

# The Neoliberal Danger of Basic Income

 [socialistproject.ca/bullet/1494.php](http://socialistproject.ca/bullet/1494.php)

The [Ontario Coalition Against Poverty](#) (OCAP) has drawn up the following statement on basic income (BI). It makes the case that, progressive hopes to the contrary notwithstanding, BI is being developed as a measure of neoliberal attack that should be opposed. We invite progressive organizations and individuals who hold positions in agencies and academic institutions, who agree with our arguments, to sign onto the statement. We hope that it will raise a voice of opposition and help develop information sharing and forms of co-operation among those, internationally, who reject the notion that basic income represents any kind of realistic response to the neoliberal attack.

We, the undersigned, are convinced that the emerging model of basic income, reflected in pilot projects and other initiatives in a number of countries and jurisdictions, is one that would intensify the neoliberal agenda. The hope that there is any realistic chance of ensuring a truly adequate, universal payment, that isn't financed by undermining other vital elements of social provision, is misplaced in our view.



We are far from wanting to suggest that existing systems of income support are anywhere close to adequate. They provide precarious sub-poverty income under conditions that are marked by intrusive regulations and forms of moral policing. Moreover, decades of neoliberal austerity have made these systems considerably worse.

However wretched and inadequate present systems may be, the assumption that basic income must or even could be an improvement on the status quo has to be tested by considering a number of factors. Historically, income support has been provided because those in political power concluded that outright abandonment of those not in the workforce would create unacceptably high levels of unrest and social dislocation. In the far from dead tradition of the English Poor Laws, income support has been provided at levels that were low enough to maintain a supply of the worst paid workers, in forms that were as punitive and degrading as possible. Again, the neoliberal years have seen these features intensified in what we must concede has been a highly effective drive to create a climate of desperation and a plentiful supply of low paid and precarious workers.

If austerity driven governments and institutions of global capitalism are today looking favourably at basic income,

it's not because they want to move toward greater equality, reverse the neoliberal impact and enhance workers' bargaining power. They realize that a regressive model of basic income can be put in place that provides an inadequate, means tested payment to the poorest people outside of the workforce but that is primarily directed to the lowest paid workers. This would be, in effect, a subsidy to employers, paid for out of the tax revenues and it would be financed by cuts to broader public services. Such a model would lend itself to [disregarding the particular needs of disabled people](#) and, as a "citizen's income," [could readily be denied to many immigrants](#), especially those left undocumented. Under such a system, you would shop through the rubble of the social infrastructure with your meagre basic income. The kind of pilot projects and other initiatives that are emerging offer severe warnings in this regard (we include some links at the bottom of this article that provide information on several of these).

## Workless Future?

However, some suggest that while regressive models could be developed and may pose a danger, a progressive and even "emancipatory" form of basic income is possible and realistic as a goal. Often, this is linked to the idea of preparing for a "workless future" in which vast numbers of technologically displaced workers can be provided for. The notion is that a universal payment would be provided unconditionally and that it would be adequate enough so that paid work, if it were an option, would be a matter of choice rather than necessity. While there are a few who suggest this could be won through large scale social action, advocates for a progressive basic income more often seem to assume that capitalist support and acceptance by the state can be won by way of a vigorous lobbying effort.

In our view, a truly adequate and redistributive, let aside transformative, basic income is not possible within the confines of the current economic system. Firstly, the present balance of forces in society, after decades of neoliberalism, does not lend itself to the conclusion that a sweeping measure of social reform, that would reverse this whole agenda, is immediately likely. Beyond this, however, an income support system that removed economic coercion in a way that progressive basic income advocates suggest, would be more than turning back the neoliberal tide. It would actually mean that the state was providing the working class with an unlimited strike fund. It would undermine the very basis for the capitalist job market. It would constitute social transformation, a revolutionary change that is, to say the least, beyond the capacity of any possible social policy enactment.

If basic income as emancipation is not possible, it can only too easily take form as neoliberal intensification. Yet, sadly, progressive advocates end up offering legitimacy to that regressive alternative but placing hopes in musings about basic income by Silicon Valley billionaires or by presenting cynical pilot projects, set up by austerity driven governments, as flawed but important first steps. However much they wish otherwise, the sow's ear will not become a silk purse.

