

Do Trade Unions Form an Obstacle to the Introduction of a Basic Income ?

Some lessons from an empirical study on five OECD countries

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paper to be presented at the Xth Congress of the *Basic Income European Network*,
September 18-19, Barcelona, Spain.

[Parallel session 4.4: *Basic Income as an Instrument of Trade Union Policy: North and South Perspectives*,
Chair : **Àlex Boso** (Universitat Pompeu Fabra) & **Sergi Raventós** (Universitat de Barcelona)]

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*“The introduction of such an unconditional income
is to be viewed not as the dismantling
but as the culmination of the welfare state”*
Philippe Van Parijs¹

Introduction

In most OECD countries, trade unions remain key players in the field of welfare state reform. In areas where they still represent an important fraction of the workforce, such as in Belgium and Scandinavia, they constitute traditional and pivotal partners in every reform process. In other countries, even in case of low membership levels (such as in France) they have often been able to mobilize mass support in favor of the status quo, sometimes through huge demonstrations and paralyzing strikes. Hence, it is quite surprising that so little attention has been paid by universal basic income (BI) proponents to the very position of workers unions on the radical reform they are advocating.² This paper, which draws upon a study on the political feasibility of a unconditional minimum income in five industrialized countries (Belgium, Canada, France, Ireland, and the Netherlands) but will mainly focus on three of them,³ focuses – briefly, at this stage – on this issue in two complementary ways. In the first part of the paper, I sketch some theoretical reasons that trade unions could have to oppose or, alternatively, support a BI. In the second part, I use some empirical information collected in Belgium, Canada, and the Netherlands to test the robustness of the theoretical assumptions.

¹ Van Parijs 1992: 465.

² A few exceptions are worth mentioning. In his doctoral dissertation (Groot 1999), Dutch economist (and BIEN life-member) Loek Groot developed a sophisticated model for the assessment of possible trade unions' responses to the introduction of a BI. He argued that “if unions exhibit a strong willingness to tradeoff net wages and employment, the BI scheme of social security is superior (especially with regard to wage inequality and the level of employment) to the present arrangement of conditional social security, even if there is a significant fall in labour supply under the former” (Groot 1999: 203). Again at a more theoretical level, German social scientist Klaus Zuehlke-Robinet (1991) has focused on reasons why a self-interested trade union should support a BI. In the field of empirical research, one should first mention the work of Dutch sociologist (and BIEN life-member), sociologist Rik van Berkel, who studied the position of trade unions with regard to the implementation of a BI in the Netherlands (see van Berkel 1994, van Berkel & al. 1993). His work is discussed in more detail in the second section of this paper. In a never published mimeo, Stefano Sacconi (1992) presented an outline of the BI debate in Italy, and briefly focused on trade unions. Strong and significant signs of interest in the idea, he wrote, “have been shown by Italy’s largest trade union organization, the CGIL” [Confederazione Generale Italiana del Lavoro]. But within the organization the debate was promoted by the national research center IRES, and BI never became an official policy. Finally, within the framework of a pilot study of UK trade unions attitudes towards tax-benefit reforms, Rafael Ziegler and Bill Jordan (2001) have asked British union leaders about their position towards a BI. It seems, Ziegler and Jordan argued, that BI was seen as a “more remote prospect than ever”, too remote “to be worth considering seriously”. In other words, they said, “the BI/CI [citizen’s income] case is a good example of the relative neglect of long-term social policy issues by British trade unions”.

³ Vanderborgh 2004.

The final goal of this exploration is prospective: are trade unions bound to facilitate, or not, the gradual implementation of a BI in OECD countries?⁴

1. What does the theory predict?

For the sake of the argument, I shall here assume without discussion that a generous BI scheme would replace existing means-tested minimum income schemes, the bulk of tax credits and exemptions, and be integrated with family allowances and, when it exists, basic pension schemes. In the field of social insurance, BI would replace the bottom part of the earnings-related unemployment, invalidity and pension benefits. The income floor it provides would remain supplemented by earnings-related benefits, designed to make up the difference between BI and current benefit levels.

Should trade-unions support this radical reform? Few authors have been directly dealing with this question. But from the classic writings on the topic one can easily infer “theoretical” reasons unions could have to defend *or* oppose the proposal. The brief account that follows is not exhaustive and not much balanced. It is primarily intended to foster a thorough discussion of the pros and cons of BI in a trade union perspective.

