers would have the power to refuse work; to turn down terrible jobs, confident in the knowledge that they’ll always have a source of income. Rather than always being subjected to the demands of a boss, workers would have the freedom to choose what to do with their time. A UBI also changes the dynamics of power on a collective level, as workers can find it easier to band together—assured of their ability to fall back on a safety net, and able to use it as an indefinite strike fund.

A UBI therefore gives power to workers, and is a means to struggle for even more radical changes. Wage labour continues (and provides incentives for doing socially necessary work like reproductive labour), but it would have lost its coercive force. The idea of a UBI is now rapidly gaining traction. We are seeing Kenya, Finland and Canada run tests, while places like India have completed successful trials with a basic income. As the policy gains popularity, it will become even more necessary to ensure it is a UBI that works for the people, and not one that simply consolidates existing hierarchies of power.

The question that always arises is, of course, how to pay for it. On one level, a UBI can actually save money. Duplicate programmes in the welfare state, for example, could be eliminated (while maintaining targeted benefits). In addition, eliminating poverty can save immense amounts of indirect costs. In the UK, poverty costs around £78 billion annually in public services (e.g. healthcare, policing, housing, etc.)—a sum that could be drastically reduced. Most significantly though, we live in a world where eight men own as much as the bottom half of the world. At the very least, we desperately need higher taxes on wealth and property as an initial measure to solve this problem of extreme inequality. Using this money to fund a UBI would be a simple and effective way to start addressing these issues.