*We must fight for free, expanded and accessible public services. We must win decent wages and workers' rights. "*

If faith in a progressive basic income is misplaced, we wish we could offer a shining and readily attainable alternative but this is not possible. We are largely fighting a defensive struggle against a virulent agenda to undermine social provision and increase the rate of exploitation. We can only offer the hard slog of building stronger inclusive movements of social resistance, rejuvenating unions and building a working class political challenge to neoliberalism. As we do this, we must fight for free, expanded and accessible public services. We must win decent wages and workers' rights. We must struggle for income support systems that are based on adequacy, full entitlement and that are purged of intrusive rules and moral policing. We must infuse all of these movements and struggles with a sense of a very different kind of society from the capitalist one we are fighting. This doesn't have the glitter of the dream of a progressive basic income but it does accept the reality that there is no social policy way around neoliberalism or a long and hard fight against it. The progressive welcome mat for basic income is a very big mistake. •

# Progressive Dreams Meet Neoliberal Realities

 [socialistproject.ca/bullet/1350.php](http://socialistproject.ca/bullet/1350.php)

## John Clarke

Up until now, the concept of Basic Income (BI) has enjoyed a greater history of being proposed than of being implemented. We may well be approaching a period, however, when this changes. The Ontario Government is [holding consultations](#) on setting up a BI pilot project. The Legislature in another Canadian Province, Prince Edward Island, has agreed to [test out a version of BI](#). Pilot projects are also impending in [Finland](#), the [Netherlands](#) and [Scotland](#).



Basic Income has been suggested in an exceptionally wide range of forms, often with completely different objectives in mind. In fact, we can draw a line between the models that are concerned with improving lives and raising living standards and those that are focused on intensifying the capacity for capitalist exploitation. Among those in the 'progressive' category there is considerable diversity. There's the 'universal demogrant' that provides an income to everyone and the concept of a 'negative income tax' involving some level of means test. BI proposals come from liberal quarters that are responsibly redistributive, reduce poverty and inequality and ease up on bureaucratic intrusion. The above mentioned proposal for an Ontario pilot project would be part of this camp. Then there are the models that have more radical, transformative objectives in mind. These suggest that BI could be used to take from employers the power of economic coercion itself by [severing the link between work and income](#). Often such ideas are tied to the notion of preparing for sweeping technological displacement and a 'workless future' by providing secure, adequate and unconditional income. Given the vast extent to which forms of unpaid labour are performed by women in this society, it is hardly surprising that there are also [feminist arguments](#) for BI.

I have to say that the one really common thread that I see running through all of the notions of a progressive BI is that they pay great attention to explaining how nice their systems would be but give little if any thought to the concrete prospects of implementation. Before looking further at these deficiencies and proposing an alternative approach, it might be useful to consider more seriously the neoliberal version that is hanging like a sword over all our heads.

## Neoliberal Version

The deeply [reactionary ideas of Charles Murray](#) have extended to some very sinister proposals for BI. There are two basic elements that shape his system. Firstly, the universal payment, after the compulsory purchase of



private health insurance, is set at the dreadfully low amount of \$10,000 a year. Secondly, he is utterly insistent that all other systems of provision must be dismantled as a BI is put in place. Canada's right wing Fraser Institute, [recently used its blog](#) to stress the same points as Murray, making clear that the level of provision must not interfere with the supply of low waged workers.

If governments today, as they intensify the neoliberal agenda, are starting to consider the possibilities of BI, I see three factors at work. Firstly, there is the not unimportant issue of legitimacy. Particularly because they are being provided with a generous amount of 'progressive' cover, they are able to present their deliberations on BI as a responsible weighing of the common good. The Ontario Liberals stand out as international champions in this regard. Their BI pilot project consultations, have enabled them to put in place yet another round of fake dialogue, with the empty promise of a "[better way](#)" diverting attention as they push people even deeper into poverty. The World Bank and the IMF have been [worrying out loud](#) about the backlash against their austerity agenda and its devastating impacts. That IMF economists are themselves [musing about BI](#), is perhaps significant in this regard. It advances their agenda but can be dressed up to look progressive. It may be the best thing for the institutions of global capitalism since the myth of 'poverty reduction'.

