

What makes labor free? Sefton lecture March 28, 2019

I finally have something to write about on the topic of Basic Income, relevant to Toronto. So I will put out another Livingrant Newsbreeze.

Lately I attended a lecture from a Professor Judy Fudge on the topic; "What makes Labour free? And why this question matters". It was at my old "alma mater" of Woodsworth college, University of Toronto, at Kruger hall. I think the last time I was in that space it was to write an exam.

This was the 2019 version of the Sefton-Williams memorial Lecture series. These are hosted by Woodsworth and the Center for Industrial Relations and Human Resources. You can see where there is a pronounced left/labour tone to these proceedings.

Professor Judy, as we ended up calling her, teaches at the labour studies faculty at McMaster University in Hamilton. This is where the most recent Basic Income Canada Network congress was held. Judy is a supporter of the idea of a Basic Income, though clearly not the kind of BI which the BICN politburo has become fixated on. I will explain.

Professor Fudge build up to her topic gradually, summarizing the age old problem of unfree labour. We have gone in western civilization from slavery to serfdom to wage labour or wage slavery. The common feature of these systems is that the labourer has no right to talk back and is not really free to leave.

In Victorian times in England, people could work for what they were given, and take any abuse handed out, or go into the workhouse, or literally starve to death in the streets. British society in these times was incredibly mean. Fudge spend some of her carer in England and did some research into this.

Then the society became a little more enlightened and the welfare state developed. People were given enough to tide them over for awhile so they did not actually starve to death or turn to crime out of desperation. This mollified growing social unrest.

A kind of social contract held for a while. Management agreed to pay workers a liveable wage and allow some minimal social services. In return, organized labour agreed to let management manage.

However, to this day people still have no real rights at work. Proff Judy is appalled that people have to ask permission to use the toilet. People are told how they can have their hair, and what they can wear. Labour in Canada in 2019 is definitely not free. It was gotten worse since the 1980s.

She noted that actual slavery is increasing world wide. Her warm up act showed how there are 40 million actual slaves in the world. Human trafficking is increasing; it used to be about women for purposes of prostitution, now it is often children for use as cheap labour.

The problem is not that people are usually being kidnapped. They have no choice but to sell themselves or their children in order to stay alive. They have no other means of survival.

Judy finally got to the subject of a Basic Income. The problem with it, says she, is that for it to be any use, it has to be set quite high and the cost covered by taxation. She specifically mentioned wealth taxes.

A BI is of little real use if it is not universal; if it is just a way of mollifying social discontent from worsening economic conditions on a least cost basis. This is of course, exactly what the version of BI that was being tested by the recent liberal government, and promoted by BICN, is all about.

Fudge does not like the term “precariate”. I am not clear why. She is concerned about some of the people advocating for a Basic Income. This includes a certain billionaire. She wonders why he doesn’t just pay taxes.

Fudge is fully aware of the discussions among the more clued in of BI proponents, of “Exit” and “Voice”. She comes down strongly for Voice. Having the right to just quit work does not give workers much real power. The power to stay and to demand and get a Voice in how things are run, is something very useful.

Here is a link to Wispaleare Birnbaum paper

https://www.researchgate.net/publication/306344554_Basic_Income_in_the_Capitalist_Economy_The_Mirage_of_Exit_from_Employment

Judy did not develop this very far. She is writing a book on this topic, and may want to wait until she has fully worked out her arguments before airing them. She asserts that she is reading a lot of Carol Pateman these days; an encouraging sign.

When questions came up, someone asked her to comment further on Basic Income. This person was an enthusiast for “The Pilot” but said she talked with some socialists who did not like it, although she could not recall their reasons.

In reply, Fudge elaborated a bit on her original statements. A BI which is just a stop gap program to prevent serious social instability does not do much good. It does not make labour free. A larger and more universal program does not help much either unless it is packaged with other programs.

So the simple answer to the question of what makes labour free is; Voice! This is a whole lot more than just the right to have a union. As to why this matters, the Professor Fudged a little. But it really is fairly self evident; it is so people cannot be coerced.

I did not take really good notes of this lecture. I did not expect it to be this good, or for it to get right to the topic of a BI. I had already attended one other meeting that day, and I was pretty tired. The lecture was not videoed, but I was told that the slide deck and notes for these lectures are usually up on the CIRHR web site pretty quick.

(No, actually I haven't been able to find any video of it. I hope she does a pair of her own on the subject, but Widerquist makes the same point fairly well.)