

How Universal Basic Income (UBI) Can Empower the Working Class Through Improved Wage Negotiation and Poverty Alleviation

Hefin Gwilym, Bangor University

David Beck, University of Salford

Nghiêm Phương Anh, Oxford University Clinical Research Unit

Abstract

Universal Basic Income (UBI) and its relationship to class are undertheorized and have received scant attention in academic literature. In this article, we address this omission of UBI and class in current discourses on UBI. We do this by focusing on how UBI can ameliorate class inequalities and ease social insecurity and precarity through a guaranteed, regular basic income. We focus on key areas where UBI can lighten the burden on the working class, namely, rebalancing power in the labour market, poverty and stigma reduction, navigating crisis (economic and Covid-19), addressing automation, improving health, and supporting employment and education. In all these areas, UBI has mitigating value for the working class, bringing new opportunities for a fulfilling life. Focusing on the UK, we believe that, with welfare reform and certain government constraints, UBI can make a significant contribution to improving the standard of living for the working class. However, we also argue that UBI has limitations since it cannot transform class relations, let alone abolish class. The article also discusses the problematic nature of defining class as binary, the significance of intersectionality, particularly between ethnicity and gender, and the development of class from Marx to current-day definitions that encompass populations who feel precarious and financially under- or unrewarded for their work.

Keywords

UBI, Working Class, Amelioration, Poverty, Stigma

Introduction

This paper argues that Universal Basic Income (UBI) can increase workers' wage bargaining power, thereby liberating them from low pay and undesirable work. Moreover, UBI can be a vehicle to reset the class balance, which in recent times has shifted in favour of capitalists and employers, through de-unionisation, precarity in the gig economy, and low wages (Chang et al, 2023; Walke, 2023). Moreover, we argue that UBI has significant potential to reduce poverty, which affects both low-income and unemployed groups. Thus, we take an innovative perspective on UBI as a radical tool with the potential to play a significant positive role in the class struggle. We argue that UBI, by strengthening the wage-bargaining power of unions and

workers, will improve their conditions, and we contest the view that UBI would be used merely as a subsidy for employers to pay low wages.

UBI as a Vehicle for Class Emancipation

In recent years, there has been renewed interest in the concept of a Universal Basic Income (UBI) (also known as a citizen's income, standard income, or unconditional basic income) with worldwide pilots and a plethora of books and articles in academic journals. However, its source extends back at least to the English radical Thomas Paine, who argued for a UBI in his pamphlet *Agrarian Justice* (1797). UBI is a social policy that guarantees citizens' subsistence as a right and is independent of paid labour by providing a regular payment, mostly from the state, but also possibly from charities and large corporations to all citizens, regardless of their employment status, age, and gender (Zimmermann et al. 2020, 301). It can include children and older people. Although terms are used interchangeably, there is a difference between UBI, basic income and cash transfers. Cash transfers are payments of financial assistance to the poor, such as to support food security, health, and education (Nyame and Gwilym, 2025). Basic incomes are payments to selected groups of poor people; they are not universal. An example of how these terms have been used interchangeably is the worldwide UBI pilots, which have never been fully universal but have focused on groups, such as care leavers in Wales (Gwilym and Beck, 2024). We address issues regarding how to phase out means testing, how payments would be made and funded, and the level at which UBI is set elsewhere (Gwilym et al, 2025). We also address elsewhere the evaluations of UBI trials worldwide, including the trade-offs, such as the rate at which UBI is set and the largely positive results of UBI pilots (Nyame and Gwilym, 2025, 2023; Beck et al., 2024)

There are many positives in UBI, such as redistributing wealth between social classes (provided it is accompanied by tax reform), tackling poverty and inequality, empowering workers in oppressive work, and enabling a person to live a secure life free from the social insecurity of low pay, insecure hours, and precarity (Lowrey 2018). While not a route to Marxist class emancipation, UBI nonetheless promises millions of working-class people greater freedom over their lives (Standing 2017). We posit that UBI has the potential to free the working class from many shackles of poverty, precarity, and social insecurity (Riedl, 2020; Weight, 2004). We argue that it increases workers' bargaining power with employers, thus improving wages and working conditions. However, eliminating poverty would also require a universal health care system and a free-tuition public higher education system, as well as generous benefits for people receiving categorical benefits, such as those with disabilities (Sculos, 2018, 3).