The second element of BI that I think is of interest to the architects of neoliberalism is that it can fine tune economic coercion as they create an ever more [elastic workforce](#) based on the most precarious forms of employment. The income support systems that emerged out of the Poor Law tradition, stressed intense restrictions and moral policing. Along with horribly inadequate benefit levels, this has been very useful in driving people into low waged work to an [unprecedented extent](#). It may, however, be time to rethink this to a degree. If people are moving between poverty wages and poverty level benefits more frequently in a precarious job market, perhaps they can be more effectively prodded into the worst jobs with less intrusive benefit systems. A less rule bound delivery of poverty income, that gives people a chance of retaining their housing, may be needed to keep them job ready. Linked to this, of course, is the huge boost to the employers of a BI system that constitutes a form of wage top up. Provided the payment is meagre, it will not impede the flow of low paid workers but it will mean that their employers receive a subsidy that absolves them from having to pay living wages or come under pressure to increase the amount they do provide.

Thirdly, the great advantage of neoliberal BI is that the inadequate and dwindling payment it provides turns those who receive it into customers in the marketplace. In my opinion, BI would be far from the best way to strengthen the social infrastructure at any time but in the context of an intensifying agenda of austerity and privatization, it is a recipe for disaster. It's really about the commodification of social provision. Your payment may actually be less conditional and somewhat larger but, as you shop through the privatized remains of the social infrastructure, with inadequate means and very few rights, you are dramatically worse off. That, in my view, is what is being prepared by those who will actually implement a system of BI and the hopes and wishes to the contrary of its progressive advocates don't count for very much.

## **Progressive Dreams**

I said previously that proposals for redistributive or transformative models of BI are generally marked by a tendency to focus on the desirability of what is being advanced while paying much less attention to actual prospects for implementation. I've yet to see, quite bluntly, any serious attempt to assess what stands in the way of a progressive BI and what can be done to bring it into existence. It simply isn't enough to explain how just and fair a given model would be if it could be adopted. In order to credibly advance BI as the solution, there are some questions that must be settled.

Firstly, income support systems came into being because, while employers welcome an oversupply of labour and the desperation that comes with it as something that boosts their bargaining power, the total abandonment of the jobless creates social unrest. Some measure of income support, provided as a reluctant concession, has proved to be necessary. However, the systems of provision that have been put in place have always been as inadequate as possible so as to undermine employer strength as little as possible. A widely delivered or even universal adequate payment would greatly tilt that balance back the other way. What reason is there to think that this is likely to be implemented?

Secondly, over the last several decades, concessions made during the post war years have been taken back. Trade unions have been weakened, workers' rights undermined and low waged work has increased considerably. The degrading of income support systems has been central to creating the climate of desperation needed to achieve this. Not only have benefits for the unemployed been attacked but other systems, especially for disabled people have been undermined so as to generate a scramble for the worst jobs. This has led to a shift in the balance of forces in society and we are fighting a largely defensive struggle. Given this very unfavourable situation, in which unions and movements are not in the ascendancy, how can it be supposed that those profiting from the present situation are likely to accept a measure of redistributive social reform that is at least as sweeping as anything put in place during the post war boom? What is the plan to make this happen?

Thirdly, as right wing governments and political parties directly linked to the most reactionary business interests consider BI and set up pilot projects that provide meagre payments and focus on how to ensure people on social benefits become low waged workers, what reason is there to imagine that a progressive BI, rather than the neoliberal variant, is being cooked up?

Regardless of these issues, it is sometimes asserted that an adequate system of provision must be put in place simply because we are moving toward a "[workless future](#)." In such a society, it is suggested, masses of people who have been displaced will have to be provided for and the capitalists will have to think like Elon Musk, of Tesla Motors and support BI because it is the only sensible and rational solution. To imagine such responsible provision for the future is to place undue faith in a system based on the making of profit. If they won't stop building pipelines in the face of environmental catastrophe, there's little reason to expect them to worry too much about sensible solutions to technological displacement. There simply is no post-capitalist capitalism and no social policy innovation that is going to bring it about.

