

Stand Up for Basic Income as a Human Right

by G.S. Evans

There is a growing movement in Europe in support of the idea of an unconditional basic income. In Switzerland, organizers gathered enough signatures to force a national referendum which, if successful, will make a basic income for every citizen the official government policy. A similar referendum initiative is being organized in Spain.

Meanwhile, across of the whole of the European Union, an official “European Citizens’ Initiative for a Basic Income in Europe” just concluded which, while it didn’t succeed in gathering the million signatures needed to officially place the issue on the European Union’s policy agenda, stimulated considerable discussion on this innovative, if controversial, proposal. The following text, taken from the website of the official citizens committee of the Initiative, gives a good idea of what is being proposed:

“An Unconditional Basic Income (UBI) or Citizen’s Income is a guaranteed income, given to all in addition to any other income they might receive. By advancing equality and economic participation while enabling simpler welfare systems, UBI leads to a fairer and more efficient society...

“We see today overwhelming evidence that the economic and social policies of the EU countries have a devastating impact on the lives of many Europeans.

“Rather than producing favorable conditions for the life of each individual, they often lead to a situation in which people have very little control over their own lives.

“In spite of the various solutions, measures and means put forth on national and European levels by successive governments to improve the conditions of life and work of their populations, a growing number of people are confronted with an everyday life of financial restrictions and a fading hope of seeing personal and professional efforts recognized.

“With the objective of implementing an Unconditional Basic Income for each individual, our European Citizens’ Initiative sets an emancipatory process in motion allowing everyone the opportunity of participation in working towards the common goals as stated in the Constitution and the Declaration of Human Rights.

“The initiators of the present initiative—which aims at exploring the feasibility of a European Basic Income scheme—emphasize that UBI should not replace the welfare state but rather complete and transform the same from a compensatory into an emancipatory welfare state.

“Emancipatory Unconditional Basic Income is defined by the following four criteria: universal, individual, unconditional, high enough to ensure an existence in dignity and participation in society.

“**Universal:** In principle every person, irrespective of age, descent, place of residence, profession, etc. will be entitled to receive this allocation. Thus we claim a European-wide, guaranteed, unconditional Basic Income.

“**Individual:** Every woman, every man, every child has the right to a Basic Income on an individual basis, and definitely not on a couple or household basis. The Unconditional Basic Income will be independent of their circumstances: of marital status, cohabitation or household configuration, or of the income or property of other household or family members. This is the only way to ensure privacy and to prevent control over other individuals. It enables individuals to make their own decisions.

“**Unconditional:** We regard Basic Income as a human right which shall not depend on any preconditions, whether an obligation to take paid employment, to be involved in community service, or to behave according to traditional gender roles. Nor will it be subject to income, savings or property limits.

“**High enough:** The amount should provide for a decent standard of living, which meets society’s social and cultural standards in the country concerned. It should prevent material poverty and provide the opportunity to participate in society. This means that the net income should, at a minimum, be at the poverty-risk level according to EU standards, which corresponds to 60% of the so-called national median net equivalent income. Especially in countries where the majority have low incomes, and therefore median income is low, an alternative benchmark (e.g. a basket of goods) should be used to determine the amount of the Basic Income, to guarantee a life in dignity, material security and full participation in society.”

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The issue of a basic, unconditional income—and the provoca-

tive manner in which the Initiative has presented the issue—has proven attractive and yet controversial for both the right and the left. Some fair portion of the opposition from both sides revolves around the sense that, as it was expressed in the Czech Republic, “*bez práce nejsou koláče*” (there are no cakes without work); that is, without the incentive to work, people

will get lazy, not work, and society will fall apart or atrophy.

And yet, it has also challenged elements of both the right and the left in this same regard: for the more libertarian right, it is appealing because it takes mat-

ters out of the hands of bureaucrats with all their means testing and social policy engineering and places responsibility on each and every individual receiving the basic income to make of it what he or she will; for the left, it has a strong element of utopianism in that it is the realization, in part, of the socialist and communist dream of a society where the efficiency of technology would abolish work—and the logic of capital and commodity relations along with it—so that, as Marx put it, “disposable time” becomes the measure of “true wealth.”

On a more practical level, the basic income appeals to elements on the right because, with an end to all the bureaucratic procedures associated with means testing for benefits, there would be a significant reduction in the size of the government bureaucracy.

For the left, on the other hand, it represents a solution to the growing problem of the “precariat”—that is, all those workers having to take a succession of

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transient, low-wage jobs. No longer desperate to take any job that comes along, these workers will be able to pick and choose, thereby putting pressure on employers to improve wages and working conditions. Indeed, as Ben Knight reports in the *Guardian* (“Hartz reforms:” How a benefits shakeup changed Germany, January 1, 2013), support for the Basic Income has grown in Germany in proportion to the government’s attempts to introduce “the modern interpretation of the word ‘incentive’ in the job market: the doctrine that poor people will only work if they are they are not given money.”

Much criticism of the initiative has also naturally focused on how to pay for the scheme, and various answers have been put forth. The British social policy analyst and economist Malcolm Torry has taken the lead in this, arguing in brief that a significant portion of the necessary money for a basic income can be realized by simply redirecting the money from the elaborate means testing system currently in use across the industrialized economies. Proposals for how to come up with the additional needed money range from the rein-troduction of a steeper progressive tax to a so-called “tax on the robots,” i.e. taxing part of the productivity gains from automation and putting it towards a basic income.

Because of the simplicity of the proposal—an *unconditional* basic income for *all*—and the directness of the campaign (e.g., a favorite Facebook meme of the campaign is a picture of some young toughs glaring into

the camera with the caption “**First rule of basic income: Everyone gets a basic income,**” or a picture of some robots with the caption, “**We don’t need wages, which is why we need a basic income**”) it has had the very positive effect of forcing people to address what the role of work in a post-industrial so-

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ciety should be, and to what extent we should be bound to traditional conceptions of work and the virtue that is assumed to flow from it.

Additionally, it directly confronts us with the age-old contradiction of bourgeois society’s “rights of man,” i.e., that we have the fundamental right to express our opinion, but we don’t have such a right to material well-being. Or, more specifically, as the slogan “a basic income is a human right” implies, it forces us to confront the issue of whether, since we are widely agreed that one has an inalienable political right to a share of the political power of his or her country (“one person, one vote”), whether we also have that right in regards to the wealth created by our nation’s economic system, which is why some prefer to call it a “citizen’s” or “social” income.

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Resources

Home page for the Citizen’s Initiative:

<http://basicincome2013.eu/en/>

Facebook page (see especially the discussions):

<https://www.facebook.com/ECI.BasicIncome>

Home page for the the Citizen’s Income Trust, a think tank focused on the policy specifics of the basic income:

<http://www.citizensincome.org/index.html>