A policy that spans the political spectrum, for the Liberal Right, a UBI can be understood as associated with the social justice theory of "real libertarianism" (Zimmermann et al. 2020, 312). This theory aims to combine freedom, that is, the ability to do whatever one pleases, with equality, that is, the equal opportunity to pursue opportunities, in a particular way. On the Left, proponents claim that a UBI would free workers from market shackles and work toward the objective of labour de-commodification (Cigna 2022, 133). UBI could rebalance bargaining power in the labour market and potentially contribute to a partial de-commodification of labour. Currently, employers and the state keep pay rates below a living wage (therefore contributing to in-work poverty). UBI's main effect would be to reduce the pressure on workers to accept poor-quality work, potentially leading employers to increase wages over time. At present, the conditional nature of welfare forces workers to accept poor-quality jobs (or risk losing their benefits), and exploitative employers are effectively subsidised by the state through in-work benefits. UBI could somewhat level the playing field and enhance individual choice over which

jobs are accepted and on what terms (see 'Wage Labourers' below). Thus, because it stresses each person's entitlement to resources, UBI is consistent with positive libertarianism; nevertheless, because it is redistributive, it is at odds with radical libertarianism, which esteems free-market solutions (MacLean, 2018).

The eligibility criteria for UBI typically require both nationality and residency (Gentilini et al. 2020, 25). While UBI aims to provide universal coverage, it may extend to temporary residents, such as foreigners living in the country, at the government's discretion. However, if applied only to citizens of a specific nation, certain disadvantaged groups, such as undocumented immigrants, would be excluded from UBI due to their lack of eligibility for public funds. The income unconditionality that basic income provides lays a foundation for meeting essential needs, such as employment, quality of life, and better access to health care. Moreover, it incentivises people to work, as its universality means recipients do not experience reductions in social security benefits, which currently trap working people in poverty. A basic income enables all young people to participate in unpaid or low-paid internships, which would otherwise be available only to the well-off (Parijs & Vanderborcht 2017, 25). It is for this reason that basic income is considered a social protection system, creating minimum conditions and protecting those on the edges of social marginalisation.

The term 'basic' in UBI does not necessarily refer to a minimum payment threshold or a link with so-called *basic needs*. In fact, a basic income might theoretically both exceed and fall short of the income threshold considered sufficient to meet an individual's basic needs (Martinelli 2017, 6). In worldwide pilots, the rate at which it has been set has ranged from 750 to 2,059 euros monthly (Kay, 2017). Basic income is a flat payment, meaning that regardless of differences in living expenses, people receive the same amount regularly. No one loses out since most categorical and contributory benefits would remain after the introduction of UBI, for example, to help those with additional needs such as disability. UBI does not eliminate the necessity for a living wage because it aims to provide a basic income floor rather than cover the full, diverse costs of living for everyone. While UBI offers financial security, a living wage guarantees that work is rewarded at a rate that allows for a dignified standard of living beyond mere survival. Not only does it serve as a potent redistributive device in favour of the poor, but UBI is also additional to citizens' main income (Parijs & Vanderborcht 2017, 9). The purpose of UBI is to ensure that an "above-poverty" standard of living can be achieved. Those below the poverty line have been widely viewed as undeserving and as belonging to an underclass that is often depicted as dangerous and a threat to the moral fabric of society (Murray, 1984; Owen Jones, etc.). However, many poor working-class people who would receive UBI would have at least one household member working.

Wage Labourers

A major focus of this article is the empowering nature of UBI regarding pay and working conditions. Work has been a controversial topic in the UBI debate, particularly regarding the working class. The discussion amongst social scientists often focuses on the different roles in the relationship between employees and employers, as well as on their different lifestyles (Sculos, 2019). Class advantage determines the level of risk and resources they encounter, for example, through relatively high incomes (Fitzpatrick, 2022; Mathers, 2020). As for the working class, they often face exploitation at work because their physical labour intensity is greater, and the time they devote to work is also greater, so they can ensure enough income for themselves and their families. In this case, UBI is seen as a welfare programme that ameliorates harmful class relations within capitalism, partially counteracting the power imbalances of those

relations (Gentilini et al., 2020). We argue that UBI could significantly enhance workers' wage-negotiation power, thereby contributing to higher incomes and better working conditions. UBI demonstrates the ongoing reality that the capitalist state itself is a focus of class struggle (Brenner, 2025). However, UBI might mitigate an all-out class war if it were ever to occur, making it anathema to revolutionary socialists (McDermott, 2025).