1a) Reasons to support a BI

° **Collective strikes.** If the level of the BI is sufficient, (part of) it could easily be used as a source of funding for strike purposes. First, members’ BI could be “taxed” by the union on a regular basis in order to raise the level of its strike fund, thereby increasing workers’ relative power within the firm or branch. Second, even in the absence of such a mechanism, a BI would make each individual strike a less financially painful momentum for workers, since they would keep their entitlement to a guaranteed income floor outside of the labor market. With a BI, strikers would be able to face long-lasting resistance from employers.

⁴ It does not mean, of course, that the role of trade unions is of no importance in BI debates *outside* of the OECD. However, this point goes beyond the scope of this paper. Readers interested in this issue should, for instance, look carefully at the most recent developments of the South African debate. In their account of this debate between 1996 and 2002, Heidi Matisonn and Jeremy Seekings explain that « South Africa’s trade unions (and union-linked intellectuals) have played the leading role in calls for a BIG [Basic Income Grant] » (Matisonn & Seekings 2003: 65). The Congress of South African Trade Unions COSATU officially « recognises that the Basic Income Grant will have a positive impact on [South Africa’s] economic growth and development, with positive implications for job creation » (Vavi 2003).

◦ **Individual bargaining power.** BI would not only foster workers' independence in the case of strikes or crises. At another level, it also provides *individual* workers with a true, reliable, and unconditional exit option, hence fostering their own bargaining power. Even if their job remains the primary source of income, the existence of a BI guarantees that they will benefit from an income floor *outside* of the labor market, without means-testing or work requirement. This could lead them to negotiate for higher wages, even in the absence of a strike-type collective threat.

◦ **Better jobs.** The first and second reasons to support a BI are both related to the power resources it would confer to workers, collectively and individually speaking. The third one is a direct consequence of these two assets. The existence of an exit option and the perspective of long-lasting conflicts with unions would force employers to preventively improve working conditions and make jobs as more attractive as possible. This would, in particular, be true for most undesirable or stigmatizing jobs.

◦ **Job-sharing.** A BI policy is consistent with job-sharing, an objective which has been endorsed by various trade unions in Europe. It has sometimes been described as the “soft strategy” to achieve this goal,⁵ in contrast with compulsory working-time reduction programmes – as they were implemented in some European countries (notably France). BI makes it indeed easier for workers to take part-time jobs, or even to quit their job temporarily and go on sabbatical leave, since the lost of revenue is partly offset by the guaranteed payment of an unconditional grant outside of the labour market. Hence, a BI would help in creating jobs without worsening insiders' position.

◦ **The end of exploitation?** At a more general level, Philippe Van Parijs and Robert van der Veen have argued that the implementation of a BI would open a “capitalist road to communism”.⁶ In their view (at the time), capitalist societies have already reached the stage of “weak abundance”, and the gradual introduction of a BI could allow workers to skip the stage of socialism (public ownership of the means of production) and go directly for the establishment of a communist society. Within this framework, raising the level of the guaranteed income up to a maximal level would meet the Marxian criterion “from each

⁵ Van Parijs 1996: 65.

⁶ Van Parijs & van der Veen 1986.

according to his abilities to each according to his needs”. In such a scenario, of course, exploitation would not only be *diminished* through the increase of workers’ collective and individual bargaining power, it would simply be *abolished*. It would be difficult for workers unions to sweep this perspective aside - in theory, at least.

1b) Reasons to oppose a basic income

◦ **Lower wages.** Even if, for the reasons outlined in the above section, one could suppose that wages are going to increase in the poorly paid end of the income distribution spectrum, a general increase of salaries should not necessarily be expected of the introduction of a BI. On the contrary, its implementation might well engage a downward spiral: employers could start lowering all wages, considering that a BI is providing for the complement needed to reach the level of legal minimum wages. Under such a scenario the latter would, inescapably, come under discussion.⁷

◦ **Flexibility and precarious jobs.** Even if one might show that a BI would facilitate part-time work, it does not logically follow that it constitutes a desirable path of reform. BI advocates, as I briefly mentioned above, focus on opportunities: individual workers could choose to work for less provided the income floor is high enough. But in most cases, it might well happen that part-time work and flexible timetables will be imposed by employers. BI would then serve as state-subsidized “shock absorber”, softening the harmful effects of an increasingly flexible labor market, especially for the most vulnerable part of the working class.

