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Socialism & Universal Basic Income

Abstract

The idea of universal basic income (UBI) has taken on new life as people experience greater inequality and greater exploitation than ever before—combined with the recurrence of the historically-cyclical fear of mass unemployment driven by rapid advancements in automation technologies. But the idea of providing every person with a certain amount of money, regardless of their socioeconomic status or (in)ability to or (dis)interest in working, is far from universally-accepted by socialists. This essay offers replies to three common socialist criticisms of various basic income proposals, in an effort to defend the radical potential of UBI; a potential that is consonant with the fundamental goal of the socialist project—achieving a democratic, non-exploitative world beyond capitalism.

Keywords

Socialism, Universal Basic Income

Cover Page Footnote

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The idea of providing a stipend to every person in a given country—or even across the globe—seems like it would be a project that socialists would love. And while there are certainly a large number of socialists that do or would support the establishment of a universal basic income (UBI), there are many left criticisms of UBI that have produced a great deal of skepticism about the idea. Most of the critics of UBI treat its advocates as though they believe UBI would solve all or most socioeconomic problems, at least in the Global North.¹ I have yet to come across any serious UBI advocate who takes such an expansive position. My point here will be to provide reasons for why socialists should support a thick conception of UBI as a kind of radical reform from within capitalism, as part of a broader left agenda.²

In order to make this case, this essay will focus on three main contentions that are generally raised by left critics of UBI: (1) UBI would be used to dismantle existing social welfare programs, leaving the poor worse off than they were before; (2) UBI doesn't do anything for workers within the workplace; and (3) UBI doesn't challenge capitalism.

(1) First, it is quite true that not all UBI programs would be worth supporting. Any UBI program that would have the likelihood of leaving the poor and vulnerable worse off should certainly be opposed by any socialist or progressive. This kind of welfare-state replacement UBI is the kind that white supremacist and conservative thought-leader Charles Murray and other libertarians often support.³ However, simply because not all UBI programs are worth supporting, does not mean that there are not thick or expansive conceptions of UBI that absolutely are. An example of a conception of UBI that socialists should support would be one that is—as the acronym requires—universal and also set at or above subsistence. This means that all people, regardless of their ability or willingness to work, would at least be much more likely to live a life without lacking any fundamental necessities.

A subsistence (or higher) UBI would likely only be able to achieve the goal of eradicating extreme poverty if it was also combined with a universal health care and tuition-free public higher education system. If the poor still had to pay or go into massive debt to afford basic health care and education, a subsistence UBI would be nearly functionally irrelevant—or worse.

(2) Second, it is simply not true that UBI is irrelevant to workers and the workplace—again provided we are discussing a thick version of UBI. There are two key reasons why UBI

¹ A simple Google search for “UBI” delivers dozens and dozens of articles that offer similar perspectives from across the political spectrum. For some left examples see: Adam Booth, “Universal basic income: utopian dream or libertarian nightmare?” in *In Defense of Marxism* (Feb. 10, 2017), <https://www.marxist.com/universal-basic-income-utopian-dream-or-libertarian-nightmare.htm>; Alyssa Battistoni, “The False Promise of Universal Basic Income,” in *Dissent* (Spring 2017), <https://www.dissentmagazine.org/article/false-promise-universal-basic-income-andy-stern-ruger-bregman>; and Mark Paul, et. al., “Why We Need a Federal Jobs Guarantee,” in *Jacobin* (Feb. 4, 2017), <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2017/02/federal-job-guarantee-universal-basic-income-investment-jobs-unemployment/>.

² For an alternative, though somewhat similar, defense of UBI from a socialist perspective, see: David Calnitsky, “Debating Basic Income,” in *Catalyst* (Fall 2017).

