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COVID-19 and the End of Work

Hoyt Hilsman · Wednesday, April 29th, 2020

In the late 1990's, economist Jeremy Rifkin wrote the controversial book *The End of Work*, which predicted the devastating impact of technology on the global workforce, putting millions of people out of work. He estimated that while corporate owners and managers, along with knowledge workers, would benefit, blue-collar, retail and wholesale employees would suffer the widespread loss of gainful employment.

Rifkin also believed that while the market economy and public sector would decline, he thought voluntary and community-based service organizations that would create new jobs with government support to rebuild decaying neighborhoods and provide social services would actually grow.

When the book was published, Rifkin was roundly criticized for his doomsday predictions by economists who believed that technological progress would actually create more jobs and by political scientists who scoffed at the notion of a declining market economy or governmental sector. But even before the Great Recession of 2008 and the current pandemic, many of Rifkin's predictions had already come true.

Since 2000, U.S. manufacturing jobs have fallen by 30% or 5 million workers. Meanwhile, the four most common occupations in the U.S.— retail salesperson, cashier, food and beverage server, and office clerk, which account for 10% of all workers, over 15 million people — are most vulnerable to technological change. These also happen to be some of the lowest-wage occupations, leaving those workers surviving paycheck to paycheck.

The current pandemic shutdown highlights the seriousness of our situation, especially for lower-income and middle-class workers. Our health care system is an expensive and inefficient patchwork. Our social safety net is full of holes, and our local, state and federal governments are woefully unprepared to meet the social and economic challenges in every field from education to infrastructure.

So what will happen over the next few years as a significant percentage of the workforce is struggling to survive in the face of widespread unemployment and a crippled economy? While most scenarios seem dark indeed, there are plenty of solutions, many of which have been employed successfully in other countries.

Some form of universal basic income, which was touted by Andrew Yang in his presidential campaign, seems like a promising and timely way to address our serious economic and societal challenges. Countries like Germany already have a form of basic income by guaranteeing wages to

workers in stricken industries and promoting work-sharing rather than layoffs.

Universal basic income has long been criticized as fostering a lazy citizenry who will simply sit at home and play videogames while collecting the government dole. In fact, pilot studies have shown that while some people pursue hobbies or other leisure pursuits, most people view basic income as a kind of insurance policy against hard times. With the security of basic income, more people start businesses or switch to jobs that they enjoy more. In fact, with the introduction of basic income, people become more productive rather than less.

The challenge to the “end of work” is the historical set of values that people bring to the idea of work. Whether it is the Protestant ethic or the American work ethic, Americans believe fervently in the value of work. It may be fairly said that many of us “live to work” rather than “work to live.” However, with crisis of widespread employment, Americans may come to value other modes of living beyond the work world. Provided, however, that they have some financial security – perhaps in the form of universal basic income.

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