At a recent panel on Basic Income that I spoke at, the moderator posed a challenge. She accepted that BI might not be a way forward but asked, if that were so, what "bold vision" could be advanced in its place. It's a fair question but a realistic appraisal of what we are up against is still obligatory, even if that has some sobering aspects to it. The great problem that we have is that the neoliberal years have done a lot of damage. The level of exploitation has been increased and working class movements have been weakened. While what we demand and aspire to is very important, the bigger question is what we can win. What's disturbing about the left wing turn to BI is that it seems to think there is a social policy end run around the realities of neoliberalism and the need to resist it. There is no such thing.

## British Labour Party and BI

With very good reason, there has been considerable excitement internationally around the Jeremy Corbyn leadership in the British Labour Party. His close ally, Shadow Chancellor, John McDonnell, has been [paying some attention to adopting BI](#), as part of a platform that would express a break with the austerity consensus. McDonnell, from a position on the left of a major social democratic party, raises the possibility of a 'best case scenario' for progressive BI. For that very reason, the question is posed of whether the 'bold vision' I spoke of should be framed around the universal payment concept or devoted to other objectives.

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*Basic Income, when all is said and done, is a vision for nothing more than the means to be a customer in an unjust society that decides what is for sale. ”*

In my opinion, if we are to consider goals we set and demands we put forward in the face of neoliberalism, that are based on the needs of workers and communities and create the conditions for challenging capitalism itself, we sell ourselves well short if we settle for something so limited and inherently conservative as the universal payment. BI, when all is said and done, is a vision for nothing more than the means to be a customer in an unjust society that decides what is for sale. How much bolder and more meaningful to fight for free, massively expanded and fully accessible systems of healthcare and public transportation? How much better to focus on the

creation of social housing and try to expand it so that, not only the poorest, but most working class people enjoy its benefits? There is universal child care and vast array of important community services to pay attention to. Moreover, we can work to wrest as much power as possible out of the hands of the mandarins of state bureaucracy and fight to increase the control working class people exercise over the public services they rely on. When it comes to existing systems of income support, we should not for a moment accept their poverty level benefits, bureaucratic intrusion and forms of moral policing steeped in racism and sexism. There is a fight to be taken forward for living income, full entitlement and programs that meet the real needs of unemployed, poor and disabled people, as opposed to the present 'rituals of degradation' they embody. At every point, let's try to ensure that these expanded services are not paid for by other working class people but by forcing the corporations, banks and those who own them to pay by increasing their tax burden and imposing levies on their wealth.

The struggle to expand and improve public services would have to, of course, be linked to workers' struggles for living wages, workplace rights and real compensation for injured workers. Beyond this, let's challenge as much as we can the 'business decisions' that deplete resources, pollute and threaten us with ecological disaster.

I am suggesting that our movements need to challenge, rather than come to terms with, the neoliberal order and the capitalist system that has produced it. For all its claims to be a sweeping measure, the notion of progressive BI is a futile attempt to make peace with that system. In reality, even that compromise is not available. The model of BI that governments are working on in their social policy laboratories will not 'end the tyranny of the labour market' but render it more dreadful. The agenda of austerity and privatization requires a system of income support that renders people as powerless and desperate as possible in the face of exploitation and that won't change if it is relabelled as 'Basic Income'. •

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# What Basic Income Means for Disabled People

 [socialistproject.ca/bullet/1399.php](http://socialistproject.ca/bullet/1399.php)

## AJ Withers and John Clarke

Disabled people in Ontario are much more likely to experience poverty than non-disabled people. Many have to live on sub-poverty payments under the Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP) or the even more wretched income provided by Ontario Works (OW). Those that are in this situation are confronted by an ongoing process of surveillance, invasion of their privacy and moral policing. Those disabled people who are working, because of systemic discrimination, are less likely to be receiving living wages and are far more likely to be precariously employed. As anti poverty organizers, we fully understand the anger and desperation that such a situation generates.