A UBI would increase individual freedom and improve fairness by reducing the risk of exploitation by employers, domestic partners, or government administrators, as it would lower the likelihood of falling into poverty and material deprivation (Reibstein & Stern 2018, 248; Laukkanen, 2018, 2). In the implementation of UBI, workers see their income increase and their power to speak up and make choices about their employer. This means they have a greater ability to choose whether to continue working or quit and seek better opportunities for themselves (Wright, 2004). For people in disadvantaged groups, how to make ends meet becomes a fear that motivates them to do exploitative work. Workers may also have to retrain, which can lead to periods of unpaid leave. Applying UBI gives them not only the option to leave for better opportunities but also the ability to manage their livelihood while looking for a new job (Reed and Lansley 2016, 10). UBI will likely have a more profound impact on class relative power than other welfare policies since it increases the ability to engage in non-market, non-commodity activities, thereby expanding the scope of economic activity outside capitalism (Wispelaere and Yemtsov, 2020). Several academics conclude that UBI is the most effective way to protect society's most vulnerable members in the face of the quickly evolving social and economic landscape of the workplace (Searight and Dowd, 2025; Hamilton and Martin-West, 2019).

A UBI would support workers by contributing to greater symmetry of power between labour and capital, even in the absence of collective organisation on their part, which would be particularly salient for workers in low-skilled, low-income jobs. With a UBI, the low-paid would have real choices, strengthening their negotiating position with employers by providing guaranteed strike funds for workers (Sculos, 2019). Naturally, this might imply that many of these low-skill jobs evaporate. However, as many low-skill professionals still need higher incomes than a basic UBI provides, prospective employees will remain ready to fill those positions (Wright 2004, 83). Workers will have the option to continue maintaining their current jobs without increasing their hours or taking on extra work to meet basic needs. Usually, people who are truly interested in these jobs are willing to do them for a relatively modest income, as is often the case for actors, musicians, political activists, and social care workers (Lawhon and McCreary, 2023).

UBI functions, in effect, as a permanent, universally accessible form of income, formalising the capacity for industrial action in a way no previous welfare arrangement has. The historical decline of union power through de-unionisation and casualisation, as discussed at the start of this article, makes this potential even more significant. Johnson's (2023) work on restoring authority in so-called "lumpen" communities, communities that have been progressively detached from formal economic and political participation, expands this insight: UBI is not merely a safety net but a gateway back into collective economic agency. It fosters workers' freedom, resilience and non-domination by corporate hierarchies.

Contributing to the Elimination of Working-Class Poverty

Enhancing workers' power in wage negotiations alone is not enough to significantly reduce poverty. UBI can support a multipronged approach to the present-day war on poverty. The

'Absolute/Relative' binary approach to understanding poverty in the UK has recently experienced significant change. Recent data from the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (2026) indicates that poverty in the UK is more nuanced, especially when household costs are considered (using the Department for Work and Pensions' Households Below Average Income data). This offers a much clearer understanding of the severity of poverty in the UK, categorised as 'very deep poverty', followed by 'deep poverty', and then 'poverty', though not as severe. When discussed in this way, poverty becomes more relatable and helps us to see how choice becomes restricted for those experiencing different levels of poverty. Class, on the other hand, is rather opaque but also provides an additional perspective on choice.

Class leads to varied opportunities to accumulate capital, whether social, cultural, or economic (Bourdieu, 2005). Marx identified two classes: the bourgeoisie, who own the means of production, and the proletariat, who labour to create profit (Edgell, 1993). He also mentions a third class, the petty bourgeoisie, which is sometimes in conflict with the bourgeoisie's interests and is likely to merge with the proletariat, since their capital is not great (Joyce, 1995; Marx, *Communist Manifesto*, etc.). His *Das Kapital* ends with a focus on class, but Marx did not fully develop his theory of class, leaving this to his followers to complete (Kivinen, 2022). Weber developed Marx's theory of class by adding the concept of stratification, in which society is hierarchically arranged into strata, including status and ethnic stratification (Edgell, 1993). Contemporary discourses about class have revolved around whether a classless society has emerged and whether white-collar workers who also produce surplus value should be included in the working class (Day, 2001). The binary idea of two classes no longer suffices given intersectional dynamics with ethnicity and gender; moreover, many professionals and self-employed people would not identify with the owner class (Wright, 2019).

The working class largely emerged in urban areas during the Nineteenth Century (Dejung and Motadel, 2024). Throughout the Twentieth Century, the UK's Registrar General identified six classes, three of which belonged to the broader category of manual workers. More recently, Savage (2015) identified seven classes in the UK, four of whom we recognise as working class for this article: new affluent workers, traditional working class, emergent service workers, and the precariat (Savage, 2015). Opportunities are closely tied to one's social position, which is largely influenced by economic and social capital. Those with greater economic means can access better education, networks, and cultural assets, further widening the inequality gap between the wealthy and the disadvantaged. In addition to tangible assets like land and natural resources, inherited wealth also includes "intellectual property", such as patents (Standing 2017, 31). In the UK, only 5% of deaths result in an inheritance tax charge, roughly 31,500 estates, thus conserving wealth inequality for future generations. In contrast, in the 1950s, the UK Estate Tax was progressive, reaching 80% (HMRC, 2025). Despite the increase in the GDP index, the gap between the rich and the poor continues to widen. Although it is evident that the world is wealthier now than ever, income poverty is not anticipated to decline in the near or medium term based on present patterns (Worldbank 2021). Indeed, class conflict and inequality have increased significantly in recent years, partly due to the deregulation of the global financial industry (Dejung and Motadel, 2024). Moreover, understanding the working class is complicated by issues of gender, ethnicity, and globalisation, in which workers in one country often fiercely resist the migration of workers from another country (Dejung and Motadel, 2024).

