

Popular networks and public support for a basic income in Europe

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Introduction and first five sections.

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On Saturday 10 June 2000 an international meeting was held in Brussels to launch a campaign for a European guaranteed income. The event titled 'A Social Minimum for all in Europe' was organised by activists from a popular network that has built up around the 'European Marches against Unemployment, Job Insecurity and Social Exclusion' (EM). This represents an important initiative in that not only has it gained support from across the continent and from a diversity of social forces, but it also has the capacity to mobilise a significant level of popular support.

Present at the meeting were activists from a range of associations and organisations from Belgium, France, Germany, Spain, UK, Netherlands, Luxembourg and Italy. The diversity of the network was illustrated by the platform of speakers that included representatives from the French and German unemployed and claimants' movements, the European Pensioners Federation, the League for Human Rights, and academics from Belgium and France. The meeting thus brought together an array of diverse groups in support of a 'guaranteed income'.

The demand for a guaranteed income was however part of an appeal for a broader set of social rights designed to counter growing levels of social insecurity in Europe. In the context of an undemocratic Europe constructed in the interests of the market the meeting demanded a democratic European Union of solidarity and respect for human rights. The call for a guaranteed monetary income was thus accompanied by demands for rights to essential services like water and electricity and to social rights like health and education. The immediate goal of the EM network is to have these rights recognised through their inclusion in the European Charter of Fundamental Rights due to be agreed at the EU summit in December 2000. Alongside the increasing popularity of the idea of a basic income by political activists has been the increasing interest in the idea by academics. While the notion has attracted the support of intellectuals from a variety of perspectives including right-wing libertarians, communitarians and socialists (Purdy, 1994; Roche, 1992: 178-90) it has become a particularly important weapon in the armoury of writers interested in reinvigorating social democracy in the context of post-industrialism and globalization. Academic advocates of the concept are however keen to disassociate the notion of a basic income from the wider issue of basic needs (Pierson, 1999: 192). The disassociation of basic income from basic needs in the academic literature leads to a fundamental difference in the meaning and implications of the concept vis à vis the way it has developed within the EM network.

In this paper we explore the political and conceptual implications of these divergent understandings of the basic income concept in the context of the EM struggle for a guaranteed income in Europe. We trace the development of the EM demands through the crisis and contradictions of national welfare regimes and the process of European integration. We then explore the development of an oppositional movement to these processes and the way in which the basic income has become a central component in the political, popular and intellectual struggle over the form of 'social Europe'. We conclude that the adoption of the basic income reform by oppositional groups in Europe needs to be seen in its material context and as part of a wider set of aspirations and demands and that this highlights the political and conceptual weaknesses of several strands of the academic debate on the form, popularity and consequences of a basic income as a new and radical form of welfare beyond the nation state.

European Integration and the development of Neo-liberal Europe

The recent increase in support for a basic income in Europe is related to the decomposition of national Keynesian welfare settlements and changing forms of social and political mobilisation. The crisis of the Keynesian welfare state was primarily a result of social coalitions, led by the labour movement, being able to wrest administrative

concessions and de-commodified services from national welfare regimes (Offe, 1984). While the crisis of Keynesianism and neo-liberal restructuring is a global phenomenon it has taken a highly specific form in Europe. In contrast to the UK which was subject to intense monetarist restructuring and a state-led assault on the labour movement during the 1980s (Clarke, 1988) neo-liberalism in Europe has been marked by political and economic integration and social partnership.

In the context of a protracted crisis of national Keynesianism, European integration has facilitated the internationalisation of capital and political regulation in ways that bypass and marginalise established forms of social and political mobilisation at the national level. This has been built into the institutional form of the EU through the principle of subsidiarity that has dominated the organisational development of the EU. Neo-liberal policies and directives have been developed at the EU level but have been applied by nation states in ways that are sensitive to national conditions. The practical decision-making processes of European integration have thus served as a subtle form of deregulation: undermining what is left of national corporatist arrangements while preventing the development of European mechanisms of policy co-ordination and development.

