

# IMAGINE UNIVERSAL BASIC INCOME

Nick Srnicek

Think of the vast part of our lives presently taken up by work: the days and weeks spent searching for a job, the time spent each morning preparing for work, the increasingly long – and unpaid – commutes to work, and then the hours spent being bossed around by a manager to do often rote and repetitive tasks. After all this, we commute home, exhausted, only to repeat the cycle again the next day. The weekends offer brief respite for entertainment, but all too often serve simply as a moment to rest and recover for Monday yet again.

A universal basic income (UBI) – a monthly income paid to every individual – holds the promise of drastically changing the nature of power and work within contemporary capitalism. I want to outline a few common critiques and why they're so mistaken, and then outline the positive case for a UBI. First, I will begin with the most inane critique that is often raised.

Didn't Milton Friedman like UBI? He did, or rather, he liked a similar idea called the negative income tax. But Friedman's idea of UBI was drastically different from what the left's idea, and to confuse the two is to make a major mistake. Friedman wanted a UBI in order to demolish the welfare state and privatise government services. It would turn everything into a market. The left argues instead for a UBI in addition to the welfare state services like childcare, education, healthcare, housing, and pensions. If someone believes that Friedman and the left are arguing for the same thing, it's because they have not looked beyond the name of the policy.

Won't everyone sit around doing nothing? The evidence suggests no, given that every experiment with UBI has maintained relatively high levels of people working. When people have stopped working, it has been to take care of children, go back to school, or work on other socially useful projects. This is of course one of the purposes of a UBI: to give people more freedom over when and how they work.

Don't people want to work? As the experimental evidence above suggests, yes people do. People find satisfaction in a job well done, and part of a meaningful life is having a purposeful project to attend to. Wage labour today satisfies some of that, for some people lucky enough to have a decent job. But few people find satisfaction in stocking shelves at a grocery store or in dealing with rude customers in a checkout lane. Unalienated and freely chosen work will always be central to our lives; but wage labour is forced upon us by capitalism to do tasks at the behest of someone else. What UBI promises is to reduce that coercion.

Wouldn't UBI still be capitalist? This isn't so much a critique as it is a description. Reducing the coercion of wage labour would still mean that companies are seeking to maximise profit, and that competition in the labour market and other markets still holds. The promise of UBI is not to eliminate capitalism, but

rather to give workers a lever of power over capital. With UBI, individual workers can refuse low-paying or demeaning jobs, while collectives can mobilise strikes while being certain of having a financial backstop. A UBI doesn't end capitalism, but it is a powerful tool to help us in that struggle.

One of the major reasons why UBI has become prominent lately is because the changing nature of capitalist society is pressing us towards radical solutions. The next wave of automation promises to drastically change the labour market – at the very least throwing millions out of their jobs and into the hunt for a new one; at the very worst, simply leaving them to starve. A utopian politics of the left could change this situation, by building towards a world with radically reduced amounts of work and by putting an end to the coercion of wage labour. This would mean, in the first instance, pushing towards more automation and getting humans out of physically and mentally draining jobs. We can turn technology towards a tool of liberation, if we have the collective strength to do so. We can also aim to reduce the working week, beginning by extending the weekend to three days. Lastly, we can begin to adopt a universal basic income as a way to respond to increasing labour market turmoil and the threat of technological unemployment.

A universal basic income would not end work, but it would place the power in our hands to choose how much to work. Those who enjoy their jobs could continue to spend their time engaged in the workplace, while others could reduce their work and focus their energies in more stimulating ways. We could invest more energy into our communities and into building up political organisations. We could spend our time developing hobbies and interests, or going back to school to get a better education. We could direct our energy into creative endeavours, focusing our attention on experimentation with artistic and social forms. It is perhaps no coincidence that periods of immense cultural creativity often come from locations and times where people's immediate concerns for survival are taken care of. Artistic practice and creativity has always flourished in spaces free from the demands of work, and a basic income could be the basis for a society-wide revival of creativity. In the end, a basic income promises nothing less than an expansion of our freedom.

# IMAGINE: UNIVERSAL BASIC INCOME

[www.imagine-universal-basic-income.com](http://www.imagine-universal-basic-income.com)

What do possible foundations for a future society look like? The universal basic income has become a viable option. With increasingly automated production processes, this utopia suddenly seems realisable. When the working hours are reduced, when work is not a means to mere survival, we can devote our time to global problems. A universal basic income could not only mean freedom from the constraint of breadwinning, but also the freedom to achieve individual and social goals.

As a think tank of artists, designers, and young researchers we'd like to start a discussion on the topic. Following an invitation by the New York based Print All Over Me, we commissioned 15 artists to do a fashion edition.

To launch the collection, we invited three theorists to talk about the basic income. To discuss the topic, there are essays by Nick Srnicek and Viola Nordsieck, which are available on the website [www.imagine-universal-basic-income.com](http://www.imagine-universal-basic-income.com)

## LAUNCH

27 September, 7 pm  
Import Projects Berlin  
Keithstraße 10  
10787 Berlin

## PANEL

Ronald Blaschke  
Viola Nordsieck  
Timo Reuter

## TEXTS

Viola Nordsieck  
Nick Srnicek

## TEAM/ SUPPORT

Print All Over Me ([paom.com](http://paom.com))  
Import Projects Berlin ([import-projects.org](http://import-projects.org))  
Hochschule für Gestaltung Offenbach  
([hfg-offenbach.de](http://hfg-offenbach.de))  
Float Gallery (<http://float.gallery>)  
Internet TBD ([internet-tbd.com](http://internet-tbd.com))  
Katrin Krumm ([katrinkrumm.de](http://katrinkrumm.de))  
Sucuk & Bratwurst ([sucukundbratwurst.de](http://sucukundbratwurst.de))  
Very Very Contemporary/Sebastian  
Zimmerhackl ([veryverycontemporary.net](http://veryverycontemporary.net))

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