The economic challenges are also significant in developed countries; for example, the UK experienced its worst recession since World War II, with a decline in GDP of more than 6% between the first quarter of 2008 and the second quarter of 2009 (Brewer et al. 2013, 180).

Following the global financial crisis and the Covid-19 pandemic, attention has increasingly focused on UBI's potential to address rising inequalities and economic insecurity. The Welsh Government has piloted a basic income for care leavers (Gwilym and Beck, 2024), and in 2020 a debate among parliamentarians was held in Westminster Hall, demonstrating growing interest (Loft et al., 2020). Moreover, a YouGov poll suggests that nearly half of UK citizens would support a UBI (Difford, 2024). A UBI does not eliminate the need for welfare reform in the UK to address the crisis of access to services and the provision of public services (Gwilym et al., 2025), and the move towards a full UBI would be in addition to current levels of welfare, as proposed by Duffy and Elder-Woodward (2019) as a UBI+ model.

Finding a job is becoming less of a guarantee for lifting people out of poverty in much of the world, including wealthy industrialised nations. Real average salaries in wealthy nations have been stagnating for over three decades despite price inflation and, more recently, a cost-of-living crisis, and this trend is likely to continue. In applying Fraser's (2019) political analysis to the UK, Johnson, Johnson, and Winlow (2025) have shown that situations like this can undermine working-class solidarity - as working-class communities become alienated, paving the way for a rise in right-wing populism. For the precariat, real incomes have been declining and have become more erratic; one slip-up, error, or accident might send them into actual poverty (Standing 2017, 75). In other situations, governments might be able to increase employment by reforming labour laws to loosen labour markets. However, doing so increases the economic insecurity of the working class, which in turn intensifies criticism of the politicians who take that course.

Governments could also introduce a real living wage, as required by the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), to assist the one billion workers worldwide affected by work poverty (Living Wage Foundation 2024). In the UK, the real living wage at the time of writing (2026) is £13.45 across the UK and £14.80 in London. Approximately 3.5 million jobs in the UK pay below the real living wage, thus contributing to in-work poverty worsened by the cost-of-living crisis from 2021 to the present. At the same time, even when wages rise for the working-class people in the lower income brackets, only those who are employed can benefit, while those who fall into poverty due to unemployment do not have the same opportunity. This is especially true given the UK's benefit cap, in place since 2013 and imposing a ceiling of £22,020 per year for a couple in 2026 (Gov.UK, 2025). A UBI would reset workers' negotiating power with employers, thereby generating higher incomes that would attract workers to menial work.

In the UK, UBI could be seen as an evolution of the current welfare state (Boden 2021, 647). As with the Beveridge policies of 1945, a basic income remains the only viable solution for policymakers (Johnson, Johnson and Winlow, 2025). By providing a regular monetary transfer to all citizens, UBI would help stabilise working-class household incomes, especially for those facing difficult circumstances or earning low wages. It would not simply be a welfare reform in the usual sense, but a political demonstration that the left of politics is, once more, there to fight for the working class, and would serve as a mechanism to reduce the populist pull towards the right. As a proportion of their income, these groups typically spend most of their income on essential items such as rent, utilities, and food, and struggle to meet their basic needs (Lu 2021, 705). The UK already has a history of income-support programmes through Universal Credit (UC); UBI is a much-needed evolution of this, offering a more comprehensive coverage without the need for complex means testing. Research from other countries suggests that cash transfers are effective at reducing poverty, and similar results could be expected in the UK. For example, research on UBI in the UK shows that even a budget-neutral initial programme could