The Single European Act of 1986 involved member states ceding a degree of national sovereignty in order to hasten the process of economic and monetary union and the completion of the single market by 1992. The Treaty of European Union of 1992 was the logical progression from the completion of the single market. The Act established powerful regulatory mechanisms at the European level to ensure the operation of the newly created market according to neo-liberal principles. This was achieved through both the enhancement of EU competency in the areas of industrial and competition policy and the dynamic of EMU. The centrality of 'subsidiarity' to the 1992 Act demonstrated the attempt to develop an institutional distance between the neo-liberal regulatory institutions at the European level and the modes of national administration through which EU laws and directives were being implemented.

However, the convergence criteria of the Maastricht treaty linked together the process of EMU and the reduction of government budget deficits through reductions in social security payments and benefits and the result was an increasing level of nationally focussed struggle and mobilization that increasingly threatened to derail the entire European project. The limited ability of national political forms to contain the political mobilisation and struggle associated with European integration resulted in the re-channelling of struggle into new forms of interest mediation at the national and European level premised on notions of 'social partnership'.

The application of EMU convergence criteria was an extremely painful process and resulted in the restructuring and retrenchment of social welfare and in most EU member states was accompanied by high levels of unemployment (Kaupinnen, 1998). Public hostility to economic liberalisation in general and EMU in particular has resulted in the development of a series of tripartite and bipartite social pacts within EU nation states (Pochet & Fajertag, 1997).

The struggles and crises surrounding EMU resulted in a fundamental recomposition of European modes of governance. These are incorporated in the 1997 Treaty on European Union or Amsterdam Treaty. The Treaty included the employment chapter and incorporated and strengthened the Social Chapter. The Employment Chapter of the Amsterdam Treaty enshrined the notion of 'employability' as the touchstone of social development and economic growth within the EU. Through subsidiarity neo-liberal principles have been imposed on national agendas through the necessity of EU member states to draw up Annual Action plans along the lines of employability, entrepreneurship, adaptability and equal opportunities. This is resulting in the convergence of European labour markets and welfare systems around notions of flexibility and 'workfare'. The central organisational principles around which the above restructuring has occurred are conditionality and employability: the necessary subordination of social rights to the dynamics of the labour market and the need to re-establish the connection between social citizenship and labour market activity. These arrangements have been supported through a popular discourse of 'social' and 'civic' partnership that has been practised by trade unions and NGO's at European, national and company level. These new forms of inclusion are premised on an underlying acceptance of neo-liberal market capitalism and embody an intrinsic dualism that has created and intensified social exclusion as manifested in unemployment, low pay and insecurity and an increasing hostility to migrants from outside the EU. It is in opposition to these new forms of exclusion that popular networks in support of a basic income have developed.

European Marches the development of an oppositional network to neo-liberal Europe

The adoption and development of the demand for a European guaranteed income by the EM network can only be understood in relation to the origins and development of the network itself (see Mathers, 1999). The idea for the European Marches came from the French group Action Chomage! and was adopted by a meeting of European unemployed associations in Florence in 1996. The 1997 marches highlighted the way in which the processes of EMU and neo-liberal restructuring associated with European integration were resulting in a 'Bankers Europe' rather than a 'Peoples' Europe'. The existence of 20 million unemployed and 57 million living in poverty demonstrated the pressing need for the development of a 'Social Europe' alongside the processes of economic and political integration. This idea struck a popular chord and the marches were accompanied by 1000 public meetings across Europe and culminated in a 50,000 strong demonstration at the EU summit in Amsterdam. This success prompted the formation of a permanent network that has organised mobilisations and conferences to accompany each subsequent EU summit. The EM network is thus both a mobilising tool and a forum for debate and its participants and supporters can usefully be understood as comprising three overlapping elements: intellectual, popular and political.