On this basis, it is easy to see how, at first glance, there are aspects of a Basic Income (BI) approach that could be found attractive by disabled people. The promise of a somewhat higher payment, provided without the kind of intrusive element that presently exists, would seem to represent a step forward. However, we think it's important to ask why the Liberal Government would suddenly support a new approach that would mean considerably increased costs. Why would a Government that has driven down the adequacy of benefit rates and cut programs for disabled people want to reverse course so dramatically?

BI can look very alluring but we are convinced that, in reality, it will mean a degrading of the already inadequate 'social safety net' that will make things dramatically worse for disabled people. The Ontario Government's adviser on BI, Hugh Segal, has proposed a pilot project under which a small sampling of people on OW would have their income raised to \$1,320 month. A group on ODSP would be paid \$500 more than they are at present. In both cases, the money would be provided without much of the scrutiny and intrusion people presently have to put up with. There is no doubt that the small number of people who became part of such a project would be better off for as long as it lasted. However, it is unlikely that the Ontario Government will run the test at income levels as high as their advisor suggests. Moreover, while a small minority of people are being tested in this way, over a period of several years, far greater numbers will be living as in deep poverty as before on OW and ODSP. There is also no reason to assume that any Province wide system of BI that was eventually adopted would provide the same income as under the pilot project.

## Why Basic Income?



It seems curious that the Liberals are ready to offer the promise of long term improvement by way of Basic Income while they flagrantly ignore the glaring problems with the existing system of social assistance and other poverty causing factors that they could deal with immediately. Raising social assistance rates and the minimum wage, building more affordable housing, ensuring that homeless people at least had basic shelter, developing free or low costs pharmacare and dental programs, expanding disability related benefits for all low income people and eliminating the long waiting lists for things like attendant care and supportive housing are all things that they could act upon now to make a real difference in peoples' lives. If they won't do things, why should we believe that they want to redistribute wealth and alleviate poverty but way of a system of BI.

The Ontario Liberals have established a long and very ugly record of imposing an agenda of imposing austerity and attacking public services. We might ask ourselves if there is a danger of BI being implemented in such a way as to deepen, rather than reverse, that agenda. During the years of they have been in power, the Liberals have driven down the adequacy of social assistance and, apart from the money this has saved them, this has created a situation where people are more desperate and ready to accept even the lowest paying and most exploitative jobs. By making ODSP ever harder to get onto and, by allowing the rates to fall lower against inflation, they have ensured that disabled people are frequently forced to be part of this scramble for the worst jobs on offer. Indeed the reference to setting up a pilot project that was contained [the last Provincial Budget actually stressed](#) that there was a hope that Basic Income could “strengthen the attachment to the labour force.” The real danger with a BI system, as it might actually be designed by an austerity driven government, is that it could be a basis for making things even worse.

The right wing U.S. political scientist, Charles Murray, advances a version of BI that calls for a wretchedly inadequate payment of \$10,000 a year to be provided but, Murray stresses, it is essential that this payment replace all the other elements of social provision. At a time of mounting austerity, with public services at acute risk of privatization, this is exactly the way in which BI could further a regressive agenda. Even a payment that is somewhat higher than under the present social assistance rates would still be a step backwards for disabled people and poor people in general if it was used to justify and increase the attack on public services and other benefits. Things like the Special Diet, medical transportation and the child care benefit might be targeted. What good would a slightly higher payment be if, as part of the new arrangement, people now faced exorbitant costs for things like hearing aids, wheelchairs, prosthetics, medical supplies and respiratory devices? If BI opened the door to such regressive measures, it would lead, not to reduced levels of poverty, but to a very much worse situation.

The kind of Basic Income we might expect the Ontario Liberals to design would turn the social safety net into a tightrope. The network of present systems is undoubtedly inadequate but a system of universal payment would be even more vulnerable to austerity and the impact of allowing it to fall against inflation or of reducing the level of the benefit would be enormous.

For all the talk of a ‘no strings attached’ system of income provision, governments that are looking at BI or designing pilot projects are very focused on issues of how the system might serve to prod people into low paying jobs. Linked to this, are the old notions of molding poor people into becoming ‘productive’ conforming workers and consumers. This is why coded language around the reconstruction of people can be found in BI literature. For example, the [Manitoba Liberal Party supports](#) the implementation of a guaranteed income on the grounds that it would help in “the building of self-reliant, taxpaying citizens.” Similarly, Ontario's report on BI argues that behavioural changes and increased independence are important goals. The old moral assumptions have not really disappeared.