significantly reduce child poverty and outperform other anti-poverty measures (Reed et al. 2023, 1). Experiments with UBI in rural Kenya and Canada indicated enhanced food security, better well-being, and lower rates of illness (Gopal and Issa 2021, 398). UBI pilots in low and middle-income countries have also shown positive outcomes, even when the benefits were relatively modest compared to average local incomes. Ultimately, UBI could offer a more streamlined and equitable approach to welfare, enhancing existing schemes to provide greater financial security for millions of working people (Hoynes and Rothstein 2019, 946). At this point, it is also important to consider the critics—those who argue that a UBI simply maintains the capitalist system and fails to address the underlying and ongoing crises of social reproduction, instead aiming to placate capitalism (Lombardozi and Pitts, 2019). We understand this position and, to some extent, agree with it. We also consider that UBI, in fact, sustains capitalism, albeit in a new, bottom-up form. However, Lombardozi and Pitts' (2019) discussion is based on what must now be regarded as a historical perspective, as it presents arguments predating the recent polycrisis we face in a Post-Covid-19 world—including rising poverty linked to Covid, the Cost-of-Living Crisis, Brexit, and growing concerns over unpredictable labour demands, automation, AI use and increasing global tensions across the Middle East.

Clearly, research on UBI has progressed, as have the number and findings of UK and wider pilots (see Gwilym and Beck, 2024; Nyame and Gwilym, 2025 and others). However, a UBI has been argued to help advance social justice for marginalised groups, including ethnic minorities, women, and formerly incarcerated individuals, by providing a stable income and reducing dependence on precarious employment (Reibstein & Stern 2018, 248). Standing (2017, 33) referred to this as the "Security Difference Principle," which states that an institutional or social policy change is only socially fair if it increases the security of the most marginalised groups in society.

Decommodification would also be significantly advanced by UBI, which would separate the right to decent living from one's work, inheritance, or investment-based wealth (Sculos 2019, 236). Decommodification and UBI's capacity to separate the right to a decent living from work-based income are important points in our argument that UBI can effectively rebalance power between labour and capital, reduce poverty, and lessen the stigmatising effects of means-tested welfare. By decoupling subsistence from labour-market participation, UBI begins to shift the basis of resource allocation away from what individuals can produce or sell, towards what they need to live with dignity. Johnson and Johnson (2019), in their discussion of stress, domination, and the public health rationale for a citizens' entitlement, provide a relevant conceptual framework: their argument that a guaranteed income is a structural response to the domination inherent in conditional welfare supports. They describe a toxic culture of neoliberal corporatism that supports our claims about UBI and working-class empowerment.

Working-class people trapped in poverty cannot make decisions about choice of work when their primary problem is finding a way to sustain themselves (Damaske 2020, 7). They will not be able to take breaks from the labour they must perform to support themselves (Riedl 2020, 3), prioritising immediate financial stability over alignment with personal values (Judge and Bretz 1992, 261). UBI creates more opportunities for people to gain freedom and pursue their goals and values, improving the quality of their lives. The capitalist class system would survive because of UBI, but instead of people suffering from a lack of access to necessities, UBI would rescue the most vulnerable from the most horrific forms of deprivation and despair.

Stigmatising the Working Class

Poor wages and inadequate working conditions are only one dimension of the challenges facing the working class at work; another is stigma. Normally, social security targets specific groups. But they carry the problem of stigmatising a person when they are eligible for the benefit. Welfare stigma makes people in targeted groups less likely to accept welfare when they need it, or their uptake of welfare is reduced due to feelings of shame. Moreover, conditional welfare founded on means-testing creates further stigma and plays into the public perception of the deserving and undeserving poor, with its roots in Victorian England (Beck and Gwilym, 2020). Stigma is negative and has destructive psychosocial consequences on those who experience it, including stifled aspirations and feelings of hopelessness (Pharsadanishvili and Kitiashvili, 2025). Neoliberal perspectives on welfare, which frame it as a lack of personal accountability rather than a structural failing that disproportionately affects the working class, are at least partially responsible for the stigma (Kovi 2020, 15). Research from Europe, for instance, demonstrates that one of the main reasons eligible recipients don't claim their benefits is shame (Gentilini et al. 2020, 5). Universality could eliminate any stigma affecting beneficiaries. Moreover, UBI, available to everyone on an unconditional basis, has no stigma attached and no work or other behavioural modification requirements (McDonough and Morales 2020, 10). In essence, UBI would completely avoid income discrimination: thanks to its "universal" nature, it provides a basic income to every citizen regardless of income.