The development of intellectual support for the EM has essentially developed in the context of a dialogue between intellectuals and activists (see Marches Européennes, 1997). The intellectual support for EM and the wider project of creating a social Europe has been particularly strong in France and Pierre Bourdieu has emerged as an especially prominent critique of Neo-liberalism. Bourdieu has been crucial to the construction of the Raisons d'Agir network that promotes the participation of intellectuals in the development of popular movements. Bourdieu's critique of neo-liberalism is at its sharpest in *Acts of Resistance: Against the New Myths of Our Time* (Bourdieu, 1998). Bourdieu argues that globalization is a neo-liberal myth and that the supremacy of the market is serving to destroy civilised society in Europe: a civility that is epitomised by national welfare states.

In *Le Monde Diplomatique*, which has proven to be a useful forum for critical intellectuals, he asserts the need for a European welfare state and argues that there has never been a social policy without a social movement capable of imposing it (Bourdieu, 1999). Consequently, he has been involved in the Raisons d'Agir call for a Charter for a European social movement that can co-ordinate the necessary mobilisation required to initiate 'new forms of social solidarity based on unified and improved social benefits'. What is significant is that although these intellectual critiques of neo-liberal Europe point to clear support for the development of social rights they have not provided an intellectual elaboration of the demand for a European guaranteed income. The major impetus for this demand has been the experiences and struggles of those involved in the nationally-based popular networks.

The Popular Origins of the Demand for a Guaranteed Income in Europe

The demand for an unconditional right to an income has its origins in the refusal of claimants and the unemployed to accept the way that institutional ideology, policies and practices strip them of their dignity. From the EU down, the language used is one that makes the unemployed responsible for unemployment due to either personal failings or a lack of skills. The answer is deemed to be the replacement of monetary benefits that reinforce passivity by active policies that will remoralize and retrain the unemployed. For claimants, this approach is not only seen as inappropriate but also as highly insulting.

Neo-liberal ideology and policy has been translated into a range of controls on benefit entitlement that lead to practices that denigrate claimants. The duty to show evidence of seeking work in a situation of mass unemployment is viewed as a demeaning and superfluous activity. Moreover, the power of officials to enter and inspect claimants' homes, as is the case in Belgium, is regarded as a contravention of basic human rights. Women have been particularly affected by cohabitation regulations that deprive them of benefits and have been disproportionately subjected to intrusions into their privacy. Consequently, claimants' groups and unemployed associations have been at the forefront of struggles against the everyday effects of neo-liberalism and have insisted on an unconditional right to an income as the centrepiece of an alternative.

The guaranteed income demand became a prominent part of the nationally based struggles against unemployment and poverty that were particularly notable in France and Germany in 1997 and 1998. In France the decision to cut the Christmas bonus of the unemployed sparked an outbreak of occupations of social security offices. This was linked with actions from a broader campaign against poverty involving actions against homelessness and utility disconnections. The campaign highlighted the way in which the socially marginalised were deprived of basic human rights and promoted the notion of rights to basic needs such as public transport and water. The rapid emergence of a discernible social movement from these activities has been accurately described as a 'social miracle' (Bourdieu, 1998: 88). The actions were widespread, militant and spectacular. In France, the movement

became headline news and forced a national TV appearance by the Prime Minister to announce the granting of emergency aid.

The combination of increased benefits and new legislation to combat social exclusion was however insufficient to halt a repeat of the actions during subsequent winters and these actions increasingly became linked to the struggles of other marginal groups such as the Sans Papiers migrants and workers in new militant unions (Eironline, 1998a; Levy & Aguiton, 1998). The French movement was a catalyst for a series of protest days against unemployment in Germany beginning in early 1998. These actions consistently mobilised 40,000 participants across 200 towns. Some of the actions were low key demonstrations in front of job centres demanding more jobs, but some drew inspiration from their French counterparts and occupied job centres and raised the issue of wealth distribution by storming the Stock Exchange and offices of the Deutsche Bank (Eironline, 1998b; Rein, 1998). The French and German campaigns were particularly notable for the numerous contacts made between them and the international forums organised by the EM network enabled the message of these movements to circulate across the continent and inspire similar mobilisations elsewhere. The message that emerged from the above struggles was that while the unemployed wanted jobs they were not prepared to work at any price. Indeed, the priority facing many of those in deepest poverty was not a job but an income.