³ Charles Murray, “A Guaranteed Income for All Americans,” in *The Wall Street Journal* (June 3, 2016), <https://www.wsj.com/articles/a-guaranteed-income-for-every-american-1464969586>.

would help workers in the workplace. First, if workers did not rely entirely on their wage for their subsistence, they would likely be able to take more aggressive positions in collective bargaining (Andy Stern, former president of the SEIU, has referred to UBI as a “national strike fund”).⁴ A subsistence UBI would decrease the opportunity-costs of hardline negotiating for higher wages, better benefits, fewer hours, and better working conditions. Workers, in such a position, could also demand greater democratic rights within the workplace. This is not to suggest that wages would cease to be a site of contention. On the contrary, by providing a stronger foundation from which to negotiate wages and benefits, there would be an opportunity for an *increase* in labor struggles.

The second way that UBI would aid workers in the workplace is more speculative. If a subsistence UBI were to be achieved, there is almost no way of imagining this taking place without massive organized support from workers. It would need to be collective demand that itself would require organizing and mobilizing workers, alongside the unemployed and homeless, and even stay-at-home moms and dads. The kind of social solidarity that such a radical policy position like a subsistence-level UBI would require would undoubtedly have important consequences for the organization of the workplace.

- (3) The idea that an expansive UBI program *could not* be a direct challenge to capitalism is frankly laughable. There are two main reasons why a subsistence UBI (or higher) could be a challenge to capitalism, but it is important to note that in the very short-term there is the chance of some increase in stability brought to the capitalist system by the Keynesian effects of the policy, if enacted in even a single globally-crucial economy like the US, the EU, or even China or India.⁵ This stability would be short-lived and could lead to progress towards socialism, for the reasons that follow.

⁴ In his book *Raising the Floor: How a Universal Basic Income Can Renew Our Economy and Rebuild the American Dream*, Stern attributes this insight to Timothy Roscoe Carter (PublicAffairs, 2016: pg. 188).

⁵ This is especially important when it comes to speculating about the costs of implementing a UBI program in various countries. The cost would be extraordinarily high, but that is only a death sentence for UBI if one assumes relatively similar growth rates as we have today (between roughly 1% and 4% depending on the specific economy or measure). Increased growth combined with a dedicated tax on higher income earners, inheritance, luxury properties (e.g., second and third homes, cars, and/or boats), and investment incomes would likely be enough to pay for a substantial UBI with little negative impact on anyone. Now, relying on the potential for consumer-driven growth is a dangerous proposition for the Left to accept given the planetary harms already done due to the growth-fetishizing economic logic of capitalism. However, if short-term consumer growth, driven by UBI, was channeled through green technologies and processes alongside a corollary demand that existing production be progressively reorganized to meet *different* consumer demands than the manipulated desires that are produced by capitalism in the same way that the physical products are, it is possible that further ecological damage would be sufficiently mitigated (especially when compared with existing trends). A low-carbon economy is also more likely to be achieved than the zero-carbon economy we need, but it seems reasonable to assume that progress towards a low-carbon economy would make eventually achieving a zero-carbon economy more likely. This is not a speculation or qualification that is rooted in optimism though. The planet and its various inhabitants—especially those already excessively harmed by the existing order—are already between a rock and hard (warm, wet) place. No amount of wishful thinking can change that. Low-carbon consumer growth could create an increase in the tax base large enough to sustain a UBI for a few decades, and it will be in those decades that the broader struggle against capitalism will be waged. It is also important to note that the typical alternative to UBI heralded by the Left is a combination of full employment and a shorter work week (see Daniel Zamora’s “The Case Against a Basic Income,” in *Jacobin* [Dec. 28, 2017] for a recent iteration of this false alternative). If one is primarily concerned about the ecological impact of a growth economy, full employment and a shorter work week fail to offer any necessarily more feasible path towards a

The first reason builds on the points made under the previous section: a subsistence UBI that did not replace existing, or was implemented alongside expanded, social welfare programs would require a mass movement in order to be achieved. It would also take workers in enormous numbers out of the realm of necessity and closer to the realm of freedom (as described by Marx). With a subsistence UBI, workers would no longer be forced to work at low-paying, degrading, unsafe, or mindless jobs. These jobs would then likely become the first sites of full automation. If systematically-compelled wage-labor is the *sine qua non* of the capitalist mode of production, then a subsistence-or-above UBI would be a direct challenge to the foundation of capitalism.