◦ **Self-employment.** A BI, it is sometimes argued, offer new opportunities to those wanting to launch their own business. It would, in other words, facilitate self-employment. As a consequence, its implementation could accelerate the decline of waged labor as the core of capitalist economies. If this was true, a BI would for this very reason erode the traditional basis of trade unions’ action.

◦ **Informal activities.** More generally, the exit option provided by the unconditional income floor would negatively affect the cultural centrality of paid work (and the work ethic).

⁷ This scenario comes close to what James Meade was advocating in his *Agathotopia* (Meade 1989).

If currently employment remains the main source of social recognition, with a (sufficiently high) BI all kinds of informal activities would become financially viable options. Hence, they would receive proper social consideration, and waged labor would lose its central role in the shaping of social order. Workers' union might see this development as a threat to their own position.

° **Renewing exploitation?** But perhaps the most decisive reason to oppose a BI from a trade union perspective is the fact that such a scheme would not, contrary to what has been asserted above, *abolish* exploitation; it would more probably change its very nature. To put it roughly, the argument would go as follows: in the case of a society with a BI, “the idle exploit the industrious by receiving an income generated (*inter alia*) by the activity of those who choose to work”.⁸ Incidentally, this has been the most controversial issue in all philosophical debates on the proposal.

2. What do we learn from the fieldwork?

The overview presented in section 1 was aimed at briefly clarifying some arguments. At the same time, it shows that a detailed discussion of pros and cons of a BI might in fact throw union representatives into confusion. Should the introduction of a BI be considered as a step towards the end of exploitation, or not? Would a BI facilitate wage moderation, or not? In order to further clarify the issues raised by the listing of arguments, it is useful to go in the field and have a look at national debates in a comparative perspective. Keeping the theoretical discussion in mind, what do we learn from the fieldwork?

Drawing upon a larger empirical study on five OECD countries, this second section focuses on three national debates: Belgium, Canada, and the Netherlands. Before starting, it should be noted that with a few exceptions BI has never been – to my knowledge – a very hot item on trade unions' agenda, at least in OECD countries.⁹ The main explanation is quite obvious: in most countries BI has never been high on the *political* agenda itself. Why bother then, with the pet idea of cranky academics? As Ziegler & Jordan once commented the position of British unionists towards a citizen's income, the proposal has often been considered “too remote a possibility to be worth considering seriously”.¹⁰ It is, however,

⁸ Reeve 2003: 11.

⁹ See note 4 above for a short comment and references on South Africa.

¹⁰ Ziegler & Jordan 2001: 3.

worth looking for the “few exceptions”. For in some cases BI has been thoroughly discussed by workers representatives and, sometimes, it has even been officially endorsed.

◦ **Belgium: “no basic income!”**. With a unionization rate of approximately 85%,¹¹ Belgium has no doubt some of the most representative trade unions in Western Europe. The two main confederations CSC (Christian Unions Confederation) and FGTB (Socialist Unions Federation) remain powerful in most sectors of the economy, and they are – directly or not – involved in each substantial reform of the welfare state. They are not only able to mobilize workers on a large scale, but they also benefit from privileged links with political actors, including MP’s and ministers. Furthermore, they participate in formal institutions such as the National Labor Council (CNT), as well as in the administrative management of social insurance programs.

Belgium has played a crucial role in the BI debate. BIEN founding congress (1986) and second international conference (1988) were held in Belgium under the impulse of Philippe Van Parijs. BIEN secretariat and archives are located at the Hoover Chair (University of Louvain), where Van Parijs teaches. With social scientist Walter Van Trier and others, the author of *Real Freedom for All* has been advocating BI on many occasions in French- and Flemish-speaking parts of the country. Finally, one should keep in mind the fact that Belgium has the only European single-issue party entirely focused on BI: Vivant, founded in 1997 by businessman and BIEN life-member Roland Duchâtelet, has been participating in various elections and attracting public attention on the proposal. Thus, Belgium might represent an interesting test-case regarding the question of trade unions and a BI.