## **Basic Income and Disability**

There are different ways that a BI could be implemented. The [Ontario Report suggests](#) that disabled people get \$500 extra in recognition that the “costs of living with a disability” are higher than those faced by non disabled people. However, this isn't true in the same way across the board. The expenses of someone having to pay the daily cost of a service dog, someone who needs special dietary items, someone who must pay for attendant care, someone who has to pay for ASL interpretation or someone who has to replace a \$40,000 wheelchair are all very different. If BI were used as a pretext to eliminate other systems of support, there are a whole range of



needs that different disabled people have that would be placed out of range for them.

Importantly, who gets the disabled top up will revolve around how the Government defines disability. Lots of those who are disabled will not be accepted as such. The definition of disability is very limited in terms of accessing ODSP and it's likely that the vast majority of disabled people will not qualify for the additional payment under a BI system. Governments are presently working to narrow the concept of 'disability' and the introduction of a new income support system would likely offer an opportunity to take that further.

## Imagining the Future

Right now, we are being told that we are at a crossroads and there are two possible futures. One in which things remain the same with inadequate social assistance rates and rampant poverty or one in which everyone gets a BI payment at 75% of the poverty line in Ontario, making it supposedly easier to escape from poverty altogether. The second, BI future will require study, public consultations and several years to put into place but we are told it's the best possible outcome. [Ed.: see [LeftStreamed No. 346](#) for a debate on Basic Income.]

One of the main arguments for BI is that social assistance is deeply flawed: the rates are too low and it is punitive and degrading. However, it isn't necessary to pin hopes on BI to fix these things. The Government could raise social assistance rates to decent levels but it has made the deliberate choice to perpetuate the suffering of the poorest people in Ontario. The Government could eliminate the policies and structures that make social assistance so punitive. It could make the system fair and respectful and expand benefits to all disabled people but it chooses not to.

A lot of people who promote BI have very good intentions. This isn't the case, however, for Kathleen Wynne's Liberals and other governments that are investigating BI. They intend more cuts and to increase pressure on people to scramble for the worst jobs. Rather than pin our hopes on the flawed concept of BI, so easily implemented in ways that further a regressive agenda and harm disabled people, we suggest fighting for adequate income, living wages, improved, expanded and accessible public services and income support systems that are adequate and free of surveillance and moral policing. This won't be won by trusting governments to do the right thing but through strong collective struggle. •

AJ Withers and John Clarke are anti-poverty activists with [Ontario Coalition Against Poverty](#).

# How ‘Progressive’ Basic Income Proposals Fail Migrants

 socialistproject.ca/bullet/1489.php

## Intentional Neglect or Callous Oversight?:

**Yogi Acharya and A.J. Withers**

In the debate around the pros and cons of basic income, the implications for immigrants are seldom discussed. This omission, whether intentional or a product of indifference, is particularly glaring in progressive pro-Basic Income (BI) literature where the term “citizen’s income” is often used synonymously. Taken together, a troubling picture emerges of what is imagined for basic income and who is to be included within it. While basic income is often promoted in the name of social justice, we will demonstrate that this vision is flawed and excludes migrants – which we argue is both profoundly unjust and works to reinforce the white supremacy and class hierarchies that are foundational to the Canadian state.



Globally, the predominant driver of migration continues to be poverty and war. Growing income inequality fuelled by neoliberal capitalism and ever-expanding wars are driving record numbers of people away from their homes. Historical forces have shaped the world such that a sizable amount of this migration is heading to the global north. The same forces have also created immigration systems to control migration, and by extension, migrants themselves. This control has taken the form of forcing migrants to work in precarious conditions for low pay and with few legal protections. A key mechanism of exerting this control has been the introduction of a tiered system of rights and privileges.