The recipients of UBI in pilots have used it to proactively improve their situation (Whitney, 2021; Qejvanaj, 2021). The fear of losing benefits and having to start over discourages workers from taking temporary, low-paying employment (Standing 2017, 78). This is because of the consequences of means-tested benefits, which act as a disincentive to leave welfare *for* work (Laenen and Gugushvili, 2023) and can result in a 'benefits trap'. Moreover, for middle-class people who do not earn high salaries, sometimes referred to as the squeezed middle, the introduction of UBI can be beneficial. The universality and unconditionality of UBI allow the working class of all ethnicities to benefit, thereby blurring ethnic divides and circumventing the issue of who deserves admission. As such, UBI could potentially neutralise racial animus among conservative opponents, thereby providing a basis for persuading conservatives to moderate their opposition to UBI. UBI programmes can advance outcomes aligned with conservative principles, potentially overcoming conservative opposition, and promoting economic growth (Wooldridge et al. 2024, 68). Programmes that benefit people from diverse backgrounds foster social cohesion and positive cross-cultural interactions by acknowledging and engaging in dialogue with members of different groups (Pagani 2024, 300). This is markedly different from class-struggle discourses, which identify class conflict as inevitable and ultimately resolvable only through class war.

Economic and Health Crises and the Working Class

The conditions of workers, including low pay and poor working conditions, have worsened in recent times due to economic decline and low income. The 2008-09 recession in the UK led to increased work-time underemployment, damaging workers' financial positions, increasing class inequalities and financial hardship (Warren 2015, 192). The most recent in a series of crises has been the Covid-19 pandemic, which resulted in a UK recession in 2020 that was worse than the Credit Crunch Crisis of 2008-09 and the worst recession since the Great Depression in 1929 (Johnson et al. 2020, 191). The Covid-19 pandemic negatively affected social security, health, and well-being and increased economic and societal fragility. The pandemic affected economic activity, leading to stagnation, unemployment, and a sharp decline

in UK GDP (Harari and Keep, 2021). The crisis caused many social ills, including unemployment and excess deaths. It also restricted choices and deepened poverty, as many workers lost their jobs or had their salaries reduced under the furlough scheme, which covered only 80% of their usual income during the lockdowns.

There are many painful repercussions from an economic shock. Trauma and poverty both increase the likelihood of divorce and separation, domestic abuse, and homelessness (Johnson et al. 2020, 191). The UK, Canada, Austria, Japan, and many other nations shared several risk factors for deteriorating mental health, such as lower income, lower educational attainment, racism, job loss (or reduction in hours or pay) related to Covid-19, and food insecurity (Beck & Gwilym, 2023, 545; Hall et al., 2022, 384). Even the middle classes felt threatened by financial decline, creating vulnerabilities for them and their families, such as fear of rising costs and retirement insecurity (OECD, 2019). The effects of the Covid-19 pandemic varied significantly depending on one's socioeconomic level, with low-income families suffering significant financial setbacks and limited access to necessities like food.

In times of crisis, the government seeks to guide and protect people from possible risks. During the Covid-19 outbreak, governments took measures to prevent the rapid spread of the virus. Lockdowns were imposed on a large scale to prevent people from moving and limit the spread of the disease. UBI was widely discussed as a policy to protect the incomes of working people during the Covid-19 pandemic (Ståhl and MacEachen 2020, 4). Since the pandemic, UBI has been considered sufficiently resilient by the UN and several states to adapt to the unique circumstances of each crisis and fulfil its objective of mitigating its effects (Chrisp & Wispelaere, 2023, 915). A steady stream of income would allow those in work to be less frugal with their spending while aiding the underemployed (Johnson & Roberto, 2020, 233). Responding directly to Covid-19, the Spanish government declared that it would implement UBI in exchange for the jobs lost to technology (Johnson et al. 2020, 192). The lockdowns led to a sharp rise in global unemployment, and many countries implemented compensatory furlough schemes that pay up to 80% of earnings.

Automation and the Working Class

Automation, which promises economic growth and social development, also poses many challenges for workers, namely the prospect of fewer jobs, lower pay and poorer conditions in industries at risk of automation. These effects are most likely to peak in relation to technology such as driverless vehicles, which could overnight render millions of taxi, truck, and bus drivers unemployed (Sculos 2019, 242). Moreover, manual labour jobs, such as factory production workers, office workers, and cashiers, are more likely to be replaced by automation. The new wave of automation comes as income growth has stalled during the past 40 years, while the economy (and consequently, economic inequality) has expanded dramatically (Hall et al. 2019, 1). Recent data from the UK's Office for National Statistics has shown that the UK's jobs market (number of vacancies) continues to decline. The number of new vacancies dropped by 5.8% across all industries, to just 718,000 as of July 2025 (ONS, 2025).

Many workers become unemployed because technology can replace their jobs and achieve better results, thereby bringing greater benefits to employers. The working class are more likely to fall into unemployment due to automation because of their vulnerability and lack of protection. In many factories, robots have been installed to support the product manufacturing processes. While workers are likely to become unemployed due to machine-driven replacement, automation is also, to a lesser degree, a threat to white-collar middle-class

workers (Kelly, 2023; Hall et al., 2019). Automation may exacerbate wage polarisation between rich and poor due to unemployment (Chrisp, 2020), while UBI can serve as a safety net to protect the vulnerable from falling into the unemployment trap (Kelly, 2023; Chrisp, 2020). If UBI is introduced before automation causes large-scale unemployment, it may be possible to reduce the proportion of people made jobless by automation while strengthening opportunities for more satisfying jobs (Allegrì and Foschi, 2021).

