

Falling in Love Again

Wade Rathke

Undated

I love this guy! I love the concept of "work fetishism." I love the notion that somebody, somewhere, somehow may really be worried about, and working on, a public program that would assure "a natural and attractive way of ensuring a fair distribution of real freedom." That may be my definition of heaven on earth. But I'm also just the kind of guy who could fall hard for the "universal basic income" scheme.

At one level it's near where I came into this fight. In the late 1960s, I was an organizer for the National Welfare Rights Organization (NWRO) in Springfield, Mass., Boston, and Little Rock, Ark., during the founding of ACORN. We fought tooth and nail in those days for the principal plank in the NWRO platform—a guaranteed annual income.

According to George Wiley's definition of the term and the suggestions of recipient leaders like Johnnie Tillmon, we set the number around \$5,500 per year for a family of four. We fought this campaign both in the streets and in the suites. The demonstrations were highly publicized. And the NWRO national staff pushed the debate forward by determining a real number (\$5,500 or fight!) to offset the lowballing figures from economist James Tobin and the McGovern "demogrant," as well as Daniel Patrick Moynihan's \$1,800 per year Guaranteed Annual Income (GAI) welfare proposal under Nixon. NWRO led the opposition to most of these proposals because they were too punitive and too cheap. We didn't know then that we were as close as we might get to a payday over this thirty-year stretch.

Today, we seem to have largely lost the battle on forced work. Workfare, as it has become under the Clinton welfare plan, is the bedrock of the program, while the notion of a guaranteed annual income for welfare recipients, much less a UBI, has been lost in the policy debate completely. Workfare is "work fetishism" with a vengeance, since the penalties for resistance—or simply non-compliance—are sanctions and a guarantee of no income whatsoever.

Having been so badly routed on the issue of "distributing real freedom," organizers for low and moderate income families and communities have tried to change gears and focus more on *making work pay*. That has meant that ACORN has organized "workfare unions," particularly in Los Angeles, New York, and Milwaukee. We have fought—and sometimes won—on issues requiring the payment of minimum wages for workfare, creating rights and entitlements on workfare jobs, and winning formal grievance procedures for workfare workers. Nonetheless, people do still have to work.

Outside of the workfare regime, we believe the living-wage movement has been crucial in reintroducing the issue of wages and wage levels out of the context of a firm and its workforce and into the general policy debate. These living-wage fights have led to the passage of more than fifty city and county ordinances requiring significant wage thresholds, mostly for publicly contracted work within these communities. ACORN, SEIU Locals 100 and 880, and other unions and community groups have made a huge contribution in this fight. Current efforts, like the pending initiative in New Orleans to raise the minimum wage by one dollar over the federal level for all workers in the city, could take the fight to the next level.

This work problem is real. Damned if people don't seem to *want* to work. They want to be paid fairly, treated with dignity and respect, and they want to think that their jobs are important—the whole package. It strains my imagination to think of the burgeoning service economy, chock-a-block with minimum wage and menial jobs, surviving if citizens could get paid to not work at any level, no matter how pitiful. Firms would be unable to fill some of these jobs without a gun.

So, as smitten as I am with all of this, and as hard as I have always fallen for the notion of something like the UBI, I just can't see it happening. With a projected trillion-dollar federal treasury surplus, the silence around a guaranteed annual income for everybody in the national policy debate is deafening. I think we should encourage Van Parijs and the whole UBI debate: rather than fiddle-faddling around about what might be possible, why not

push the limits of the dialogue as far as we can get people to go? But the notion that we could move a consensus around income—much less freedom—as an entitlement of the American economy and work culture strikes me as an elegant and delightful fantasy.

I feel like a jaded, forlorn victim of unrequited love. I think we need more and more of this, if for nothing else, just to take the edge off.

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