To put it crudely, one could say that no man is a prophet in his own country. Belgian main trade unions have never shown much interest for BI, and when they did they expressed very hostile opinions. From the very start of the discussion in the mid-eighties, the main confederation (CSC) attacked what it called a “silly and worrying utopia”. After almost twenty years of debate, some union officials are still among the most uncompromising opponents to a basic income. In January 2002, CSC published a preparatory report in anticipation of its national Congress. It included a section entitled “No basic income”!

¹¹ Source : Ebbinghaus & Visser 2000 (« gross density in percent of dependent employed »).

What do Belgian unionists hold against the proposal? Five grievances are worth mentioning.¹²

- Belgian trade unions, and especially FGTB officials, fear that the introduction of a BI would make it more difficult for them to negotiate wage increases with employers. Since a BI could be seen as an indirect wage subsidy, employers would send union representatives back to the state, telling them to put pressure on politicians in order to get an increase of the BI level. A BI would, in sum, negatively affect the relative power of workers, especially if it were to be accompanied with the abolition of the minimum wage legislation. In saying that a BI would increase individual workers' bargaining power, BI proponents seem to believe that the class struggle is *passé*, which is – Belgian unionists argue – obviously wrong.

- Belgian unions also believe that the existence of a guaranteed income floor would justify further developments in the labor market along the lines of flexibilization. According to a FGTB official, BI advocates seem to accept that contracts for unlimited periods should be abolished, and that in the future “all work contracts would have to be short-term and precarious”.¹³

- In most writings and interviews, union representatives also express their commitment to selective and targeted schemes. They see these schemes as a better and more efficient way of using fiscal resources which are, massively; stemming from the taxation of wages. To provide a basic income equivalent to the level of the conditional minimum income (about €600/month), they say, one should substantially rise the tax rates, which is unacceptable for most workers. And if it were not the case, the system would be absurdly inefficient: some would have to work hard in order to pay for a... miserable grant. Obviously, Belgian unions do not believe that a BI would abolish exploitation.

- Belgian unions are quite ambiguous on the question of work requirements. If both CSC and FGTB have repeatedly opposed the strengthening of these requirements and the tightening of eligibility rules in unemployment insurance, they are not ready to argue in favor

¹² This account is based on two main sources : sociologist Sabine Wernerus' master thesis (Wernerus 2004) and part of my own PhD research (Vanderborcht 2004). I also benefited from discussions with union officials during a seminar on « Trade unions against basic income ? » at the Hoover Chair (University of Louvain, Belgium) on May 13, 2004.

¹³ Wernerus 2004: 47.

of a fully unconditional benefit, be it targeted at the poor. It seems that the question of the optimal equilibrium between rights and duties of beneficiaries remain open. Still, a CSC official told me that, in his view, it is perfectly legitimate to require that able-bodied contribute to the production of collective wealth.

- It would be unfair, though, to write that Belgian unions are therefore only defending the interests of insiders. Most officials put an emphasis on the fact that the least advantaged should be helped, but they stress that the poor need much more than the automatic payment of a basic income floor. The introduction of a BI would be the first step of a slippery slope: the disinvestment in social work would become increasingly legitimate, and public authorities would progressively stop all programs aimed at socio-professional integration. Yet, union officials insist, paid work remain the crucial precondition for social recognition.

Needless to say, this brief account shows that Belgian unions remain unconvinced by the arguments of BI advocates. It does not mean, of course, that their reasons to adopt such a position are logically and universally valid.

°Canada: the mixed feelings of Quebecois unions. Canadian trade unions are not as powerful as their Belgian counterparts. Still, with a unionization rate of approximately 25%,¹⁴ they do represent a significant proportion of the workforce. In the French-speaking province of Québec, the rate soars up to almost 40%, which is extremely high by North-American standards. At federal level, they benefit from the fact that the electoral system, contrary to the US, allows for the existence of a third party between the liberals and the conservative.¹⁵ However, the New Democratic Party (NDP) remains a small player on the political scene. Furthermore, the liberal character of the welfare system has always kept Canadian unions at the margins of the social policy debates.¹⁶

According to political scientist Rodney S. Haddow, “the union movement has always treated the GAI [Guaranteed Annual Income¹⁷] with considerable caution and viewed it as

¹⁴ Source : Human Resources Development Canada 2003 (« Union membership as a percentage of civilian labour force »).