The Social Determinants of Health

Low-paid workers were more at risk during the Covid-19 pandemic, further adding to the case for UBI as a protector of the working class through their empowerment. The outbreak of Covid-19 led to the establishment of the Public Health Emergency of International Concern (PHEIC) by the World Health Organisation (Ali et al. 2020, 644). Poor health is closely linked to social determinants, and during the Covid-19 pandemic, the working poor were the most affected, largely because they faced greater risk through their work and living conditions (Holst et al., 2021). There are many different factors in society affecting health, and the working class is more likely to have poor health to begin with, because of their higher vulnerability to disease and harm. UBI can improve health among the working class by covering basic needs and enabling recipients to spend money on health-promoting resources such as healthy food, clothing, and heating (Huss 2023, 1). These are often difficult for vulnerable people to access without UBI support. UBI contributes to poverty reduction for these people by enabling them to meet their basic needs and narrowing the gap between classes (Gerard, 2018).

A recent global meta-analysis of fifty-six separate datasets, totalling 53,405 participants, unequivocally shows a substantial relationship between employment instability and mental health (Allegrì & Foschi, 2021, 13). Individuals who have unstable income and low educational attainment may be more susceptible to stress and illness. Improved mental health can result from greater monetary gains, both directly and indirectly (via the educational pathway) (Ruckert 2017, 4). UBI can create opportunities for human behaviour change, which can strongly help reduce adverse behaviours and increase opportunities for the working class to thrive (Wilson and McDaid, 2021). Perceptions of inequality may also inspire aggressive and risky actions; persons in positions of disadvantage who perceive little hope of ‘catching up’ with the rest of society through lawful means may be more prone to choose destructive paths, such as crime (Johnson 2021, 410). The idea that UBI might boost workers' negotiating power, motivate people to enhance self-care, and improve mental health is valuable (Bidadanure 2019, 496). Moreover, UBI enables citizens to pursue more personally fulfilling objectives and interests.

However, UBI can have conflicting impacts on health, having little influence on certain outcomes but significant effects on others, such as birth weight and mental health (Johnson et al. 2023, 3). Families with children in difficult circumstances are provided with a basic income to help ensure their children's nutritional and health care needs, which affect children's cognition, behaviour, and future health. Factors that can determine a child's life course, such as birth weight, are considered very important in efforts to improve the health of future generations. One argument for a UBI is that it would shift the focus from youth investing in themselves to society investing in the future of all its youth. Young people have significant potential to change their lives, but they are also a group influenced by the conditions they face, which is why they may need a UBI to invest further in themselves (Gwilym and Beck, 2024).

Access to Education and Training

Education is critically important for achieving the outcomes desired by both workers and their political representatives, including higher incomes and improved working conditions. At the individual level, a person's education can determine their future quality of life by impacting class mobility, where they live, income, ability to work, and chances of success. Not only that, but education can also impact people's health and the benefits they enjoy in life. Poor educational outcomes contribute to inequality, as children from working-class families do not have the same access to high-quality education as children from wealthy families (Blanden and Gregg 2004, 5). A basic income is linked to higher literacy rates, lower dropout rates, and better academic performance (Ruckert 2017, 3). Increased educational attainment has also been linked to improved health outcomes, strengthened social support networks, and healthier lifestyle choices (Cohen and Syme 2013, 997). UBI pilot projects in Namibia and India yielded encouraging educational outcomes. Most of the funds went for shoes, uniforms, and school supplies, and the school enrolment rate in the participating villages in India was 12% higher. 90% of Namibia's school fees were paid in full, which was "an unprecedented achievement" for schools (Ruckert 2017, 4).

Not only does UBI have the potential to transform educational opportunities for children from working-class families, but it can also reconfigure education, with an emphasis on adult education (Bouttell, 2024). Put another way, regardless of its inherent worth, education is seen as a means of preparing people for the workforce at all levels and in all forms. Additionally, education is viewed as a form of vocational training that equips workers with the fundamental skills needed in the workforce (Rodríguez-Fernández & Themelis, 2021, 69). When education is considered a consumer product, with value in the labour market in the form of job opportunities, workers by accessing education will also increase their likelihood of having a job (OECD, 2012). Increasing the proportion of working-class adults with access to education and training supports a country's future socio-economic sustainability.

