

8th BIEN Congress Berlin: Oct. 6-7, 2000

The Positives of “Flexibility”

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Abstract: “Flexible workforce” is the private sector’s term for just-in-time contingent workers--on contract, part-time, temporary, and the like. With an adequate Basic Income to provide the security required to maintain community cohesion in this new employment world, such flexibility could offer a richer, more balanced way of life for individuals and families. This paper describes and discusses a variety of positive options that increased choice about work and other activities could make feasible, as well as the community benefits that could ensue. It is suggested that a variety of BI pilot projects could help us learn more about how to ensure these positives.

Introduction

Employers' calls in the '90s for a "flexible workforce" were, of course, easily recognized as code for a world of temporary, low-wage, insecure, just-in-time workers. And for millions over the past decade, the secure adequately waged job **has** gone the way of the dodo. It was at least in part the recognition of the irreversibility of what is happening to traditional employment--the great transformation of our own time--that led many of us to advocate a Basic Income. Initially, I saw BI primarily as the only sane and just way to prevent the suffering and political upheaval certain to follow upon the massive power shift from state to market forces in North America, with its largely unmitigated abrogation of the traditional social contract.

And yet...it was also clear that releasing humans from dumb, dirty, dangerous work was an outcome much to be desired from harnessing the rapidly developing technologies around us. Where is the tragedy if no more men go down in the mines, no more women waste their lives on mind-numbing assembly lines, no more children sacrifice their chance for literacy?

Further along it became clear that a BI must be seen -- and presented to the public and politicians -- as the new social contract, the exchange, the *quid pro quo* for the insecurity forced on workers by employers' "flexibility" agenda. At the same time, the possible advantages to workers of more "flexibility" in the form of career choices, sabbaticals, flextime and the like began to be discussed. Proposals were ballooned for a shorter work week, month or year promising a more equitable distribution of paid work. The plight of

the overworked now shares the spotlight with that of the un- and underemployed, as do Cinderella stories of software whiz-kids who are courted with stock options and can write their own tickets in the tech world. But the question persists of how the vast majority of contingent, part-time and seasonal workers can build a secure livelihood and a meaningful life without some form of an adequate BI.

Only gradually did I realize that a BI could be--and must be--the keystone in building the more varied, less rigid, more positively "flexible societies" that technological change is making possible (Lerner and others 1999). Of course, I had such excellent companions as Van Parijs, Standing, Walter, Gorz and many others on the road to the realization that this is the next step in human development.

Positives of Flexibility

In what follows, I want to suggest some areas in which the flexibility, choice, freedom, (call it what you will), that will be both **enabled and underpinned by a BI**, could work positively for people with a wide variety of interests and social objectives.

1. A major benefit of flexibility, of the possibility of people choosing a more varied array of life activities beyond a total focus on employment, is that **education** can assume its rightful role as a "leading forth" of human potential. Beginning with a much-needed societal commitment to invest in excellent early childhood education (e.g.Hurtig 1999), learning can become the core human activity, with a much wider choice of learning situations offered in and out of formal institutions. As Gorz puts it, "...education aims essentially at bringing out in individuals the capacity to become the subject of their relation to themselves, the world and others." (Gorz 1999: 68). Lifelong learning has become something of a cliché, but there is much evidence that only continually challenging oneself to become better in a self-chosen activity--sports, arts, letters, community service, computer repair, cooking, whatever--provides real nourishment for the human spirit, in contrast to the empty calories of passive mass entertainment.

2. More flexibility in choice of lifestyles, that is, people having more choices about how to use their time and energy, should foster **a value shift away from materialism and consumerism**, which are widely recognized as failed substitutes for the personal satisfaction missing from many kinds of work and commercialized leisure activities (Dominguez and Robin 1992). This would, of course, eventuate in a virtuous circle where fewer material desires required less paid work to meet one's own needs, thus opening up

more personal discretionary time--to pursue valued (satisfying, stimulating) paid work or chosen unpaid activities.

3. In tandem with this value shift, we could expect **increased societal recognition of many kinds of "good work" and achievement**, a re-valuing of parenting, caregiving, life-long learning, volunteerism, philanthropy, community and environmental service. There are already scattered signs that increasingly a "balanced life" characterized by family and community involvement is viewed more positively, and sought more insistently by the younger generation, than is the 60-hour work week that has been typical of many of their parents (Hayden 1999). Women are particularly aware of the heavy price they pay to combine paid work--whether satisfying or only necessary--with community and family commitments. But men are also beginning to realize what trade-offs they make when they see their kids only three hours a week. A shift away from annual lists of the world's richest people to greatly increased recognition of other achievements would be most welcome.

4. **Entrepreneurship and innovation**, defined as creative risk taking in any arena of human endeavour, will be encouraged by the security and flexibility provided by a BI. Whether this involves artistic experimentation, starting a small business, pioneering a new industrial process, or taking the risk of a career change, it will be a societal benefit. The bunker mentality fostered by widespread fear and insecurity may seem useful to some in the power elite who desire a docile workforce, but it does not move companies or societies forward. We could also expect that more secure, flexible people, with their greater scope for innovation and risk taking, would find the time and resources to make cooperative ventures more feasible. Such ventures demand more initiative from people than does simply taking a job provided by someone else. But cooperatives can offer more stimulation and satisfaction, primarily because their members have more control over decisions about their work (e.g. MacLeod 1997).

