

Article

Exit strategy or exit trap? Basic income and the ‘power to say no’ in the age of precarious employment

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Abstract

An increasingly influential claim is that exit-based empowerment through an unconditional basic income offers the cornerstone of an effective strategy for supporting precarious workers in contemporary labor markets. However, it is plausible to assume that supporting the ‘power to say no’—to avoid or leave unattractive jobs—will empower precarious workers only to the extent that it offers the basis of a credible exit threat. In this article, we argue that a basic income-induced exit strategy amounts to a *hollow threat*. In light of a realistic understanding of how labor markets operate and how the opportunities of disadvantaged workers are presently structured, we show that the basic income-centered exit option can easily become an exit trap rather than an empowered fallback position.

Key words: commodification; employment; labor market institutions; poverty; public policy; welfare state

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1. Introduction—the age of precariousness?

Workers today are said to live in an age of precarious employment, leading to what one influential commentator labels as a new emerging class—the *precarariat* (Standing, 2011). The primary concern with precarious employment is typically about job tenure or job loss. The extent to which precarious workers worry about job loss can be captured as a function of

the probability of losing one's current job (job insecurity), one's ability to find another job (labor market insecurity) and the availability of income support during an extended unemployment spell (income insecurity) (Anderson and Pontussen, 2007). Precariousness in employment does not merely refer to uncertainty or instability of job tenure but also comprises a wide range of qualitative aspects, including wage rates, nature of the tasks, opportunity to use and upgrade skills, or authority relations and employee participation (Gallie *et al.*, 2016).¹ The lack of access to social protection such as health insurance, sickness and disability pay, pensions and unemployment benefit accorded to regular workers is a third, critical feature of precarious employment (Kalleberg, 2018).²

While precariousness as a trend has increased across countries (Kalleberg, 2009, 2018), extensive variation persists in terms of the share of precarious employment in labor markets, the specific forms precarious employment takes and the composition of the 'class' of precarious workers (King and Rueda, 2008; Gallie *et al.*, 2016). The response to the plight of workers in advanced welfare states laboring under conditions of precariousness and economic insecurity has taken several forms (see Emmenegger, 2009, 2015; Auer, 2016). In recent years, following the pioneering insights of Albert O. Hirschman (1970), the idea of exit-based empowerment in labor market interaction has gained prominence in scholarly and political debates (Lindbeck and Snower, 1988; Block and Manza, 1997; Rueda, 2007; Hyman and Gumbrell-McCormick, 2017; Calnitsky, 2018). On this view, the possibility of exiting one's employment relationship and taking one's labor power elsewhere allows workers to put pressure on employers to accommodate their demands. In short, a realistic exit option amounts to an improved bargaining position by imbuing workers with the 'power to say no' (Widerquist, 2013).

One instrument increasingly put forward in relation to exit in the labor market is that of an unconditional basic income.³ As Philippe Van Parijs argues, the main effect of a basic income is not to increase the purchasing power of vulnerable groups. 'It is above all to increase their bargaining power on all fronts by multiplying exit options' (Van Parijs, 2015, p. 168). Both the unemployed and the working poor are expected to benefit from the introduction of an unconditional floor of income support (Van Parijs and Vanderborcht, 2017). Such a policy tool, establishing a truly universal and non-stigmatizing safety net, has unique advantages in relation to many important objectives, including poverty prevention (Birnbaum,

- 1 Gallie *et al.* (2016) find that concerns about job loss compared to what they term 'job status insecurity' often depend on the particular form of precarious work—e.g. part-time workers worry less about job loss than contract workers. This study also singles out 'direct employee participation' (allowing for 'voice') as a leading factor determining concerns about job loss and job status insecurity. Interestingly, in contrast with employee participation, unionization plays no significant role in counteracting job status insecurity, although it impacts on anxiety related to workforce reductions.
- 2 The negative impact of precarious employment—or, indeed, precarious *existence*—on both individuals and communities is well documented. 'The consequences of [precarious employment] are not restricted to work and the workplace but also affect many non-work domains, including individual health and well-being (e.g. owing to mental stress, poor physical health and uncertainty about educational choices), family formation (delayed entry into marriage and having children) and the nature of social life more generally (community disintegration and declining social cohesion)' (Kalleberg and Vallas, 2018, p. 2).
- 3 See in particular Wright (2004, 2010); Standing (2011, 2012); Widerquist (2013); Taylor (2017); Van Parijs and Vanderborcht (2017); Calnitsky (2018).