Discussion

UBI is often seen as a safety net that protects against various risks, such as unemployment, low pay, economic crises, and pandemics. While it may not end class struggle, it can bring many ameliorating benefits, including better pay and working conditions if implemented; however, to maximise these benefits, UBI needs to be combined with other social policies. Social Security benefits offer a consistent payout, usually tracking inflation, but can be affected by broader economic deficits and surpluses. To prevent a financial crisis, governments often make regressive changes to the social security system that negatively affect the working class and the unemployed (Buchanan 2007, 262). Furthermore, as increases in UBI would count as income against safety-net criteria, certain social welfare programme cutbacks would also occur organically due to decreased need and a decline in the number of those qualifying. If UBI is mandated by law to rise in line with inflation, and is adequate to end poverty, then several other social programmes might be completely phased out (Riedl 2020, 5). Inflation from UBI is frequently mentioned in research articles, so combining it with other economic and tax policies can strengthen stability and help prevent inflation (Gentilini 2020).

As UBI is implemented, the proportion of working people with higher incomes increases, thereby raising their ability to meet their needs, with implications for housing, particularly rent (Connolly et al. 2020, 7). If UBI is financed through increased taxes, landlords may increase rents because the taxes they must pay are higher than before (Fitzpatrick, 2022; Motivala et al., 2024). Controlling rental levels may be necessary to keep cash flow stable while also helping

working-class people use the UBI for other needs. It will also allow tenants the financial space to save for a deposit and buy their own home, alleviating the current housing crisis (Beck et al, 2024). In addition, to ensure that employers do not reduce workers' salaries to levels too low for their needs, policies to enforce wage controls should also be considered during UBI implementation, including a generous minimum wage paid for through higher taxes (Pereira, 2015; Satpathy et al., 2020). The basic amount they receive from UBI will not be enough on its own to cover overheads and debts many working people have (Hamilton et al., 2021).

Financing UBI could be partly sourced from income tax since income tax is progressive and redistributive (Ter-Minassian, 2020). Although UBI is an income for everyone, its primary purpose is to focus on low-income working-class groups (Bertotti 2021, 1). Still, opposition could be fierce from the Capitalist bourgeoisie who stand to lose from UBI because of the taxes they would need to pay to implement it. UBI could appeal to the material desires of the poor to secure better support, but at the expense of the bourgeoisie's material desires by threatening higher taxation (Lustig and Pabon 2022, 1). In addition, there is a view that UBI should not be controlled by the executive branch of government since it is reasonable to assume that politicians will be influenced by large corporations. UBI needs to be under the control of an independent entity, such as the Bank of England in the UK (Rasoolinejad 2019, 1). We believe that while UBI would not end class relations, it would greatly improve the working class's income and political participation.

Conclusion

UBI offers a pragmatic way to address the structural disadvantages faced by the working class, including low pay and poor working conditions, by empowering them to bargain with employers over pay. While it does not dismantle capitalist class relations or eradicate inequality, UBI provides a stabilising mechanism that mitigates poverty, reduces stigma, and enhances social security. By guaranteeing a regular income, UBI empowers individuals to make choices beyond mere survival, fostering opportunities for strong wage bargaining, education, health improvement, and personal development. Its potential to cushion economic shocks, address automation-induced unemployment, and promote social cohesion underscores its relevance in contemporary welfare debates. However, UBI cannot operate in isolation; complementary policies such as progressive taxation, rent regulation, and robust public services are essential to prevent inflationary pressures and ensure equitable outcomes. Critics rightly caution that UBI may entrench existing hierarchies if implemented without structural reforms, yet its capacity to redistribute resources and enhance real freedom remains significant. Ultimately, UBI should be viewed not as a revolutionary instrument but as a transformative social policy capable of ameliorating the harshest effects of precarity and insecurity. In doing so, it offers a pathway towards a fairer society where economic resilience and human dignity are prioritised over market dependency.

Author Bios:

Hefin Gwilym is a lecturer in social policy at Bangor University and a Senior Fellow of the Higher Education Academy. He completed his doctorate at Keele University, and his BA and MA degrees at Swansea University. He has published extensively on poverty and welfare, including a co-edited book on social policy in Wales.

David Beck is a lecturer in social policy at the University of Salford. He completed a BA in Environmental Planning and Management, an MA in Social Research and Social Policy, and a

PhD in Social Policy at Bangor University. He is co-chair of two UBI groups (UBILab Food and UBILab Greater Manchester) and is involved with the Citizens Basic Income Trust.

Nghiêm Phương Anh is a Social Science Research Assistant at Oxford University Clinical Research Unit (OUCRU) in Vietnam. She completed her MA in Social Policy at Bangor University.

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