5. If more flexible lives do allow people to spend **more time with their families** (realizing that families now come in all flavours), we would hope to see more stable families (fewer breakups) as well as more effective and satisfying parenting. It would be naive, however, to think that these benefits would automatically follow the introduction of a BI. The reasons for this are too complex to explore fully here, but it can be noted that there is some research to suggest that many people find their home lives more stressful than their work lives (Hochschild 1997) and that we have not developed satisfactory ways

of integrating growing youngsters into the adult world. Too much of what young people are now exposed to is designed to entertain them, sell them something, or prepare them for employment rather for engagement with life. It can be hoped that more flexibility in our own thinking about a wide choice of roles, purposes and goals in life will allow us to be more creative in how we guide our children.

6. We would expect people to be **more involved with their communities**, not simply because they have more time, but primarily because of the challenge and satisfaction offered. As we all know, the desire for demanding challenges can be satisfied in many ways other than through economic competition on the career ladder, and there can be enormous satisfaction in reaching a worthwhile goal even without a monetary reward. Community involvement, fostered from the earliest years by including it in formal education as well as family life, also initiates a virtuous circle of increasing social inclusiveness and community self reliance, which in turn promote the growth of a rich civil society.

7. People's flexibility of work choice should lead to **wider distribution of what paid work there is**. While it is vital to retain a mandatory minimum wage that is very close to what a society considers a living wage, better distribution of paid work could occur because more security under a BI system will allow some people to choose fewer or no hours of paid employment for some periods (that is, set their own terms of flexible employment), thus opening up for others what employment opportunities there are. This happy state of affairs is much less likely to occur without the development of some creative union movement. This is essential to give the vast majority of people who would seek some paid work even with a BI system some means to counter employer power to dictate working hours, conditions, benefits and the like. How it might be possible to counter continuing replacement of workers with ever-cheaper, smarter machines is another question, one that only the implementation of an adequate BI can make less pressing.

Stakeholders and Issues: "What's in it for me?"

At the 1998 BIEN Congress in Amsterdam, a wise Austrian delegate suggested that the way to secure public buy-in and eventually to get BI onto the political agenda is to make clear to every stakeholder group "what's in it for them." I have come to see this idea of "the positives of flexibility" (or we could call it the positives of real freedom) as one way

of talking to different groups about how their interests would be served by an adequate BI.

Just by way of example, here are a few of the positives of flexibility that might be discussed with different groups.

- Women*: Increases a woman's freedom to create her preferred mix of paid work and child care: independent income with no strings attached, provided by right to a woman and her children and removes poverty traps since BI is not taxed or diminished regardless of other earnings. Some women's groups fear that a BI would lead to coerced maintenance of households, abrogation of the father's duty to support children, and intensification of other problems, all of which exist even without a BI. These are problems that will only be dealt with when the political will exists to do so. At least with a BI, a woman has flexibility in that she has some economic security if she leaves an insupportable domestic situation or a job where she faces harassment (see Fitzpatrick 1999:152-175).

- Men*: More control, more choice of roles in life: less pressure to base self respect on being "the bread winner", chance for more parenting, self-development, community service.

- Children:and youth*: More flexible upbringing and educational experience: less "lockstep" movement through adolescence, opportunity to receive more and better parenting.

- **Elderly*: Greater valuing and recognition of their contributions to a revitalized civic society; no loss of financial support, possible gains; less concern about the economic security of children and grandchildren.

Education stakeholders: Education for self development and community service (not only for paid employment) understood as major goals; possibility of a variety of creative formal institutions.

Environment: BI must be a central part of any Green policy package. See the excellent discussion of the ecological positives of a BI in Fitzpatrick (1999:176-201).

Business/industry: A more flexible workforce with better health and morale (Wilkinson 1996) because they have more choice, more control over their lives; less social unrest and work disruption.

Labour: more opportunity to organize workers as they experience more choice and control; opportunity to develop new services for flexible workers (Gates 1997:108-109). See also <http://www.workingtoday.org/index.html> for an example of such new services.

Government/civil service: opportunity to create teams of flexible policy/knowledge workers on an ad hoc basis to do proactive planning and problem solving on specific issues before moving on to other tasks. The real flexibility positive here, as it is for the private sector and could be for educational institutions, is the possibility of razing the "silos", deconstructing the departmental and disciplinary boxes that stifle timely, innovative thinking.

I invite you to elaborate your own dialogues about the positives of the flexibility made feasible by an adequate BI. These dialogues must also, of course, include reference to what societal commitments will be required if a BI is to have positive outcomes: affordable housing and transportation, adequate food security, universal access to quality health care, child care and education. Without this societal context, the chances of even an adequate BI delivering real freedom are slim.

