

# Do We Need a Federal Jobs Guarantee? A Debate.

*Sens. Kirsten Gillibrand, Cory Booker and Bernie Sanders have all proposed a job guarantee. But would it be drudgery?*

BY **ROHAN GREY & RAÚL CARRILLO** REBUTTAL BY **MATT BRUENIG**

JUNE 18 | JULY ISSUE

## THE CASE FOR A GUARANTEED JOB

BY **ROHAN GREY AND RAÚL CARRILLO**

Most workers work too much and too hard, only to benefit the idle rich. Thus, we support reducing working hours and capital's share of wealth. Yet [evidence suggests](#) exclusion from work causes problems beyond the absence of income, including higher mortality and suicide rates, social isolation and a permanent decline in well-being.

To address these evils, we echo [Martin Luther King's call](#) for "a job to all ... who want to ... and are able to work," and "an income for [those] not able to work." Specifically, we support a federally funded, [locally driven](#) job guarantee (JG), which, like programs envisioned by [Sen. Bernie Sanders' \(I-Vt.\)](#) and economists at the [Levy Economics Institute](#) and [Center on Budget and Policy Priorities](#), commits the federal government to guarantee a living wage job with good benefits, including healthcare, to anyone who wants or needs it.

Among other benefits, a JG creates a space for work focused on dignity, self-actualization and public purpose, [divorced from concerns of profiteers](#). There is no shortage of meaningful labor, from infrastructure repair to care work to artistic revitalization. Combating climate change alone requires massive [public mobilization](#) to transform energy and food production, restore ecosystems and defend frontline communities.

Although post-work utopians claim [robots are rendering human labor obsolete](#), the data shows no such evidence. As the Center for Economic and Policy Research [notes](#), the last decade actually saw a decline in productivity growth between 2006 and 2015, relative to the decade beforehand.

With no robot-topia in sight, people must work. A JG reconfigures labor markets in favor of workers. As economist Michal Kalecki argued, ending the threat of unemployment grows the “[self-assurance and class-consciousness of the working class.](#)”

Additionally, as [Pauli Murray](#) and other Civil Rights [leaders](#) argued, true full employment helps ensure *fair* employment. Workers trapped in low-wage sectors ([disproportionately workers of color](#)) can take JG jobs instead. Workers tired of employers promoting war, incarceration, extraction, and deportation can do the same. Meanwhile, workers remaining in the private sector benefit from heightened competition among employers to fill openings.

A JG can also address other structural inequalities within the labor system. Currently, women perform the majority of care work without formal remuneration. A JG program could assist child and elder care professionals, moving familial burdens off the backs of women and into the public sphere, and [formalizing and valorizing existing care work.](#)

We do not think central bankers, currently tasked with steering the macroeconomy, are [interested in, nor capable of](#) truly achieving full employment. Furthermore, we consider traditional stimulus and labor market programs [sloppy and inadequate.](#) By establishing a legal right to work, a JG shifts responsibility for unemployment from individuals to the government.

The struggles for [public education](#) and [housing](#) are illustrative: Communities that support these goals do not simply try to earmark funds, build infrastructure and hire staff; they commit to meeting the needs of any eligible individual. Recognition of a legal right to work is [necessary, but, of course, insufficient.](#) Successful rights enforcement requires administrative support from courts and agencies, [fiscal support](#) from Congress, and [political support](#) from the public.

Critics [contest](#), first, that jobs suitable for the unemployed are necessarily “make-work.” But the [Sunrise Movement](#), “an army of young people” supporting a climate-oriented JG, argues critical, [long-term](#) greenwork jobs do not require prior training or skills.

Second, critics claim that certain work, like construction, [can’t employ “unskilled” labor.](#) But the Works Progress Administration [did](#) exactly that, and we still [use those buildings.](#)

Third, critics equate a JG with [bloated bureaucracy.](#) But we can easily integrate JG jobs into [existing nonprofit and government infrastructure.](#)

Fourth, critics claim a JG is susceptible to fraud and abuse. But that’s true of all public programs, including those, like [Social Security](#), that entail “simply” cutting checks. This doesn’t mean we should give up on them.

Finally, critics claim a JG is punitive workfare by another name. But we simply argue for [basic solidarity.](#) We expect those who can work, to do so —[according to their abilities](#), in an equitable fashion, to meet everyone’s needs.