2012). However, when conceived as an exit *strategy*, basic income advocates are not merely claiming that basic income could benefit disadvantaged groups by alleviating poverty and economic insecurity (Standing, 1999). Instead, they make bold claims about the potential for basic income to offer a meaningful exit option to workers, especially to those marginalized and vulnerable workers currently trapped in precarious jobs. On this view, a basic income-induced exit option implies a significantly improved bargaining position for precarious workers. Advocates of basic income as *an instrument of exit-based empowerment* argue that rebalancing bargaining power between workers and employers through an unconditional cash grant would drive important changes in the organization of employment (Wright, 2004, 2010). 'Having ex ante income security, however basic in terms of amount, would put pressure on those wishing to purchase the labor of the precariat to provide more attractive, dignifying conditions or to do without the labor if not prepared to pay enough to make it attractive' (Standing, 2012, p. 605).

Without denying the value of basic income in relation to many other objectives, this article takes issue with the specific claim that supporting the 'power to say no' through a basic income would play a key role in empowering precarious workers and transforming the organization of employment. Our thesis is that exit-based worker empowerment through basic income is at best insufficient for, and in some configurations plainly counterproductive to, improving the bargaining position of precarious workers.

2. The case for exit in the labor market

The relationship between exit and voice in the standard Hirschmanian analysis is complex. The extent to which exit serves as an alternative or complement to voice strategies, understood as attempts at repairing or improving a relationship through communicating concern, is contingent on a number of structural features of the context in which the social exchange takes place (Dowding *et al.*, 2000; Warren, 2011; Dowding and John, 2012). To appreciate the case for exit in the labor market, we need to examine first the main alternatives available to disgruntled workers eager to improve their conditions (Anderson and Pontussen, 2007).

A first alternative to exit depends on third-party intervention from the state through legal control over the employment relationship, for instance, through state regulation of workplaces but perhaps also labor market policy more broadly. Employment protection may involve measures to limit firing employees on arbitrary grounds or promote working conditions aimed at safeguarding worker privacy, integrity and general well-being. A regulatory approach may even require the prohibition of certain types of work practices or labor exchanges that place workers in situations of exploitable dependency and vulnerability to abuse. Although the regulatory approach typically involves third-party involvement from legal authorities at sectorial or national level, workers' involvement may still be required to trigger complaints or report violations of established rules and regulations.

A second alternative to exit implies a more direct form of voice by strengthening the opportunities for those exposed to the managerial power of firms to express their grievances. Authors who emphasize the importance of voice typically welcome various forms of worker representation as indispensable for protecting the interests of disadvantaged workers (Hsieh, 2005, 2008; Gourevitch, 2013; Anderson, 2015). Voice-centered measures focus on opportunities for disadvantaged groups to express concerns and proposals for improvements, ensuring their views are included in the relevant decision-making processes. This could take

the form of systematic representation of workers in decision-making bodies of strategic importance; e.g. requiring worker's representatives as members of supervisory boards or otherwise boost employee representation (Gallie *et al.*, 2016).

While the regulatory and voice strategies are valuable, they also come with important limitations. Far-reaching versions of the former may involve regulation of a sort that is so dense and intrusive as to become counterproductive and turning the state bureaucracy itself into a source of excessive and arbitrary interference. Relying heavily on solutions that place great discretionary powers in the hands of public or private agents substitutes bureaucratic power for employer power (Lovett, 2010; Taylor, 2017). More broadly, it is nigh-impossible for state bureaucracies to identify and track all the ways in which people's core interests may be jeopardized in a rapidly evolving labor market. For this reason, there will always exist situations of vulnerability that such strategies cannot effectively prevent.

Similarly, direct collective channels of voice can be crucial for empowering vulnerable and marginalized workers, but they also place the interests of individuals in the hands of organized decision-making bodies with substantial discretionary power. These are hardly ever immune from pressure to prioritize certain interests over others and therefore cannot generally be trusted to effectively protect the interests of all vulnerable workers (Taylor, 2017). For example, unions face important challenges in representing the interests of non-standard workers such as informal workers, part-timers, the self-employed or those operating in the gig economy (Rueda, 2007; Hyman and Gumbrell-McCormick, 2017).⁴

