

Problems of a programmatic UBI debate within the German Party of Democratic Socialism

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While life without cares has been a major aspect of social utopian concepts of all times, the discussion about and call for an unconditioned basic income (UBI) has only risen during the last three decades. Concepts of this kind have been shaped and refined by smaller social, intellectual or religious groups, and have hardly ever found their way into mainstream politics.

The importance of extraparliamentary activities, such as campaigns, events, publications, for the promotion of basic income (BI) concepts is quite undisputed. The more difficult question is, what role political parties can or should play in this issue: After all, it would be up to them to introduce a Basic Income Law to parliament, or to vote on it.

So if we wish to promote UBI, NGO activities can only be the first step: it is vital to carry the discussion into the political parties, and to organize parliamentary majorities. This can be achieved through pressure from outside, but also through programmatic development within a party.

The discussion of UBI is well advanced among Austrian liberals and in the Catalanian Green party. In Germany it was an important issue of the newly founded Green party during the 80ies, while now there exists a considerable group among the Party of Democratic Socialism (PDS) who want to extend the party's concept of 'Soziale Grundsicherung' (a type of conditioned basic income) into a full-fledged UBI.

So far, UBI has been the subject of several papers, discussions, articles, etc. within the PDS; however, the claim for an unconditioned basic income still has to make its way into the party programme. And there are reasons to doubt that such a claim would find a majority, because work is felt to be a moral obligation, and the main legitimation for receiving an income - even at a time when it is obvious that there is not enough paid work for all (and perhaps will never be again, given the development of productivity). The link between work and income has been a very strong one, particularly in the ending Fordistic era, irrespective of whether the individual derives his/her moral principles from a religious or socialist background.

For our context this means that even the PDS' existing concept of basic income is a matter of some dispute, in particular with regard to its importance to the party's aims and objectives in general. In the years since 1993 the party's concept of a conditioned basic income has been subject to some changes, which I will present during my talk in some more detail. Basically, one can see the following tendency: While PDS parliamentarians have begun to develop concrete suggestions for a gradual introduction of a conditioned basic income, the focal point

of the discussion within the party has long shifted, away from a basic income for those in need, to an unconditioned basic income for everyone. However, as was stated before, currently such a claim is not capable of winning a majority. Noticeably, the sides of the debate coincide with the lines separating various camps and social groups within the party, and thus frequently overlap with personal conflicts as well.

The debate – often reduced to the right to be lazy vs. the right to work – acts as a catalyst for fundamentally different models of socialization, and can be rather fierce.

This leads to grotesque arguments, for instance when I as the author of a book on basic income am being accused by traditional marxists of corrupting the youth, while the same youth sometimes say that the traditionalists' resistance against a basic income would soon be overcome 'biologically'. A few examples and conflicts of this kind will be mentioned in my talk.

However, it cannot be my aim to carry internal conflicts of the PDS to the public in the form of anecdotes. Therefore I am going to present a quantitative empirical investigation in Barcelona, which however is not completed at this point. Admittedly, this investigation will not be representative, and is only intended to illustrate trends. These quantitative results shall be accompanied by qualitative results I was able to gather as a participant observer.

One main group of informants were socially active PDS voters (most of them party members), whose answers will be compared with that of a control group. Other independent variables to be considered are income, age and origin (town/country, East Germany/West Germany). As dependent variables, attitudes towards the decoupling of work and income will be considered. These quantitative data will give an exemplary illustration of the chances and difficulties of successfully promoting UBI within the PDS.

Additionally, the questionnaire contains a set of questions aimed at eliciting the religious orientation of the informants. These were included to show possible attitudes towards the decoupling of work and income that are religiously motivated.

I am looking forward to presenting my results to you soon, and I hope these will be able to illustrate, in an exemplary way, chances for and opposition against the introduction of a claim for BI into the programme of socialist left-wing parties.

It is likely that in a post communist party like the PDS, the conflict between a strong feeling of social responsibility and a conservative work ethics will bring out interesting insights into rationalization processes. These have to be dialectically taken into account in view of the EU extension, and the propagation of an UBI for the whole EU.