Economic justice demands more than cash transfers. We must recognize each other as irreducibly social beings, embedded in a [complex global system](#) as consumers, *and workers.*

# WHAT A JOBS GUARANTEE CAN'T DO

BY MATT BRUENIG

What exactly is a job guarantee program, according to Raúl and Rohan? We only get the briefest of hints in a single sentence: “We support a federally funded, locally driven job guarantee (JG), which, like programs envisioned by Sen. Bernie Sanders (I-Vt.) and economists at the Levy Economics Institute and the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, commits the federal government to guarantee a living wage job with good benefits, including healthcare, to anyone who wants or needs one.”

In addition to its vagueness, the sentence is at odds with itself. The [very nascent Sanders plan](#) merely creates a process that local governments can use to get federal funding for local projects. This may or may not be a good idea, but, since it relies on localities' discretion, it can't possibly provide a job for every American “who wants or needs” one.

The JG program that the [Levy Institute](#) and other leading academics have been proposing for decades sets the federal government up as an employer of last resort. The government would fund temporary, minimum-wage jobs—described by Hyman Minsky, the godfather of JG, as [“make-work”](#)—for those who are presently unemployable in ordinary public and private sector work. The advocates of this view, including Randall Wray, Stephanie Kelton and Pavlina Tcherneva, have said these characteristics are essential if the program is to avoid creating unsustainable inflationary spirals.

The basic problem with the academics' proposal is that the make-work jobs will not provide meaningful benefits to society. A JG program could not provide child care and elder care because those jobs need to be done on a permanent basis, not merely when the economy is in recession and many people are out of work.

A JG program could not build infrastructure because construction requires highly skilled workers who make more than the minimum wage. A JG program could not do climate-change work because building sea walls, installing solar panels and just about anything else on this front requires skilled workers who will not work for minimum wage.

If you think it is better to have unemployed people pick up trash and rake leaves rather than receive an unemployment check while they search for a job, then a JG could make sense. Otherwise, you should oppose it, as I do.

# Do We Need a Universal Basic Income? A Debate.

*Getting free money from the government is popular. But would it prop up capitalism?*

BY **MATT BRUENIG** REBUTTAL BY **ROHAN GREY & RAÚL CARRILLO**

JUNE 19 | JULY ISSUE

## THE CASE FOR A UNIVERSAL BASIC INCOME

BY **MATT BRUENIG**

In America today, around two-thirds of the national income is [paid out](#) to workers in the form of labor compensation: wages, salaries, tips and benefits. The remaining one-third is paid out to capitalists in the form of passive income: dividends, interest, rents and capital gains. The capitalists do not work for their share of the national income. They simply own things and, by virtue of that ownership, passively extract income.

This arrangement would not be so disequalizing if the ownership of passive income-generating capital was evenly distributed, but it is not. Federal Reserve data show that millionaires [own](#) 80 percent of the country's capital while the bottom 38 percent of Americans own none. This means that a small group of people receives the overwhelming majority of the nation's passive income, which is one of the reasons inequality is so high.

For the last hundred years or so, market socialists like Rudolf Hilferding, Oskar Lange, Rudolf Meidner and John Roemer have argued that we should solve this problem by collectivizing the ownership of wealth into common pools. The Norwegian government made the idea work over the past few decades through nationalizing oil resources, creating dozens of state-owned enterprises, and just ordinary taxing and saving. Today, Norwegian citizens collectively own 59 percent of their wealth in these types of funds (and 76 percent if you exclude owner-occupied housing).

The main Norwegian social wealth fund is especially interesting because it does not invest in speculative real estate or coal, and is planning to [divest](#) from oil and gas. It also [excludes](#) companies from its portfolio if they violate human rights and [labor rights](#) or engage in environmentally destructive practices.

Once the wealth is collectively owned, that raises an interesting question: What to do with the income it generates? In Norway, the money goes into public spending, mostly on robust social

welfare programs. Another answer is to fund a universal basic income, or UBI (also called a “universal basic dividend” or “social dividend”) for everyone in society. Such a program exists in Alaska and helps to ensure everyone benefits from the state’s wealth, not just the super-rich. In part because of this, Alaska is the most equal state in America.