The need for BI pilot projects in real communities

In conclusion, I want to note briefly several Canadian opportunities for BI pilot projects. Custom-designed for each situation (as they could be for different European and North American localities), BI pilot projects would explore the extent to which an adequate BI could turn "flexible" employment arrangements that are essentially insecure and precarious into a base for economic security that productively combines paid work and "ownwork" (Robertson 1985).

• **Cape Breton (Nova Scotia) and Newfoundland and Labrador** -- Little or marginal economic growth as traditional steel, coal and fisheries decline; locals increasingly leave because they have no secure source of income; those who remain depend on piecing together a living from a variety of activities, many seasonal, plus social welfare payments. Community economic development efforts over many years have yielded cooperatives such as New Dawn and community investment funds to seed local businesses. A new call

centre in Sydney (NS) is currently seen as a real triumph despite its generally low wages. A new employment initiative in Cape Breton is described below as an example of a source of ideas for BI pilot studies.

Like Cape Breton, the province of Newfoundland and Labrador has long endured the vagaries of the fisheries and the cold winds of high unemployment. In 1996, a government-appointed Economic Recovery Commission led by university professor and former royal commission chair, Douglas House, put forward a *Proposal for a Comprehensive Income Security Plan for Newfoundland and Labrador*. This detailed plan, which includes a Basic Income, was firmly embedded in societal commitments to education reforms, employment programs including a conservation corps, regional economic development boards and public/private partnerships. Adoption of this proposal would have initiated a comprehensive pilot BI in exactly the kind of area where it could benefit the majority. Last-minute shifts in the political tides foreclosed this possibility, but House chronicled the experience in a candid book (House 1999) and says he is willing to be part of a the BI/Canada study and advocacy group. We have much to learn from this pathbreaking effort.

- Region of Waterloo: Kitchener-Waterloo, Cambridge plus rural townships (Ontario) - Residual poverty in this prosperous high-tech boom area includes both working poor and those only marginally employable; the many non-English-speaking immigrants to the area swell these groups. An all-sector community “anti-poverty” project (Opportunities Planning, now OP2000) has been under way for the past six years. Initially it sought to find paid employment for the unemployed, with considerable success. Its current phase, which ends early in 2001, has placed more emphasis on “building community capacity” and getting local business onside to combat low wages and the poor ”skills matching” that keeps about 15% of the population in poverty.

As BI is envisioned, it would constitute one element in a flexible mix of human activities that would add up to a sustainable livelihood. A BI pilot in the Waterloo Region would benefit, and benefit from, ongoing research at two area universities (Guelph and Waterloo) on the concept of “sustainable livelihoods” (IUCN 1999) . Spearheaded by UNDP Visiting Fellow, Naresh Singhv (1999), the project takes a number of paths to explore how people at all stages of development, both rural and urban, piece together their livelihoods (“the activities, assets and entitlements which people use to make a living”) and how this could happen more effectively. This kind of research is important

in moving us toward a BI that works positively, with a minimum of unintended consequences.

- Vancouver Island (British Columbia) - Rapid population influx, especially by well-off retirees, raises real estate prices/cost of living and marginalizes locals, especially those dependent on resource-based employment (forestry in particular) which is in decline. The Sustainable Development Research Institute (SDRI) at the University of British Columbia is fielding a long-term study of this area (SDRI 1998). The general objective is to learn more about how to ensure the sustainability of communities. One focus is on how to maintain and develop “social capital” (a phrase apparently borrowed from economists and probably best understood as civic society). In a dialogue to be conducted with area residents on the topic, questions about the acceptability of a BI will be raised by the researchers in an effort to shed light on attitudes toward BI and barriers to its acceptance by the public. Whether or not a BI pilot project materializes for this area, this information on attitudes will be invaluable to the BI/Canada network in its work to get BI onto the current Canadian political agenda.

Conclusion

By learning from relevant research and demonstration projects, we in Canada intend to design proposals for BI pilot projects that draw on real-world experience. Based in part on real-world experience in Ireland (CORI 1998), a project (funded by Human Resources Development Canada) currently under way in Cape Breton (Nova Scotia) has elements that could strengthen future BI experiments. Citizen Boards in three small towns are identifying work that needs doing in their communities (“community employment opportunities”). Over two years, at least 1500 randomly-chosen unemployed Cape Breton residents will be given the opportunity to volunteer for the project. Of these, 750 will be given the choice of foregoing the EI (Employment Insurance) or SA (Social Assistance) benefits in exchange for three years of community employment in one or more of the participating communities. Others in the pool, serving as a control group, stay on EI or SA and retain access to programs to help them find work..

The objective here, over five years, is to discover the effects of the program on participants and on the communities in which they work. We can learn from this experience. BI pilot projects to examine the positives of flexibility, among other purposes, should also be designed to identify needed community work, both paid and unpaid, as well as other opportunities focused on education, family-oriented and self-

development activities. These should be publicized widely in the pilot area to give BI recipients knowledge of and access to a range of activities in which their greater time flexibility would enable them to participate. Then we would see what happens, to the participants and to the sustainability of their communities.

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