

A Plea for Young People to Join the Fight for Basic Income

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As a writer, I spent the first 20 years of my career trying to put people out of work and the last few years worrying about it. Let me explain.

People are attracted to a basic income economy for any number of reasons. Most are antipoverty, which makes sense, but others are sociologists, educators, environmentalists, and others. I arrived via technology.

But the one missing group is the one that stands to benefit the most: today's youth.

I have to go back to my own youth to explain why it's so important to have young people involved in our fight for a basic income.

As a child it didn't take much intelligence for me to realise that man was the brightest creature on earth. What didn't make sense to my childish mind, however, was why he needed to work for a living.

Certainly no dumb creature would tolerate working on an assembly line, repeating the same operation hour after hour, day after day, year after year. Or going down a coal mine shaft every day and working in the dark from childhood to old age.

It didn't make sense. Surely machines could do this work more efficiently and free men up for better things?

Thus when I became a writer my subject -- my passion really -- was automation and the early computers, and it wasn't too many years before my early concerns were satisfied: most factories were becoming fully automated.

But introducing automation to offices was painfully slow. I knew there was a great deal of tedious office work that could be handled far better by machines -- accounting work, payroll, scheduling. Why was office management dragging its feet?

Then it came to me. It was an emotional thing. There's nothing emotional about installing a new machine to debark logs, for example, but there's lots of emotion about putting two young accounts people out of work.

By then I was too deep into the subject. During the period 1960-1980 -- I call it the adolescent age of the computer -- I wrote hundreds of computer application articles on three continents.

When I spoke to computer users about their experiences I would usually ask the question. “With your new computer did you experience major savings in time, money, or staff? Or all three?”

In the early days my clients (hardware manufacturers) would be concerned about me stressing staff savings but to me that was the whole point of the exercise. On the flip side the growing computer/communication sector was starting to employ thousands of people.

By 1980 the social upheaval in the office had subsided and computers were fully accepted as efficient management tools. Personal computers were gaining ground, the electronic media became involved, software became more important than hardware and...the computer became a toy as well as a tool.

As a print-oriented person my involvement became largely irrelevant (technology had downsized me!) and I switched to other writing interests. But over the subsequent years I kept a wary eye on the progress of computers, particularly the communications aspect. And as time went by I slowly became more dismayed.

A fear I had expressed nearly 60 years ago that technology was in danger of outstripping our spirituality (“Automation – what will it mean to you?”, The Province B.C. Magazine, November 17, 1956) rings just as true today.

I’m now concerned that many people who lose their jobs to technological innovation will not only lack for money but also the resources to handle their new-found “leisure”.

Education in the past 60 years has largely taught us how to work, not how to live, and also to be satisfied in a world of passive entertainment. My 1956 article quoted psychoanalyst Dr. Erich Fromm as saying, “We are eternal suckling, eternally disappointed sucklings.”

Have we changed?

Introducing a basic income to stop poverty once and for all is going to be a very tough fight, but the aftermath will bring its own problems – a restructuring of the educational system, a new attitude to work and lifestyles, an increased role for volunteering, a reevaluation of how we treat our mentally ill, and stronger community involvement, among others..

Fortunately young people today are said to have a different attitude to work which is a positive start. But is youth aware of the world we’re moving into and, if so, are they prepared to help shape it?