Unlike a JG, this kind of UBI has been tried successfully. Since 1982, Alaska has used investment returns from the Alaska Permanent Fund to pay out a universal basic dividend to everyone who lives in the state. In some years, the dividend has been as high as \$2,072 for a single person or \$8,288 for a family of four. If Norway paid a dividend from its much larger fund, it would have been \$23,970 per person last year or \$95,880 for a family of four. Both the Alaskan and Norwegian programs are wildly popular, work as advertised and could easily be copied by our national government.

## **THE PROBLEM IS PROFITS**

**BY ROHAN GREY AND RAÚL CARRILLO**

Like Matt, we oppose the concentration of wealth and ownership. However, his approach of redistributing capital income, rather than reducing it, stands to make a bad situation worse.

Financial inequality is a [symptom](#), not a cause, of capitalism. It exists because capitalists and managers [control production](#) while exploiting workers and the broader public for their own power and profit. This system scars communities and the environment in ways dividends cannot heal, causing death, disease and ecological collapse. Consequently, proposals that rely on ever-greater profits risk entrenching the current economy’s worst abuses.

In particular, we oppose linking the performance of stocks, bonds and real estate to poverty reduction, as Matt’s social wealth fund [proposal](#) would do. Goldman Sachs, Monsanto, Halliburton, Facebook, Amazon and the rest of the Fortune 500 are not merely money-making machines; they are sprawling private governance [regimes](#) that warp the lives of billions. What’s good for General Motors is [rarely](#) good for the country (or planet). Furthermore, the [hostility](#) of central bankers to the [working class](#), especially workers of color, should cause leftists to balk at reforms featuring a technocracy of fund managers.

The Norwegian and Alaskan experiences also cause us concern rather than comfort. Norway’s sovereign wealth fund (SWF), for example, amassed its wealth by investing in [fossil fuels](#). Today it invests in overseas [real estate](#) and earns passive income off the backs of workers in the [Global South](#). The Alaska Permanent Fund (APF), still rakes in [healthy profits](#) from fossil fuel [extraction](#), while Alaska remains plagued by [poverty](#), [unemployment](#) and [underinvestment in public services](#). Meanwhile, the highest dividend paid by the APF—\$2,072 per person—is still far too

low to provide substantial respite from work, the alleged advantage of a universal basic income (UBI) over a job guarantee (JG).

Regardless of the size of the payout, we are concerned that mailing everyone an identical check will increase inequality, rather than reduce it. Early social dividend proponents, such as C.H. Douglas, [envisioned](#) an “aristocracy of producers and a democracy of consumers.” A standalone UBI, financed by a wealth fund or otherwise, does not challenge the capitalist system of production. History [demonstrates](#) technocratic elites favor a standalone UBI precisely because it actually subsidizes corporate power, rather than threatens it.

Instead of a stock dividend, we should guarantee housing, healthcare, education, family and disability support, reparations, and other public goods through a full employment economy, undergirded by a JG. Rather than leaning into financialization, we should reduce our dependence on mega-corporations and money managers by establishing a [right to a job](#), then building [alternative systems](#) of [community-oriented production](#). The solution to capitalist-driven inequality is not making everyone a capitalist. It's less capitalism.

# Jobs Guarantee or Universal Basic Income? Why Not Both?

*Neither is a silver bullet, but they can help us tackle inequality and climate change.*

**BY ALYSSA BATTISTONI**

The argument about a universal basic income (UBI) versus a job guarantee (JG) has become one of the liveliest and most contentious debates on the Left. Each has been touted as a solution to all ills: the way to decrease depression, close the racial wealth gap, recognize historically undervalued forms of work, transform the economy, save the planet.

Though UBI and JG are typically counterposed, it's entirely plausible they could coexist. If paid work is as important to well-being as JG advocates say, most people would want a job even with UBI. In particular, the black freedom movement, from civil rights leaders to Black Lives Matter, has called for both a basic income and guaranteed jobs.

Whether both can do all the things proponents promise—in particular, the essential work of transitioning quickly to a low-carbon economy—is a different, harder question. Whether it's possible to achieve both is yet another.

A UBI program could actually be a danger to the climate if, in distributing revenue from publicly owned resources, we rely on profits from destructive industries such as oil, as in Alaska. But there are alternatives: a depletion tax on companies that degrade so-called natural capital, a tax on carbon and other pollutants, or a land value tax targeting large landowners—all of which foster environmental conservation and make public claims to natural wealth.