In Canada, this takes the form of the classification of migrants based on their mode of arrival. There are permanent residents, temporary foreign workers, refugees, and students. There are also those who are denied any legal status, and forced to become undocumented. Each category has a different set of rights and legal protections. Permanent residents are closest to citizens in their grant of rights and legal protections whereas undocumented residents are afforded virtually none of either. While there exists some mobility between the categories, the process is expensive and convoluted, often taking years, and in some cases, there is no mobility at all. Trends in immigration policy demonstrate a shift toward keeping an increasing percentage of migrants from obtaining permanent residency, and by extension, citizenship. For example, over the past decade and a half, when Canada increased its intake of immigrants, the greatest expansion – a [three-fold increase](#) – was in the category of temporary foreign workers. The clear motivation for these policies, despite often being couched

in xenophobic rhetoric, is the need to create a flexible business-friendly labour market. Given this context, and Canada's reliance on immigrant labour for its economic and population growth, it is imperative that we assess what the introduction of basic income means for migrants.

## Universal Benefit?

Basic income is generally imagined by its progressive proponents as a universal benefit – meaning that *everyone* would get it regardless of their circumstances. In the means-tested version, it is proposed that *anyone* who falls below a certain income level would qualify. Comparisons to existing universal programs such as healthcare, Old Age Security (OAS), Guaranteed Income Supplement (GIS), and the Canada Child Benefit (CCB) lead proponents to argue that basic income would be a replication of such programs. It's important to examine the presumed universality of these programs for two reasons. Firstly, BI proponents typically assume the same number of people who access existing benefits should be eligible to access basic income. Secondly, existing universal benefits aren't truly universal: not all residents of Canada have the same level of access to them. Migrants often have restricted access to, or are excluded from 'universal' programs. For instance, taxes paid by temporary foreign workers support OAS, GIS and CCB but they can seldom access them. The same applies to their contributions to Canada Pension Plan and Employment Insurance. When it comes to healthcare, temporary foreign workers are only eligible if they continue to have a job. Many permanent residents can't access OAS and GIS until they have lived in Canada for at least 10 years and in some cases double that time.<sup>[1]</sup> Furthermore, they must continue to meet residency requirements, not applicable to citizens, in order to maintain their immigration status, and with it, their grant of rights, benefits, and protections. Undocumented residents, who make up as much as 1.4% of Canada's population,<sup>[2]</sup> are not eligible for any benefits or health coverage.

The so-called 'universal' access is generally implemented along citizenship lines. That's why, writing about the creation of Canadian welfare state, Sunera Thobani says that "access could certainly have been organized along different principles [other than citizenship], and with different eligibility criteria, had there been a commitment to ensure that this access became truly universal."<sup>[3]</sup> In other words, citizenship criteria for social programs works to disproportionately exclude racialized immigrants. Uncritically continuing to apply universal benefits in this way maintains this white supremacist pattern.

Progressive proponents of basic income fall into this line of thinking. Most simply don't think about migrants, or don't mind continuing the status quo of differential access (including complete exclusion in some cases) for millions of people, when designing their proposals for basic income. Consider this pitch by Dr. Danielle Martin, one of the leading proponents of basic income in Canada:

"Taken together, the Canada Child Benefit, Old Age Security, and the Guaranteed Income Supplement essentially offer a Basic Income Guarantee to around one-third of the Canadian population. What is left now is to close the gap so that every Canadian can be protected from the health effects of poverty."<sup>[4]</sup>

It seems clear that the presumed pragmatism of this version of BI relies heavily on continuing existing patterns of exclusion in society. It is incomprehensible to us then how social justice is so frequently used as the justification for basic income when so many people, the vast majority of whom would be poor people of colour, would either fare no better, or more likely, be worse-off. In their struggle to "achieve a post-work society,"<sup>[5]</sup> proponents of basic income either fail to consider or accept the fact that *some* people – migrants – will still *have* to work, often in the underpaid and poor conditions they are forced to work in now.