The guaranteed income thus began to speak to the needs of the range of people who were involved in social struggles. Many of those involved were young workers who, with an employment history of insecure employment, were not eligible for work based benefits. These groups were strongly represented in AC! and the leading activists of this group became convinced by the argument for a guaranteed income. Groups such as AC! And German groups such as Bundesarbeitsgemeinschaft der Sozialhilfeinitiativen (BAG-SHI) popularised the demand for a basic income within the EM network. As a consequence, at the Assizes held in Brussels in April 1998 the guaranteed income was the central element in a declaration demanding a series of European social and cultural rights. The slogan of the network became 'a job is my right, an income is my due'.

Support for a Basic Income amongst Political Parties

Adopting the demand for a guaranteed income at the European level suggests its translation into practice through a specific policy to be adopted by political parties and groupings at the EU level. Political participation in the EM network is characterised by its plurality, a situation that is explained by EM chairperson, Angela Klein, who states that: We are a campaign against unemployment and its social consequences behind this there is a criticism of the EU and of national states but this is not codified into a political programme because this unity doesn't exist. There are common demands and points that many groups share but not a political programme.

This recognition has made it easier for diverse political forces to work together at the European level in way that has not been possible at the national level. Practical support and consistent meaningful participation in the EM network has been largely restricted to left wing parties, the Greens and anarchist groups. The EM were initially linked with the 'Conventions for Full Employment' - a cross-party initiative that received the support of the ETUC - and as a consequence received support from across the political spectrum. The Amsterdam marchers were welcomed by members of the European Parliament representing the European United Left (GUE/NGL), the Party of European Socialists and the European People's Party. Subsequently, the EM network has dropped its support for full employment in favour of demanding the right to work and the right to an income. It has become highly critical of the social democratic promoted EU policy goal of full employment which is seen to be associated with further labour market deregulation and welfare restructuring. Liaison between the network and EU political groupings has become most developed with respect to the Greens and the GUE/NGL. However, neither the Greens nor the GUE/NGL included the call for a European guaranteed income in their 1999 election manifestos. The Green election manifesto asserted that 'a new model must allow for full social protection and a more flexible lifestyle The basis for this model is a drastic reduction of working time to make gainful employment available to everyone'. The GUE/NGL is 'in favour of an increase in minimum social security benefits and in favour of a high level of social security protection' (GUE/NGL, 2000). The 1999 European elections resulted in the election of a small yet significant number of MEP's from parties that support a guaranteed income policy and whose members are active participants in the EM network. The Italian Rifondazione Comunista (RC) has 4 MEPs and supports a guaranteed income. The German Partei des Demokratischen Sozialismus (PDS) has 6 MEPs and is openly critical of European employment policy and has argued for European minimum standards and in support of European popular networks demanding a basic income. The French Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire (LCR) has 2 MEPs and is part of the Trotskyist Fourth International that has been an enthusiastic supporter of the EM network.

Basic Income and the European Marches - The Struggle for Alternatives

Support for the notion of a basic income is becoming increasingly evident within the EM network. The basic income is seen as a potential defence against the neo-liberal restructuring of social protection systems and labour markets. The EM appeal is to 'Build barriers! Resist this spiral of poverty! Impose limits beneath which it is unacceptable to fall: a guaranteed income, a minimum wage and a minimum pension'. However, activists like Uwe from the Oldenburg Unemployed Centre recognise the necessity of linking defensive campaigns with a project for longer-term social transformation. He argues that: When you see how rights in the labour market that the workers movement struggled centuries for are being destroyed, it is quite right and necessary to say 'that's enough', we are against this and not to say simply we'll let Europe develop in a way that the rulers want and just work on our alternatives. But if we are restricted to defensive struggles then we will eventually be pushed back, perhaps more slowly, but it will happen. We must work on our alternative perspectives alongside these daily struggles. For many in the EM network it is the guaranteed income that is the key to linking daily defensive struggles to visions of social change. Irène of AC! argues that: This guaranteed income for all has become more and more important in the unemployed movement, not only because it effects the everyday life of the unemployed, the level of income support, but for us it is also a demand for the future you know. It's not only a reaction to the nasty tricks of the capitalists, it is also a kind of demand that can be utopian in some way, perhaps in the direction of a liberation from capitalist wage labour. And for us this demand has this utopian seed in it and that has not been the case with the social movements of the last twenty years.