¹⁵ This often-made description of the Canadian system is not entirely accurate, however. In fact, with the passing of years a fourth party, the nationalist Bloc Québécois, became a significant political force at federal level.

¹⁶ See Banting 1987.

¹⁷ In Canada, the expression « Guaranteed Annual Income » has been used to refer to a negative income tax and, at some occasions, to a basic income.

potentially antithetical to its social policy goals”.¹⁸ But they did not always take coherent positions on the topic, Haddow argues: “Organized labour’s early response to the GAI [Guaranteed Annual Income] was *muted and confused*. (...) it was *slow to form a coherent assessment* of the implications of a negative income tax for its program”.¹⁹ However, the publication in 1985 of a bulky and influential report by the Royal Commission on the Economic Union and Development Prospects for Canada (the “Macdonald Commission”), which included a scenario for the introduction of a partial basic income, triggered harsh reactions off. In 1986, the convention of the Canadian Labour Congress, Canada’s main union confederation, expressed serious doubts about the desirability of such a reform and denounced its “neo-liberal character”. A BI, the CLC argued, was going to undermine the minimum wage legislation.²⁰

The story is quite different, though, in Québec. Michel Chartrand, the most prominent and popular – but controversial – figure of the trade union movement is advocating BI for many years.²¹ In 1999, the CSN (National Unions Confederation), one of the main Quebecois unions, published a detailed and balanced study on BI in order to foster a pacified discussion of the proposal. Even if other unions (FTQ and CSQ) did not finance similar initiatives, they never publicly expressed any hostility towards the idea of a unconditional minimum income. Recent interviews with union officials have shown that they have mixed feelings about the possible introduction of a BI in Québec.²² Most of them do actually endorse the proposal on ethical grounds... but reject it for pragmatic reasons. How comes?

Quebecois union officials recognize that providing everyone with an unconditional income floor is a matter of fundamental rights. They also admit that – in theory, at least – such a BI could help at solving (part of) the problem of unemployment traps without worsening poverty. In this perspective, they do not see BI as antithetical to the cultural values of a society where, as is the case in Québec, paid work remains a crucial precondition for social recognition.

In spite of these positions, no union official openly advocate a BI. For, representatives say, they lack the power resources needed to impose a truly progressive package of reform including a BI. Hence, in the context of an increasingly competitive economy, and at a time when provincial and federal governments are pleading for a more “active welfare state”, a

¹⁸ Haddow 1994: 350.

¹⁹ Haddow 1994: 353.

²⁰ See Haddow 1993.

²¹ See Bernard & Chartrand 1999.

²² See chapter 7 of Wernerus 2004.

defense of such a radical reform would be suicidal. At present times, a discussion of the introduction of a BI would necessarily degenerate into a Friedman-like scenario: a dismantling of the welfare state, not a culmination. “We should defend what we already have”, a FTQ official says.²³ “We should keep fighting for higher wages” and “progressively improve the current welfare system”, a CSN representative argues.²⁴ In other words, for Quebecois unions BI is ethically appealing but too much a big-bang in social policy.

°The Netherlands: a trade-union has been vigorously advocating basic income.

Dutch trade unions have never been as powerful as their Belgian counterparts in the field of social policy. Yet with a unionization rate of approximately 30%, and a direct involvement in various councils and committees at national level, they remain important partners in the discussions on welfare reform. A former leader of the biggest union confederation FNV, Wim Kok, was a prime minister between 1994 and 2002.

During the eighties and early nineties, BI has been relatively high on the public agenda in the Netherlands. In 1994, it was even openly advocated in the press by two ruling ministers, but their initiative was short-lived.²⁵ During this period, the Union of Food Workers *Voedingsbond FNV* – an important component of the FNV confederation – was one of the most prominent proponents of a *basisinkomen* (a BI in Dutch). In many ways, this was a unique position within western democracies. They published plenty of leaflets and documents arguing in favor of the proposal,²⁶ and they organized regular workshops in order to enlighten their own members. As it was stressed by Rik van Berkel, who made an in-depth analysis of this episode of the *Voedingsbond*’s history, when reading the pamphlets “one is struck by the utopian nature of BI alleged effects (...). In short, the *Voedingsbond* presented its BI as a panacea for the problems of contemporary society”.²⁷

Since the very start of the discussion, *Voedingsbond* leaders have been questioning the work ethic and the cultural centrality of waged labor, calling for a radical reform that would confer social recognition to “those who do unpaid work, have no income and no social status”.²⁸ Unfortunately, as van Berkel and his colleagues discovered, the perspective of a BI did not really appeal to the union’s members. It was rather a “top-down” debate: the influence of well-educated staff members was decisive in the choice of the BI strategy. As the leaders

²³ Wernerus 2004: 113.