The more constraints the effective regulation of employment relations through labor law or organized voice faces, the greater the need for alternative or additional instruments—enter the *exit strategy*. Exit and voice are of course closely connected. Indeed, the exit option is often valued as a means for supporting rather than replacing voice mechanisms—threatening to leave in order to have one's arguments and grievances heard (Taylor, 2017). Nonetheless, the exit strategy remains relevantly distinct in at least two important respects (Warren, 2011; Taylor, 2017). First, it involves an expressed readiness to leave one's present employer and look elsewhere for a (better) job. This explains why a strike—where workers collectively lay down their work (temporarily) in order to pressure employers for concessions on wages or work conditions—is different. Although similar in some respects, a strike is not an instance of the exit strategy because strikers are 'quitting the work but not the job' (Gourevitch, 2016); its main purpose is typically to signal major discontent *as part of a dialog (however fraught with contention and conflict)* with an employer and always within the broader remit of retaining the *existing* employment relationship. Second, the exit strategy is always action-oriented. Exit implies voting 'with your feet' (Warren 2011) or through the 'revealed preference' of (intended) action. Hence, the claim that 'silence can sometimes speak as loudly as words' (Taylor, 2017, p. 15). The concept of strategic exit thus directs our attention to the exit intentions of workers and how employers may respond to the perceived 'risk' of worker exit. While the exit strategy is compatible with, and sometimes supportive

4 This is in part related to the decline in unionization rates in most countries since the 1980s. Hudson (2007) finds a strong relation between decline in unionization and increase of labor market segmentation over time. Advocates of flexicurity advance reducing direct regulation and voice in favor of protecting workers outside firms—trading-off *job security for labor market and income security* (Auer, 2016). However, this position contradicts research, indicating employee participation is a key factor in reducing subjective concerns about precariousness (Gallie *et al.*, 2016).

of, a powerful articulation of the reasons for one's dissatisfaction (voice), it is not defined by such a voice element.

Importantly, not all forms of reducing labor—or expressed intentions of doing so—count as *strategic* exit in the sense of using the threat of exit as a means for improving one's labor market prospects (Birnbaum and De Wispelaere, 2016). Workers may decide to temporarily opt out of work—for instance, in order to pursue an education or take up parental leave—or merely reduce their hours and opt for part-time employment.⁵ None of these examples qualify as an exit strategy, which requires that the worker is willing to *sever the employment relationship* unless working conditions or the terms of employment improve.

Another defining element of the exit strategy is that it requires that workers are prepared to sever a particular employment relationship while nevertheless seeking to *retain a position in the labor market*; albeit possibly with a different employer. In contrast, some workers, when given the opportunity, prefer to leave the labor market altogether and opt for starting a small business or engaging in community work. But this type of exit implies no intention to use the exit option as a *strategy* to improve one's prospects in the labor market. This category of workers is genuinely interested in leaving formal employment rather than negotiating a better deal inside the workforce and falls outside of the scope of strategic exit.

This is not to say that forms of exit focused on leaving the workforce rather than seeking a better job have no impact on the bargaining power of vulnerable workers, a point to which we return in the penultimate section. Even when it is not driven by strategic intentions, a declining labor supply may have the *effect* of tightening the labor market and pulling up average wage rates, which in turn promotes the objective of worker empowerment (Calnitsky, 2018). However, in characterizing different forms of exit, and identifying the mechanisms driving exit-based empowerment, it is important to distinguish between workers with a strong labor market commitment who exit their current job in the context of negotiations with employers but fail to land alternative employment and individuals who use the opportunity provided by potential exit measures, such as basic income, to leave the labor market altogether. Both may end up in a similar situation, but the former does so inadvertently and is presumably eager to accept suitable employment when offered. The former but not the latter therefore counts as a case of *strategic* exit.

The exit strategy can operate in different ways. We take the idea of an exit threat to involve the worker signaling an expressed readiness to leave to the employer. However, this is interpreted broadly in the sense that it does not need to take the form of a direct, explicit threat to leave. It can also work through more indirect, implicit communication. Indeed, mere rumors of workers' exit intentions—if perceived as credible—may induce employers to take steps to prevent exit such as improving working conditions or offering higher wages.⁶ Workers signaling a readiness to leave—and the common awareness of everyone concerned that the worker has a realistic opportunity to do so—does not need to result in actual exit when the threat leads the employer to sufficiently accommodate the worker's interests

5 It is worth noting, however, that much of part-time work is involuntary in that part-time workers would often prefer full-time employment (Kalleberg, 2000).

6 Interestingly, employers who realize workers have easy access to an exit option may even preempt a threat of exit and preventatively address worker concerns related to pay or working conditions (Hirschman, 1970, pp. 82–83). However, in the standard case, the threat of exit offers an important signal to employers. See also Dowding and John (2012).

(Birnbaum and De Wispelaere, 2016). Still, instances of actual exit are often likely to play a role in an employer's assessment of whether a worker's threat to leave is *credible*. The credibility of a threat to leave depends on the perceived willingness and ability of the worker to *act* on such intentions. If exit intentions are frequently expressed by workers but never result in actual exit—i.e. all talk but no action—threats to leave are not likely deemed credible.