The question of the guaranteed income is closely linked to the redistribution and redefinition of work. However, once the demand for a guaranteed income was adopted at the Brussels Assize the priority became to translate the idea into something meaningful around which it would be possible to mobilise popular support. The network was immediately faced with the plurality of meanings that were attached to the idea of a guaranteed income. What followed was a process of exchanging information and ideas followed by a workshop on the guaranteed income at the Cologne 'Assizes' in January 1999. At this workshop it became clear that the terminology being used differed according to the national background. Whilst the Germans spoke of 'Existenzgeld', the French promoted the 'revenu garanti individuel' and the Spanish a 'salario social'.

It was recognised that irregular meetings did not provide the space to develop an understanding of the various perspectives and so it was decided to set up a permanent working group on this question. It is difficult to assess the extent to which information and ideas have been exchanged via informal visits and by e-mail and Internet, but such exchanges have proven to be a vital complement to the work of the more formal network. This process was both interrupted and advanced by the organisation of the second European March to Cologne that culminated with another international demonstration of 30,000 people. It was interrupted by the realisation that time for communication had to be accompanied by energy for mobilisation. It was advanced by the development of a core team of activists from the regular EM co-ordination meetings that was able to co-ordinate the work of the nationally based groups. In December 1999 a session of the first 'European Parliament of the Unemployed' was devoted to the guaranteed income question. The 'Parliament' stressed the need for a European mobilisation against 'Workfare' and in favour of the guaranteed income. However, it was also recognised that the demand would need to be more specific and relate to a precise figure if there was to be a successful mobilisation around the concept at the European level.

The team that had developed through organising the Cologne events began to work together on this task. They compared the existing systems for minimum incomes and wages and the variety of demands that coexisted in the network. It became dramatically clear that there were huge differences between countries in terms of existing provision and the translation of benefit levels into the EURO made this totally transparent. The highest levels in Denmark were nine times that of the lowest in Portugal and the adoption of an average, for example that of France, would mean that a uniform European guaranteed income would be higher than the Portuguese minimum wage. These differences made the idea of a demand for a uniform level absolutely inconceivable and so the network set about finding a way of combining the desire for equality with the need for a demand that could be a realistic basis for campaigning and mobilisation. Marie-Paule from the Belgian EM describes this process as one where: *Everyone is very respectful of the patchwork that exists in the network and is very concerned about making a demand that has an echo in the various countries, a demand that they can carry back to their country Everyone arrives with all of their radicalism but also wanting to find a demand that is a little less radical and that can continue to build the alliances.*

The way out of the problem of differing standards and costs of living was in fact provided by the mechanisms of

European integration themselves. The gross domestic product (GDP) has become the main indicator in the EURO zone and is used by the European Central Bank as the reference point for restricting public debt. It thus provides an appropriate basis on which to calculate the guaranteed income and the EM decided to demand that it is set at 50% of GDP per head of the population. This links income levels directly to those of wealth and the question of material living standards with those of wealth creation and distribution. This answer is one that ties in with the concerns of activists who have long campaigned for welfare reforms to be linked with wider social changes. Significantly, it is quite simple to translate the universal demand into a specific figure at the national level that is easily understandable by people, and around which they can mobilise. Mobilisation is the key for the EM network and this is clearly illustrated by Laurent of AC! who, when asked about the potential for the European guaranteed income to be realised, emphasised that: *I believe that it won't happen quietly through explaining things, it won't work like that, it's difficult to make a prognosis, but we can't simply leave it to the technocrats, the philanthropists, the political classes, that would be a catastrophe it needs a strong mobilisation or it won't happen.*

The demonstration in Nice will be the first test of whether such a demand will resonate amongst European citizens.

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