²⁴ Wernerus 2004: 114.

²⁵ For an overview of the Dutch debate in English, see Groot & van der Veen 2000.

²⁶ See for instance *Voedingsbond* 1981 and, in English, *Voedingsbond* 1989.

²⁷ Van Berkel 1994: 19.

themselves were conceding afterwards, “it proved difficult to mobilise members on such an abstract and long-term objective as BI”. This abstract perspective, mainly supported by the executive, was contradicting “the more concrete members’ interests that they were experiencing in the daily life”.²⁹ Furthermore, the confederation FNV, to which the Voedingsbond belonged, did not support the initiative. As a result, the debate got out of steam and stopped altogether in the early 1990s.

Conclusions

In developed welfare states, trade unions are not natural allies of BI advocates. In some cases, such as in Belgium, they even form a significant obstacle to the political progression of the idea. If in the Netherlands one union has openly tried to launch a large-scale discussion on the proposal, it was neither supported by its own members, nor by the confederation to which it belonged. And even if Quebecois unionists seem to accept some ethical premises of BI proponents, they are not ready to involve their eroding power resources in a discussion about this radical reform. At this stage, two conclusions can already be drawn from these (briefly summarized) investigations.

First of all, as is evidenced by the Belgian case, institutions matter. In a country where the welfare system is massively based on social contributions rather than direct taxation, each step towards a BI is seen as a radical reform. Through workers contributions, unions are involved in the financing and – in most Bismarckian countries – the management of social security. What would happen, they legitimately ask, if the Minister of Finance were to become the key player in social policy? In Belgium, furthermore, trade unions are pivotal actors of a “Ghent system”. In such systems, “unions run voluntary (though heavily subsidized by the state) unemployment insurance programs, generally through the operation of local labor exchanges”.³⁰ Thus Belgian unions, contrary to the Dutch and Quebecois ones, are handling individual cases of unemployed workers. It might partly explain why they have always looked suspiciously at the implementation of an automatic payment system.

The second preliminary conclusion is related to the first one. It seems that the introduction of a BI has not much to offer to the vast majority of union members. In times of retrenchment in core sectors of the welfare system (pension and health insurance), it is a difficult task to convince insiders of paying for an unconditional grant which will mainly

²⁸ Lubbi 1991: 15.

²⁹ van Berkel & al. 1993: 22-24.

³⁰ Scruggs 2002: 286.

benefit the outsiders. It is not a surprise that, as van Berkel pointed out, within the Dutch union *Voedingsbond* BI was mainly supported by unemployed members. BI, van Berkel writes, “comes across as predominantly a claimants’ issue. Most of its supporters (almost 75%) are claimants, whereas most of its opponents (again almost 75%) are paid workers”.³¹ During previous empirical investigations in France, I realized that BI had been almost exclusively advocated by independent claimants’ organizations, which had been created in the eighties as a result of workers’ unions incapacity to take the specific needs of unemployed people into account. If they were able to launch a public discussion on BI in the winter of 1997-98, they did not manage to get the proposal on the political agenda.

Hence, if it is still true that, as Claus Offe once argued, gains for the well-off middle class represent the “necessary precondition for making social security for the underclass (including the less privileged segments of the working class) politically feasible”,³² BI advocates should certainly start working towards a conversion of union representatives on ethical and pragmatic grounds. They should no doubt try to boost any emerging discussion of the issue within workers unions, since it clearly appears that most theoretical arguments in favor of a BI (from a trade union perspective) are unknown to most union representatives. For even if the latter are not natural allies of BI supporters, they remain inescapable players as well as irreplaceable partners.

³¹ van Berkel 1994: 20.

³² Offe 1992: 72.

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