## Basic Income and Migrants

To illustrate the points above, let us consider a few instances where basic income proponents actually talk about migrants. Owen Poindexter, host of *The Basic Income Podcast* assured listeners anxious about a migrant influx following the implementation of basic income that BI could be designed such that immigrants couldn't get it for a very long time and their children, even if born in the country, couldn't get it until they were 18 years old.<sup>[6]</sup> Similarly, James Davis, writing a guest post for the *Basic Income Earth Network* (the only post we could find on that website that dealt with immigration) also proposes a callous and unjust BI approach when it comes to migrants in the United States: copying the existing social assistance rules. This would be useful, he argues, "to

alleviate concerns that noncitizens would take advantage of the UBI: as it stands now, non-citizens receive substantially less welfare transfers than their citizen counterparts.”[7] Because of anti-immigrant sentiments and white supremacy, both Davis and Poindexter argue that BI can be designed to ensure less or no eligibility to BI for migrants.

At best, migrants are an afterthought. Krauter and Vance describe basic income as a program in which “the government would ensure, either by a direct payment or a top-up in the tax system, that all *citizens (in some plans, certainly those proposed on the left, this would be extended to include refugees and permanent residents)* not fall below a certain level of income per year.”[8] It’s evident that the primary recipients of a basic income are envisioned as citizens, with only a perfunctory acknowledgement calling for the consideration of permanent residents and refugees.

One important exception to the dearth of acknowledgement of the impact on, let alone existence of, migrants, can be found in Guy Standing’s work. He argues that basic income is necessary for migrants who are both the victims and “the light infantry of global capitalism.”[9] He makes the case that there has been an upturn in anti-migrant backlash because of the increasingly flexible and precarious labour market which replaces non-migrant labour with less expensive and more vulnerable migrant labour.

Standing argues that existing needs based social assistance programs have “probably done more than anything to fan resentment of migrants and ethnic minorities.” He maintains:

“A social insurance-type system based on entitlements gained through labour based contributions rewards those who have been in the system for a long time. If benefits and access to social services are determined by proof of financial need, then those who have contributed will lose out to those, such as migrants, who are demonstrably worse off. For the withering ‘working class’, this is perceived as unfair.”[10]

We certainly agree that the neoliberalization of the economy has been bad for the working class[11] and that this “process is systemic, not accidental.” But Standing provides an ahistorical explanation of the backlash against migrants. He fails to position it within the long history migrant scapegoating and racist immigration policies. There are many problems with needs based social assistance, including that they have overly restrictive eligibility criteria and low entitlements. However, Standing’s argument that social assistance whips up anti-migrant fervor is both convenient and flawed.

Standing’s solution to the racism and anti-migrant hatred that people face is, unsurprisingly, basic income. However, he suggests no mechanism for undocumented people to move into the formal economy without facing the risk of deportation. This can only happen in conjunction with a sweeping regularization program – which Standing doesn’t call for.

Universal Basic Income (UBI) also poses another problem – one shared by all universal policies. ‘Universal’ entitlements fail to accommodate a diverse population with diverse needs. Iris Marion Young argues that universalist policies are:

“... not likely to undermine persistent structural group differences, and often reinforce them... Thus, to remove unjust inequality it is necessary explicitly to recognise group difference and either compensate for disadvantage, revalue some attributes, positions or actions or take special steps to meet needs and empower members of disadvantaged groups.”[12]

Even the most well-intentioned policies can spur inequality and entrench relative inequality. Relative inequality is the difference between how well off one group is in relation to another. Immigrants in Canada make, on average, \$233 a month less than people born in Canada.[13] Racialized immigrants, especially racialized immigrant women, make far less than white immigrants.[14] Without actually dealing with this systemic wage gap, universal benefits leave these disparities intact.

Proponents of basic income argue it will be a force for social justice. However, as our analysis demonstrates, the claim is without merit since BI proponents fail to adequately address the implication for migrants. At best, their proposals fail to comprehend the divisive and exclusionary role of the immigration system, resulting in proposals



where the inclusion of some migrants is mere rhetorical flair. At worst, their plans bear a troubling resemblance to the xenophobic vision of the right in their attempts to dissuade and curtail migration. Between these two poles are those who simply don't factor migrants into their plans for BI; this is a profound oversight and they cannot be as progressive as they claim. Furthermore, universal benefits impact marginalized communities differently and risk entrenching the social inequalities of capitalism. A UBI will be more unjust for some groups than for others. We reject the notion that social justice can ever be won for any of us without winning it for all of us, including migrants. This is one of the many reasons we reject the basic income. •

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## Endnotes

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