Finally, when worker complaints are individually voiced, they are easily silenced. For this reason, effective voice often requires collective coordination or organized mediation through labor unions. In contrast, an individual worker can use the threat of exit to *directly* negotiate a resolution of their grievances with an employer—a point often emphasized by advocates of exit-based empowerment through basic income (Widerquist, 2013, p. 112; Taylor, 2017). This is not to say that exit has no collective dimension, however, for the value of an individual worker threatening to exit a particular job likely depends on how similarly situated workers act. We return to this point below.

3. Basic income as an exit strategy

Three separate conditions need to be fulfilled for workers to access a meaningful exit option that enables them to exercise an exit strategy. The first condition is the legal freedom to sever the employment relation; under most contractual arrangements, workers are indeed able to leave employment following a brief notice period. The second condition is that workers need a feasible alternative to their current employment—that is, a reasonable prospect to obtain a comparable (or better) job. The third condition is that in most circumstances, workers interested in adopting a credible exit strategy need additional income support to bridge a gap between leaving one job and moving onto the next.

The importance of the third condition in terms of improving workers' bargaining position is commonly accepted in most labor market theories. Economic search theory, for instance, postulates that increased access to unemployment benefits postpones workers from accepting bad job offers to extend their search for a better job (Acemoglu, 2001). An extensive literature on the 'scarring effects' of unemployment spells on the prospects for future employment, future earnings and the quality of future employment points out that social protection policies—notably, income support during unemployment—mitigates the extent to which previous unemployment leaves lasting scars (Arulampalam, 2001; Gangl, 2006; Dieckhoff, 2011). When income support mitigates the fear that 'trigger events' may leave lasting scars, such policies improve the bargaining position of workers vis-a-vis employers. However, economists talk about worker's bargaining position in relation to accepting fixed wage offers or extending a search, not necessarily in the context of an exit threat. Different factors come into play when considering *exiting* rather than *accepting* a job. In this literature, income support is also typically underspecified and overly focused on the level of income rather than critical institutional features such as duration, eligibility conditions or administration (Atkinson and Micklewright, 1991).

At first blush, the idea of granting each adult individual an unconditional basic income is a particularly attractive instrument to support the exit strategy of precarious workers. Basic income has several major advantages in relation to supporting exit in the labor market when compared to contributory unemployment insurance or means-tested social assistance. Because basic income is a universal scheme, every single worker qualifies (Van Parijs and Vanderborght, 2017). This reduces an important amount of uncertainty among vulnerable

and marginalized workers who are often employed in jobs with little or no access to social protection (Kalleberg, 2018; Kalleberg and Vallas, 2018). Eligibility for a basic income is also secure in another relevant sense. An effective exit strategy depends on a person being able to quit her job while still retaining immediate and guaranteed access to an income stream: under current arrangements, quitting one's job is likely to affect one's eligibility for unemployment insurance, which significantly dampens the effect of such income support on workers' bargaining position. Matters are also complicated because traditional unemployment insurance schemes typically require a minimum amount of past contributions to determine eligibility, which precarious workers—especially young workers at the start of their employment trajectory—often fail to demonstrate (Atkinson and Micklewright, 1991). Finally, increasingly, there are time lags built into receipt of unemployment and even social assistance benefits, such that workers who quit their job need to access private funds to bridge several weeks before the income support kicks in.

An unconditional basic income bypasses all these problems. It is uniformly paid to those in and out of work and automatically continues to be paid when employment circumstances change. What distinguishes basic income from conditional forms of income support is the absence of any kind of work test or other forms of behavioral conditionality: basic income is paid to all members of society in a predictable and non-stigmatizing manner with no strings attached. This makes it possible to rely on a basic income, unlike unemployment insurance or social assistance, not only to leave a job but also to turn down a job offer that one dislikes or does not find sufficiently rewarding, without thereby interrupting or jeopardizing access to the necessities of life (Lovett, 2010; Widerquist, 2013; Taylor, 2017). A critical aspect of the attraction of basic income as an instrument to support exit strategies is its non-intrusive and non-bureaucratic character. In the case of basic income, there is no government agency or organization assessing either the personal circumstances of the worker or the particular grievance for which they want to exercise their exit option; the basic income operates in the background, as it were, and as such offers the most direct and secure support for any worker wanting to improve their working conditions through an exit strategy.