Secondly, a thick UBI could change how people think about their value in society. By declaring, not with mere rhetoric, but with serious policy, that all people, regardless of status, effort, place of birth, gender, race, sexuality, or any other category, are worthy of the dignity of the means to support themselves, society has a powerful opportunity to evolve in a more just and democratic direction. It wouldn't necessarily be a smooth transition, but it would certainly provide the basis for a practicable transition from capitalism to an egalitarian democratic postcapitalism (i.e., socialism).

These two points are in direct opposition to the position articulated by Daniel Zamora in *Jacobin*.⁶ Zamora argues that UBI reinforces the market ideology by simply allowing more people to participate in consumption. What Zamora misses (though this is basically true of most socialist critics of UBI) is the progressive decommodification of work and life in general that UBI can contribute to. If I don't have to work or don't want to work under undemocratic or unsafe conditions, I wouldn't have to. Yes, labor would still be commodified to some degree—but not universally or necessarily. In the same way that we could imagine a world where basic necessities are not commodified but luxury goods could be. With an expansive UBI, I wouldn't be required to sell my labor to survive. And while there would certainly still be a market for consumer goods at this stage, buying goods in the market is not the defining trait of capitalism. With an expansive UBI, the connection between structurally-coerced labor and one's ability to live a (decent) life—the foundational relationship of the capitalist mode of production—would be progressively severed.⁷ Imagine the creative “work” people could participate in of their own accord if they didn't have to “get a job” to survive.

degrowth economy than UBI does. Both would require degrowth as an additional demand. It seems that we are stuck with a growth economy in the short-term, so why not try—as much as possible—to make sure the processes and products of growth are far more equitably shared and democratically-determined? If, however, this consumer growth doesn't happen, all that will happen is that capitalism will collapse under the weight of the contradiction between the demands of the people for an equitable share of, and say in, the production of the social product and capitalism's inability to provide that. In this sense, the inability of capitalism to accommodate a UBI for any length of time speaks to the transitional radicalism of the demand itself.

⁶ Daniel Zamora (trans. Jeff Bate Boerop), “The Case Against Basic Income,” in *Jacobin* (Dec. 28, 2017), <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2017/12/universal-basic-income-inequality-work>

⁷ Zamora also seems to misread the socialist case for UBI as it relates to people's desire to work. UBI doesn't necessarily rest on any assumption regarding people's desire to work (Though Marx suggested that it is the alienated, exploitative working conditions under capitalism that produce a disinterest in work, and thus under democratic, non-exploitative conditions people would have an increased interest in work.). If people don't want to work, they don't need to (this is predicated on UBI being achieved in response to, or alongside, advancements in

Remember, not all UBI proposals are created equal and therefore not all UBI plans should be supported by those on the left. There are however very good reasons why a thick conception of UBI should be part of any socialist project aiming beyond capitalism but moving forward from within capitalism. There are no guarantees here, and it is imperative to think UBI within a much broader left program. There is, after all, no good reason to think that any one or two policies or demands would ever be successful on their own, especially not without the mass movement any one of them would necessarily need to have behind them in order to be achieved.

automation technologies that allow for mass production of basic goods with a minimal need for human labor). If people do want to work though, they can. Though the first category is typically treated as more potentially problematic by critics of UBI, it is the latter point that Zamora takes issue with. He seems to be concerned that there won't be enough jobs for the people who do want to work. While this might be true in the short-term, if our impetus as socialists is to move beyond capitalism, a major part of that process would undoubtedly entail the reorganization and reconceptualization of work itself. If people want to work, but can't find a "job" in order to work, what is to stop them from pursuing work that doesn't take the form of what we might consider a "job" today? Following Marx, we should assume that most people will want to work, but that isn't the same thing as wanting a job.