

## A Future of Hollow Democracy For Jobless Workers?

Robert McChesney and John Nichols, *People Get Ready: The Fight Against a Jobless Economy and a Citizenless Democracy* (Nation Books, 2016).

Reviewed by Russell Harrison

For years now in classes, in my writing, I've been banging on about the time having come when we could all sit around, guaranteed an income by the state. Friends laughed, found it impractical, altruistically asked, but what will (other) people do, they asked. Not, mind you, what would *they* do. On this account they had no fears. Maybe they'll sit around all day drinking beer and watching the game. ("So what?" I would say, "It beats working.") I pointed out that support had existed among the most orthodox (neo-liberal) mainstream circles, most notably Milton Friedman and Richard Nixon (more and more ironically looking, even to Noam Chomsky, like our last liberal president. And finally, in a way, surfacing in its mirror image, the drive for a raised minimum wage, soon to morph into the demands for a living wage and then metamorphosing into the demand for a guaranteed annual income (GAI).

Nowhere, however, is there a discussion of the quality of the job itself. In a sense then, the current debate of jobs/the job/ minimum/ living wage lags behind the discussions of the 1960/1970s "Lordstown era" worker unrest and the Anarchist debates of the 1860s and of the Spanish Civil War 60 years later. Perhaps the following quotation, from Kropotkin, best sums up the anarchist position: "The truly lazy individual is extremely rare. The so-called idler .... is often only a person to whom it is repugnant to spend life making the hundredth part of a watch while in possession of exuberant energy to expend elsewhere" (Avrich 65).

While the 19th-century discussions lag in some ways between contemporary ones, it is the fact that they are now taken more seriously that is important. One does wonder why that central issue – the quality of the job – is so little debated. Several thoughts come to mind. First of all, the people who write and publish and talk about job quality, for the most part, don't have such types of jobs. I, for instance, teach and write. Ditto for most my friends and colleagues. And it is not that others have no interest in other people's jobs; the success of Studs Terkel's *Working: People Talk about What They Do All Day and How They Feel about What They Do* indicates such an interest. I would go out on a limb and say that most people have horrible jobs. Unpleasant as this fact may be, it is the plain truth. And because most people's alternatives in this the most materially important realm of everyday life are severely limited, one prefers denial, one of the most common defense mechanisms. The thought also arises that the more material aspects of work (wages, hours, job security) more readily lend themselves to analysis. So be it.

In this essay, I focus on the part of the book that deals with technological job loss, less with the politics noted in the second part of the subtitle. In a word or so, the more political part of the book travels the well-worn path of the power of money in politics after the Supreme Court's *Citizens United* decision. The authors derive the impotence of the ordinary citizens to mobilize effectively as stemming from politicians' promising their support of a measure beneficial to a majority of the people only to have the politician, once elected, perform a volte face and abandon his support for the issue.

"It bakes in cynicism about politics and about what is possible in a democracy – signaling that the fundamental issues really are off the table. This is the means by which unelected bankers and billionaires most effectively and steadily define the popular discourse, placing issues of concern to their bottom lines out of reach for the great mass of citizens. Then, the elites need only convince a handful of policy makers who are for reasons of campaign finance eternally beholden to them. The bigger the issue, invariably, the more 'off limits' it is." (139).

What do the authors suggest as a vehicle for change? Their answer, and it seems to me a good one, is to initiate something like a new constitutional convention. It has the appeal that those among its proponents are represented across the left-right spectrum. Let the formal politics lie where it may

Fortunately, they have written a book that splendidly summarizes the issue of job loss in the most global sense of all work lost due to automation. (I use this term to also include robotization, computerization and artificial intelligence.) While "it is impossible for most of us to conceive of a society without jobs," they write, "it is not frivolous to ask whether there will be anywhere near enough jobs to provide employment for all the peoples who require incomes, and whether the wages and conditions of the jobs that exist will be remotely close satisfactory for a credible economy or a democratic society." (43)

The authors maintain that recent accelerated technological progress has been like no other and thus represents so great a change that it becomes a change in kind, i.e., a change in quantity becomes a change in quality. These changes have already caused problems in that millions of jobs have been technologized out of existence. To take a random example from the book: The increasing size of the reserve army of the unemployed has now become so all-engulfing that, especially for the young, "informal work, or freelancing already

accounts for around one third of the US workforce, fully 53 million workers” (71). Newsweek “characterized young Americans as ‘Generation Screwed.’” Some writers have advanced the thesis that technology has become so productive that there is no longer need to work; or that the amount of human labor necessary for the production of a suitable standard of living Understandably enough, then, the idea of a guaranteed annual income, unrelated to work, has once more surfaced. I say once more because it was a concept that had been seriously discussed in the 1960s, but with much less support.

That it had been seriously discussed is evidenced in a 14-page memorandum of March 22, 1964 to President Lyndon Johnson. Signed by current and future Nobel Prize winners Linus Pauling and Gunnar Myrdal as well as the publisher of *Scientific American*, warned the President that:

“As machines take over production from men, they absorb an increasing proportion of resources while the men who are displaced become dependent on minimal and unrelated government measures – unemployment insurance, social security, welfare payments. These measures are less and less able to disguise a historic paradox: that a growing proportion of the population is subsisting on minimal incomes, often below the poverty line at a time when sufficient productive potential is available to supply the needs of everyone in the United States” (80).

The memo called for a guaranteed basic income for all Americans – not based upon one’s labor – to solve the problem” (80).

As I said earlier, over the years whenever I would push these ideas to students or to colleagues, they would smile indulgently – if that. The idea seemed so obvious and yet there was all this passive resistance. I could never figure it out. Over the last few years some countries have taken up the idea: Brazil, Canada, Finland, the Netherlands and India (*Financial Times*, 6/5/2016) The FT writer noted that “Once the preserve of radical economists, the idea of governments providing basic incomes has moved into the political mainstream in recent years.

The reaction on the left was twofold, and quite interesting. One camp reacted positively. After all it would produce a great redistribution of wealth as the rich would be taxed, in large part, to support the program. But there was also strong negative criticism from the left. Paul Sweezy and Leo Huberman argued that:

“Our conclusion can only be that the idea of unconditionally guaranteed incomes is not the great revolutionary principle that which the authors of ‘The Triple Revolution’ [the title of the memo] evidently believe it to be. If applied under our present system, it would be, like religion, an opiate of the people tending the status quo [and] far from igniting an era of regeneration, it would merely tend to dull the sense of anger and outrage, which is the natural human reaction to a society as corrupt as ours. Instead, they call for socializing the economy so that the surplus generated by automation was controlled by society as a whole, not by the owners of a handful of large corporations.”

Filtering out the differences of linguistic register, Sweezy and Huberman seem to be saying that the imposition of a guaranteed basic income would dull any radical transformative tendency. People would sit around drinking beer all day and watching the game. I would incline to a more Brechtian stance: “Erst kommt das Essen, Dann kommt die Moral.” It certainly is an area calling for much discussion.

An interesting test of the guaranteed income idea came recently. A referendum initiative for a guaranteed income was soundly rejected in Switzerland when a mere 23% voted for it. I think the Swiss reaction will be seen to have been an outlier. But there is a more global answer in the advanced industrial countries as to why the concept has now become *salonf*. Today, it is the global middle class as well as the working class that needs support, since their higher education was not high enough anymore.

---

*Russell Harrison is a Special Assistant Professor in the Writing Studies and Composition Department at Hofstra University.*

*REGIONAL LABOR REVIEW*, vol. 19, no. 1 (Fall 2016).

© 2016 Center for the Study of Labor and Democracy, Hofstra University