Exit advocates often argue for the empowering features of a basic income as if they apply generally to the workforce. In one influential view, a universal basic income allows every employee to escape 'forced labor market participation' (Widerquist, 2013, p. 53). However, in practice, the potential of basic income to make exit options available to every worker depends importantly on the level of such a uniform payment. The higher the basic income, the better the fallback position upon which a worker can rely on in case negotiations with employers fail to reach an agreement. By implication, the higher the basic income, the more credible is the exit strategy. Additionally, the higher the basic income, the larger the class of workers for which exit becomes a realistic option—on the straightforward grounds that the income security provided by a basic income needs to be a certain proportion of the worker's wage for that worker to consider exit.

But when basic income is advanced as a measure for empowering vulnerable groups, it is typically put forward as part of a strategy for developing existing welfare state entitlements *alongside* key social services and forms of income protection for which basic income offers no adequate replacement. Under realistic budgetary constraints in a globalized economy and the normal conditions of democratic politics, where a reform agenda must attract sufficient electoral support to establish a robust political coalition, the politically feasible level of the basic income is likely to be modest and insufficient to cover basic needs. A more generous

basic income would require a considerable transition period (Torry, 2016; Van Parijs and Vanderborght, 2017). Focusing on basic income as a means for strategic exit in the current policy landscape, a modest but more feasible ‘partial’ basic income will typically be of interest mainly to the most precarious workers. Of course, these are precisely the workers who are most in need of having their working conditions improved. In short, while a higher basic income would both broaden the range of workers that may consider exercising an exit strategy and make the threat of exit more credible in each case, even a partial basic income at modest levels is of considerable interest to the most precarious workers in today’s economy (Calnitsky, 2018).

But the question remains whether such a basic income, ‘however basic in terms of amount’ (Standing, 2012, p. 605, cf. Lovett, 2010, p. 200), is capable of supporting a robust exit strategy for those in precarious employment. Specifically, would it ‘put pressure on those wishing to purchase the labor of the precariat to provide more attractive, dignifying conditions’ (Standing, 2012, p. 602)? In the remainder of this article, we want to challenge this claim and demonstrate why heavy reliance on the basic income-induced exit strategy for empowering workers is fraught with difficulty and risk.

4. Basic income—credible or hollow threat?

For basic income to promote an exit strategy for precarious workers, it must establish a foundation from which they are able to *credibly* signal an intention to leave their job unless conditions improve. Employers who are not persuaded that exit is a realistic option will have no incentive (beyond mere goodwill) to accommodate the concerns of their workers. Advocates of exit-based empowerment through basic income believe that most vulnerable workers will be emphatically better off under a basic income regime and that both employment relations and the organization of work will significantly improve with a basic income in place (Wright, 2000, p.150).

But is this true when we consider the partial forms of basic income that may be (remotely) within reach within existing welfare state structures? How realistic is the exit option offered by such a basic income for precarious workers and, as a corollary, how credible is their threat to exit expressed as a readiness to leave unless they are offered a better deal? In this section, we want to argue that such exit strategies tend to advance *hollow threats*. The threat of exit no doubt can be credible in individual cases, but generally speaking, precarious workers face important constraints when considering the exit strategy as a tool for obtaining major concessions from employers. These constraints remain at play even with a modest but non-trivial basic income firmly in place. As a result, bolstering strategic exit through basic income is unlikely to significantly affect the bargaining position of precarious workers; nor should we expect such a mechanism to drive major changes in the labor market.⁷

The first problem arises because an economically feasible and politically sensible basic income offers no adequate replacement for earnings-related social insurance, pension rights and other economic benefits (e.g. access to health care in some countries) for which employment typically serves as a gateway in existing welfare states (Van Parijs and Vanderborght, 2017). Even with a basic income established as a stable floor underneath such arrangements,

7 Basic income may of course become an appropriate response to changes in the labor market that are *already under way* due to external factors.

there is often still a substantial opportunity cost attached to exiting from a job—even a precarious job. While basic income makes it possible to ‘say no’ to a particular job, taking such a decision entails the risk of lower pensions and of losing eligibility for (or failing to gain) access to earnings-related social insurance (Atkinson and Micklewright, 1991). Precarious employment is a heterogeneous category and we must take into account considerable variation in the access to social protection that distinct types of precarious workers have in different jurisdictions (Kalleberg, 2018). Basic income-induced exit may not have a negative impact on the income security of precarious workers who presently have little or no access to employment-related social protection, while having a serious negative impact on workers whose employment nevertheless serves an important measurable gateway function. Detailed empirical analysis is required to ascertain what share of precarious workers fit in each category and the level of opportunity costs associated with exercising the exit option in each case.