I initially supported UBI because separating livelihoods from jobs is important, not only for human wellbeing but for breaking an environmentally destructive growth cycle. That's where many JG proposals make me nervous. I have yet to see a JG proposal that doesn't promise, at least tangentially, to increase growth and productivity. [A proposal published by the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities](#), for example, suggests a JG would produce “increases in the growth rate of GDP, and substantial productivity and capacity gains.” But not all such gains are desirable. We ought to crowd out the many jobs that are actively harmful to people, society and the environment, whether in fast fashion or Amazon warehouses.

Raúl and Rohan agree that we should work less in general, and it's possible to build work reduction into a JG program. But the valorization of work nevertheless permeates JG discourse, often framed in terms of dignity or solidarity. If the point is for everyone to contribute to necessary work in the spirit of equality and solidarity, we should be making everyone work—but no one yet has proposed drafting landlords and the idle rich to shovel compost. (I'm on board.)

It is encouraging, however, to see that many current JG advocates are thinking about what constitutes low-carbon, socially beneficial work. Economists [Stephanie Kelton](#) and [Pavlina Tcherneva](#) have both called for a JG oriented around care: for people, for the planet and for communities. Important questions remain. Could parents get “jobs” caring for their children? Could friends get jobs caring for one another? Yet the move to put care work at the heart of a climate program is important. We need to move away from the work of resource-intensive consumer goods toward the work of bettering lives, planting trees, constructing playgrounds, making art.

Perhaps most promising is the combination of a JG and [universal basic services](#): free and publicly provided housing, transportation, internet access, education, healthcare and other necessities. Dense housing and public transportation are particularly crucial to reducing carbon emissions in a just way.

If that sounds too good to be true, that's where politics comes in. The most significant political challenge for both policies, of course, is that private employers don't want people to have alternatives to bad jobs. Realistically, the Left doesn't have the power to win both a UBI and a JG in the immediate future—particularly at a time when unemployment is relatively low, even if bad

jobs are rampant. So we need to be alert to the challenges of actually passing something, and to how our ideal policies might be distorted in the process.

I've grown [more wary](#) of a UBI as it's increasingly championed by tech scions who see it as a way to throw crumbs to workers replaced by robots. That version of UBI, which would replace social services with lump sums of cash, isn't what I want— but of late it's been the one with more momentum. Similarly, while left-wing JG programs aren't workfare, we need to be careful not to reinforce the idea that people only matter if they work enough, as the Right tries to [impose work requirements](#) on food stamps and other assistance programs.

My hunch is that the JG-UBI debate has become so loaded in part because passing any left-ish legislation seems hard enough right now—so people want a policy that can do as much as possible all at once. (I've [been guilty](#) of this myself!) But we don't need a single silver bullet: We need a strong Left movement. The most important problem isn't which policy looks best in the abstract, but how we build a political force capable of winning a decent version of either in the short term, and then building on it over time.

Left-liberal energy is gathering around a JG, as witnessed in recent proposals from Bernie Sanders and Cory Booker. That's reason enough for me to get behind it, too, and to [push hard](#) for a program that will support the kinds of work, from solar panel installation to wetland restoration to elder care, that are absolutely crucial to our survival. It's also why I've spent more time discussing it here. Yet, I will continue to insist that everyone has a right to a decent life whether or not they have a job, that human dignity does not depend on paid employment, that perpetual growth is not the way to prosperity, and that everyone should benefit from shared wealth and our shared planet. I hope the Left can keep both ideas in mind at once.

**ROHAN GREY** is a doctoral candidate at Cornell Law School. He is a director of the [National Jobs for All Coalition](#) and the [Modern Money Network](#).

**RAÚL CARRILLO** is an attorney fighting for economic justice in New York City. He is a director of the [National Jobs for All Coalition](#) and the [Modern Money Network](#).

**MATT BRUENIG** is the founder of the [People's Policy Project](#), a socialist-leaning think tank in Washington, D.C.

**ALYSSA BATTISTONI** is a doctoral candidate in political theory at Yale and an associate faculty member at the Brooklyn Institute for Social Research. Her writing has appeared in *Dissent*, *n+1* and *Jacobin*, where she is on the editorial board.