

Wage Negotiation – Observed by a Third Party

Employer: *We're offering 12 euros an hour. That's standard for the industry and at the beginning fair.*

Employee: *I was hoping for 14. But okay... I'm just glad to get anything at all.*

Employer: *It's a start. We can talk about development later. But for now, that's the best we can do.*

Employee: *Then let's agree. Thank you.*

Comment from a disinterested observer:

Two people reach an agreement. No raised voices, no coercion, no obvious injustice. And yet, a sense of unease remains.

The employer makes an offer. Why exactly 12 euros? Maybe because it's the industry minimum. Maybe because he knows many people will accept it. Maybe because he genuinely believes it's fair – or because he doesn't want to pay more unless he has to. His decision is the result of a calculation: What does the budget allow? What does the market demand? What will the applicant tolerate?

The employee says 14 euros. Is that a wish or a tactic? Maybe he did some research. Maybe he deliberately aimed high to leave room for negotiation. Maybe 14 euros is the minimum he needs to cover his basic living costs. Or it's a number that signals hope: I'm worth more.

And his agreement? It might come from a sense of having no other option – or from pragmatism: Better this job than none. Or from hope: Perhaps this will open new doors. Maybe even from lack of knowledge about pay elsewhere. Or from insecurity. Or simply from the idea: It's good enough to start.

In the end, both sides agree – for different reasons. The employer because he needs someone and feels he's negotiated well. The employee because he accepts terms he cannot fully determine – and yet still chooses. Consent is present. But is freedom?

This is where the deeper question begins: Is this just?

Justice requires freedom. Not only in a legal sense, but as the real ability to say „no.“ A contract can only be considered fair if both parties had the freedom to reject it – not just formally, but factually. This freedom is never absolute, but it is tangible: as a feeling of agency, of alternatives, of self-determination. Freedom here doesn't mean independence from conditions, but conscious choice within them.

But how would this negotiation have played out if the employee had a Universal Basic Income? If he weren't forced to accept any offer – but could negotiate with the calm that comes from existential security? Maybe he would have rejected the 12 euros – not defiantly, but confidently. Maybe he would have negotiated – not from need, but from conviction. Maybe the employer would also have been more open to a conversation on equal footing, knowing the applicant wasn't under pressure. The entire framework would have shifted: from survival tactics to an actual negotiation of value and contribution.

A Basic Income wouldn't necessarily have changed the outcome, but it would have changed the freedom behind the decision. And with it, the foundation for justice.

Because the employer, too, would be in a different position. Not only the employee would be secured, but also the employer. He wouldn't need to hire someone just to ensure his own survival through entrepreneurial success. The decision to employ would be less driven by economic pressure and more by conviction, by project goals, or shared purpose. He, too, could say „no“ without risking everything – and that alone changes the quality of the decision.

At the same time, he could no longer be sure whether the applicant agrees out of need or out of genuine motivation. The phrase „*I'm just glad to get anything*“ would lose its strategic meaning – it would no longer be a clear sign of desperation. This would compel the employer to make an offer that truly convinces – not because the other must take it, but because they want to.

Basic Income removes the underlying threat of failure from negotiations. It doesn't force generosity, but it forbids the excuse of necessity. Both sides must show what they have to offer – not what they can enforce.

A Basic Income is not a favor to the poor. It is a share in the common good. A society whose productivity, stability, and infrastructure are built collectively must also distribute collectively – not just through wages, but through shared rights. The Basic Income is such a right: not earned, but acknowledged.

Perhaps we need to rethink negotiations altogether: not as a game of asymmetric information, but as an encounter on equal footing. As a dialogue that doesn't just ask, *What are you worth?* but: *What do you need to be free?*

The answer hangs in the air. And yet, it is rarely spoken aloud.