Second, precarious workers may have reasonable concerns that a decision to exit could prove harmful to their future employment prospects due to ‘scarring effects’ associated with even short unemployment spells (Arulampalam, 2001; Gangl, 2006; Dieckhoff, 2011). Long-term labor market prospects and economic security may be harmed by a perceived lack of ambition or loyalty among future prospective employers or a depreciation of skills in cases of long search times before landing a new job (Rogerson *et al.*, 2005). A related concern is that the worker may fail to get a favorable reference from her past employer due to the choice of exit in a context of conflict or disagreement. Basic income itself may not adequately compensate for the risk of the exit strategy resulting in actual job loss—an outcome likely to be far too risky for large categories of vulnerable workers.

Third, an important social obstacle to exiting a poor job is that the location of the job may have great value due to workers being firmly embedded in social networks, especially family and neighborhood support networks, which are hard to replace or build up upon having to relocate. Workers may often resist relocating, for example, because of a need to stay close to the school of one’s child or being able to assist a frail parent living nearby. Another major consideration involves the free support precarious workers often rely on from family or community networks—notably, unpaid child care. The practical difficulties of seeking or accepting a more rewarding alternative job located elsewhere may simply not make such a transition feasible due to the social as well as economic costs of commuting or residing at a great distance from one’s social support network. A modest basic income would not compensate for the hours of free labor that many precarious workers receive from families, neighbors or the wider community.

Fourth, employment is associated with many non-monetary, social values that cannot be compensated for by basic income in any immediate way. Empirical research suggests that these other, less instrumental ‘goods of work’ (Gheaus and Herzog, 2016) such as ‘ties to community’ or the ‘value of workplace relationships’ are valued alongside the income that a job provides (Gourevitch, 2016, p. 8). In a society that remains largely organized around jobs, there are also often feelings of shame and stigma attached to joblessness (Hsieh, 2005). These points offer additional explanations for why the risk of ending up without any job at all may reasonably prevent workers from embarking on an exit strategy even if they are unhappy with their present jobs. There is an important distinction between viewing basic

income as bridging a short period of joblessness while searching for a better position and basic income while unemployed as the fallback position a precarious worker may end up with when exiting the current job. The greater the risk of unemployment, the more basic income will shift from being a bridge to being an end point. At this point, we need to appreciate that basic income may not compensate for the loss of social value and the risk of social stigma associated with becoming unemployed when the exit strategy fails. True, those advocating basic income often believe our perspectives on work and the social importance of employment need to change (Gorz, 1999), but this is of little use when one's social reference group remains firmly steeped in a work-oriented culture.

The four arguments above suggest that in many cases, precarious workers might predictably hesitate to exit even when entitled to a modest basic income. Conversely, to the extent that some or all of these factors are common knowledge, they give employers reasons to evaluate threats to exit as *hollow* rather than *credible*. While employers often lack full information about individual circumstances, they will be aware of the very substantial opportunity costs *typically* faced by precarious workers opting for exit—i.e. the foregone economic and social security attached to such a choice that persist under a realistic basic income policy. Employers who do not perceive exit intentions as credible and interpret exit threats as hollow threats—threats employees are unwilling or unable to follow through—have no incentive to improve employment conditions.

5. Basic income: exit option or exit trap?

In this section, we want to take the argument a step farther and argue that under current labor market conditions, a basic income-induced exit strategy may not only fail to have a positive impact on the bargaining power of precarious workers; the existence of the basic income as an exit option also risks trapping precarious workers in *worse* positions than they previously held. However, before developing our arguments for this stronger claim, we need to explain the views under challenge more fully by considering an objection to the conclusion of the previous section.

Even though exit would often remain costly under a modest basic income regime, would not the beneficiaries of such a system enjoy a more credible exit option and greater bargaining power *compared to the same situation without basic income*? In reexamining results from the 1970s Mincome experiment in Canada, David Calnitsky (2018) has recently provided empirical backing for such an expectation, suggesting that the basic income would indeed help increase the reservation wage of the least advantaged, the lowest wage rate at which they would be prepared to accept a certain type of job. The Mincome experiment included a saturation site in the small rural town of Dauphin, in which all low-income households were offered a guaranteed income sufficient to meet basic needs. Calnitsky finds that 'wage rates offered on advertised job vacancies and actual wages on new hires grew in Dauphin. In contrast, control firms report no wage growth on advertised job vacancies and slower wage growth on new hires. Moreover ... relative to controls, applications to local Dauphin firms and new hiring declined during the experimental period' (Calnitsky, 2018, p. 2).

