An Authentic “Right to Work”

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The rhetorical hijacking of the phrase “right to work” is epitomized by its use to promote union-busting laws in a majority of the nation’s states. But the original concept of a “right to work” links it to human rights doctrine – all persons should be assured of the opportunity to engage in productive employment without barriers or obstacles. It is in that spirit, the spirit embodied in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, that we have advanced the proposal for an American federal job guarantee for all citizens.

We have in mind the establishment of a universal public option for employment for all adults, under the auspices of an agency we have dubbed the National Investment Employment Corps (NIEC). Adult Americans would be ensured of the opportunity to find work at non-poverty wages via a public sector guarantee of employment for all. The minimum compensation for entry level positions in the NIEC will be just above the poverty level income associated with a family of four. Each job also will include benefits, as part of the total compensation; among these will be the provision of health insurance comparable in quality to what now is offered to elected officials and civil servants at the national level.

Such a policy will empower American workers in an unprecedented manner. First, it will place an effective floor on the compensation that must be offered by the private sector. To be able to hire workers successfully under this regime, private employers, at least, will have to match the minimum compensation offered under the NIEC. The program will eliminate low-wage employment; this will be a major transformative change, particularly since close to half of homeless individuals actually have jobs – but poorly paid jobs. Thus, the job guarantee eliminates working poverty.
Second, the creation of a federal job guarantee will fulfill the promise of the unfunded mandate of the Humphrey-Hawkins bill (the Full Employment and Balanced Growth Act of 1978) by affording a direct route to full employment. Every American who wants a job will have access to a full time employment at decent wages. Thus, the program eliminates *involuntary unemployment*. Third, unions will be strengthened; the presence of the floor on compensation produced by the NIEC should increase their leverage in providing better pay and better work conditions for organized labor.

There are precedents for the job guarantee in other countries, specifically the Jefes y Jefas program in Argentina and the rural employment guarantee in India. But there also are major precedents in the American experience. The primary examples are the Works Progress Administration and the Civilian Conservation Corps in the 1930s, developed in response to the conditions of the Great Depression. Unlike both of those programs, the National Investment Employment Corps, will be permanent and universal in its application. At any point, any American seeking public sector employment—for whatever reason—will have access to a job.

While simultaneously assuring full employment and eliminating working poverty, the federal job guarantee also will be a vehicle for citizens to contribute socially useful work. The conventional purview of mass public sector employment projects has been the construction and maintenance of physical infrastructure, typically roads, bridges, and highways, and this will be an important dimension of the activities conducted by the NIEC. Greening the economy by transforming more homes and businesses to reliance on solar energy, at a low cost to the customer, could be a new type of physical infrastructure work that is conducted by NIEC workers.

However, work under the federal job guarantee also can address our human infrastructure needs: human care whether child care or elder care. This is the type of work that, presumably, we will not want to automate. Under the NIEC it can be professionalized so that care services are provided by well-trained and well-supervised public employees. The supplying of these services at a low cost will free others to pursue their own career interests without the time constraints imposed by full-time, unpaid voluntary care for their relatives.
Moreover, workers under the NIEC can provide services that bridge physical and human infrastructural needs. Disaster relief in communities stricken by hurricanes, floods, earthquakes, and the like will encompass both types of work. Some can help build, repair, and maintain the physical facilities of our nation’s schools; others can serve as teachers or teachers’ aides. Still others might be employed as postal workers and help rejuvenate our nation’s battered postal service. Artists and writers can be employed to pursue their crafts in ways that parallel the work they performed under the Works Progress Administration. States and municipalities also could be canvassed to identify their unmet needs that could be performed by federal job guarantee employees.

Furthermore, the existence of a federal job guarantee can ensure employment for those workers most likely to be excluded from jobs, those workers who can be described as *structurally unemployed*. This will include the previously incarcerated, young military veterans, black workers – especially young black workers, the previously unemployed, the disabled and non-college educated adults – all of whom are stigmatized and face much lower odds of finding work than other Americans. Disturbingly, regardless of their level of educational attainment, black workers consistently incur an unemployment rate twice as high as comparably educated white workers; thus, the black-white unemployment gap becomes a dramatic index of the degree of anti-black discrimination in the U.S. economy.

A key assumption underlying the range of work to be performed under the federal job guarantee is that virtually everyone can do some type of useful work. To the extent possible jobs will be tailored to an individual’s existing skills, interests, and capabilities. In addition, training opportunities will be offered that will enable participants to acquire new skills and will facilitate their promotion to higher level positions within the NIEC.

The federal job guarantee not only will address *structural unemployment*, but it also will serve as a bulwark against *cyclical unemployment*. Indeed, had we had a job guarantee in place at the start of the Great Recession it would have been of great benefit to college educated workers, who also were hammered by job losses. The federal job guarantee will function like an automatic stabilizer, expanding, while helping to preserve incomes and state and local tax bases in bad
economic times, and contracting, while promising that no one who wants to work will go jobless in good economic times.

We estimate that the average cost per worker will be in the vicinity of $50- to $60,000. This will include wages (for a forty hour work-week), benefits, materials, supplies, training costs, and higher wages for non-entry level personnel. At the trough of the Great Recession about 15 million Americans were out of work. If all of them had been put to work under a federal job guarantee, the cost of the program would have been, approximately, $750- to $900 billion. To a large extent that expense would be offset by the reduction in the expenses of entitlement programs. Such programs could be reduced significantly, given the poverty reducing impact of the job guarantee. Sharp reductions will be possible in the costs associated with unemployment insurance, TANF, and other types of social support programs.

But we also recognize that, in the current political climate, the adoption of a bold policy initiative of this type, at the federal level, is unlikely. Our motivation for designing the policy is to have a proposal in place when a more propitious moment arises for its adoption. But there also is the possibility there are states and local municipalities that may have the wherewithal to develop job guarantee programs, at least on a demonstration basis.

For smaller cities this may be a difficult program to finance, particularly if they are in state’s that mandate that they balance their budgets. For example, we estimate that if Durham, North Carolina put everyone to work who is now unemployed there, it would cost about $600 million. The city’s entire annual budget currently is about $450 million. Under those circumstances, if Durham were to implement a job guarantee, it might want to execute it first by targeting those neighborhoods with the highest rates of joblessness. It could then be phased in to become a citywide program.

In contrast, we estimate that to put all persons currently unemployed to work in New York City, the expense would be about $10 billion. But that is about one-eighth of the city’s operating budget, which improves the prospects of immediate adoption of a city wide program. Therefore, the assurance of jobs for all – the phrase that informs the name of one of the long-standing advocacy groups for a universal public employment program, the Jobs for All Coalition—could start at
the local level and grow to become a national project. Local job guarantees could serve as the foundation for a genuine “right to work.”

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