This scenario seems even more likely if we take the view that we should not approach the probability of exit in terms of a binary choice. When we think of exit as continuous rather

than binary, even a modest basic income might create new empowering options for exit.⁸ It can thus be argued that basic income would contribute to restructuring labor markets in a way that broadens the menu of options for vulnerable workers. This might bolster the credibility of exit threats and make it more difficult for employers offering poor work conditions or low wages for unpleasant work to attract or keep workers. Specifically, it is often argued that precarious workers could use their basic income as a ‘job subsidy’ to accept part-time work, which would be unaffordable without the extra support provided by the basic income.

Taking this into account, why then not consider exit threats becoming more credible with a basic income in place, all other things being equal? We do not want to dismiss these possibilities entirely and will return to Calnitsky’s evidence in the penultimate section. However, keeping the focus on basic income as a basis for *strategic exit*, we propose four arguments for why, under plausible scenarios, a basic income-induced exit strategy could turn into an exit *trap*. Under these circumstances, it would not only fail to improve the capacity for exit of disadvantaged workers but may even turn out counterproductive by leaving them with a significantly *reduced* ‘power to say no’.

First, the suggestion that even a modest level of basic income always improves a worker’s exit option is plausible when adding the basic income to all pre-existing programs and if it is financed through an external funding mechanism rather than through additional taxes or cuts in other social programs. However, while many experiments pilot unconditional income support within existing policy environments employing such an external source of funding (Van Parijs and Vanderborcht 2017, p. 140), this is not the pertinent arrangement when examining the relationship between a basic income-induced exit strategy and bargaining power *under realistic political feasibility constraints*. If we were to fully resource and implement a substantial nation-wide basic income, it would surely have to compete for funding with other programs or mandate increased marginal tax rates for a significant part of the population.

Insofar as confronting these inevitable trade-offs would either prevent the basic income to reach a level close to satisfying basic needs or do away with other support structures that are essential for providing a credible exit option, we need to adjust our expectations accordingly. Taking such political constraints into account means that we can no longer afford to focus narrowly on how the basic income ‘as such’ would affect the prospects for strategic exit, all other things being equal. Instead, we need to consider that the exit strategy is affected by how the basic income interacts with other measures that would or may accompany such a reform in order to be funded and sufficiently legitimized across left–right divides. It seems safe to say that in the current era of democratic politics, it is extremely unlikely that a radical left-wing basic income party would gain sufficient political support to form its own majority government over a sustained period of time.

Second, turning to the more politically relevant option of gradually phasing in a fully funded partial basic income, it is misleading to say that exit is continuous rather than binary when, in real-world economies, workers cannot simply opt for any desired combination of work, leisure or unpaid work they may prefer. The economists’ model of a sliding scale of hours matching a worker’s preference for income over leisure does not match a labor market

8 We are grateful to David Calnitsky and to Philippe Van Parijs for stressing this point in response to an earlier draft of this article.

in which jobs are exogenously structured. Precarious job offers in particular are typically of the binary ‘take it or leave it’ kind.⁹ Interestingly, basic income is often embraced as an instrument to *render* exit more continuous by facilitating a wider spectrum of options and greater diversity, including increased options for self-employment, low paid or part-time jobs.¹⁰ Basic income supporters such as Philippe Van Parijs regularly stress that basic income would not only make it easier for people to reject unattractive jobs but also for them to accept lower wages for intrinsically rewarding work, thereby countering unemployment by offering new opportunities for (low-pay) work. Operating as an unconditional wage subsidy, basic income makes low-wage work pay.

However, the more closely basic income is tied to this type of agenda, the less plausible it becomes to accept a categorical version of the ‘basic income raises the reservation wage’ claim. Instead, this agenda is predicated on weakening stable full-time employment as a norm, which in turn is associated with an increase in the proportion of precarious jobs (Kalleberg, 2018). Employers may enthusiastically welcome opportunities for enabling part-time, temporary or low-paid jobs *instead* of offering stable and adequately paid employment as part of a broader agenda of shedding labor costs. Addressing how a basic income could be politically legitimized, and to offer the key to a ‘marriage between justice and efficiency’ for our age, Van Parijs has argued that ‘the sort of flexibility which modern technology increasingly requires could acceptably be traded by the labor movement against the income security provided by the basic income’, explicitly mentioning that the latter would make ‘restrictions on patterns of working time or even minimum wage legislation’ less justified (Van Parijs, 1992, p. 232). While this type of flexicurity agenda may be attractive to some, the implications for the idea of a *modest basic income as a basis for strategic exit* and the bargaining power of vulnerable employees remain uncertain.

Third, the exit power associated with a realistic basic income depends not only on what support structures basic income would replace or how it would be tied to wage flexibility or deregulation but also on how such a reform would connect to direct voice strategies. Much of the skepticism of exit aficionados such as Taylor (2017) or Lovett (2010) to collective participation strategies rests on the fear that such measures are a double-edged sword: in their view, these give too much discretionary power to public or private agents, something that an individual basic income is designed to minimize. Taylor (2017) emphasizes the need for simultaneously resourcing exit and promoting competition, arguing that the tolerance of

9 More generally, although exit is easily described as continuous (with a basic income having some impact compared to no basic income or a higher basic income having a comparatively larger impact than a lower, etc.), many of the factors that determine a person’s actual exit options introduce thresholds that need to be met before a basic income has a real effect. This explains why the basic income often needs to reach a threshold value before it makes for a robust exit strategy. However, the threshold is not only determined by the size of the basic income itself but also by a range of other factors, which are likely to vary across different welfare states and policy environments. For instance, a low basic income may not have any real impact on the capacity of a single mother to take on a different job that may require moving away from the parental home and foregoing free child care until there is a point at which an alternative child care option becomes affordable.

10 Basic income in this scenario allows for job sharing as a greater number of part-time jobs become available (Van Parijs and Vanderborght, 2017). Alternatively, they could now start up their own small business enterprise or pool their basic incomes to establish a worker cooperative, something that may have been far too risky in the absence of a guaranteed income (Nooteboom, 2013).

strong unions in the traditional social democratic Nordic model is inconsistent with empowering individual workers. To be sure, the dangers of investing considerable discretionary power in the hands of state bureaucrats or union representatives are real. However, turning to empirical analyses, the collective power of social democratic parties and the strength of labor unions clearly stand out as key variables in explanations of where and how welfare states have established robust exit options through comprehensive social citizenship rights and high degrees of de-commodification (Korpi and Palme, 2003; Allan and Scruggs, 2004; Birnbaum *et al.*, 2017, ch. 9).¹¹

In the absence of a widely shared collective attachment to a common transformative project, how are we supposed to achieve the establishment and gradual expansion of basic income? Which are the political actors to demand such institutions and policies in the first place and to sustain them over time (Gourevitch, 2016, p. 9)?¹² To the extent that basic income-induced exit is motivated by, or promotes the individualization of bargaining strategies at the expense of, workers' collective organization, it may—again—turn out to weaken rather than strengthen the robust bargaining power of precarious workers.

Fourth, recall that the exit strategy presumes a strong labor market commitment: even with a basic income, precarious workers drawn to strategic exit prefer moving onto a quality job over being unemployed. This implies that the potential of basic income to offer the basis of a credible exit threat in relation to employers depends importantly on the availability of alternative, better jobs within reach. However, in today's globalized labor markets, precarious workers tend to face slack labor markets and are widely subject to the pressures of automation. It is questionable whether workers without a standard employment contract—e.g. gig workers—are in any position to communicate to their employers their willingness to quit if working conditions are not improved. The painful reality is that, in a relatively slack labor market, for every precarious worker that signals a readiness to exit or decides to leave there are scores of others waiting to take the vacant job.

And to the extent that the jobs within reach for precarious workers are low-skilled, these workers are often more vulnerable to technological unemployment relative to groups that are more advantaged in terms of education and marketable skills. Taking into account influential predictions about the accelerated rates of automation and robotization in production and services (e.g. Brynjolfsson and McAfee, 2014; Ford, 2015), precarious workers are increasingly at risk of being replaced by technology. The availability of low-cost technologies that could make existing jobs redundant is generally greatest in the context of routinized

- 11 This is not to say that solutions of the past are also the best solutions to present and future challenges, i.e. for supporting the interest of precarious workers under conditions of low unionization and weak social democratic parties or that such voice strategies are equally applicable everywhere. Nonetheless, illustrating how government delivery of individual social rights (that Taylor embraces as a key strategy for resourcing exit) has historically been driven by collective voice-strategies clearly bring important doubts about the suggestion that a workable exit strategy can be easily divorced from more direct voice strategies.
- 12 Some ways of implementing a basic income, such as enabling social dividends through a social investment fund placed at arms-length distance from politicians (along the lines of the Alaska Permanent Fund) might help stabilize basic income and make it politically more resilient. But eventually, the long-term survival of such arrangements is no less dependent on firm majorities and strong collective backing. For discussion, see De Wispelaere and Morales (2016).

labor, and new types of jobs associated with emerging technologies are widely expected to be 'significantly more skilled than most jobs of the past' (Frey and Osborne, 2015, p. 89). In such a context of fierce competition for low-skilled jobs and a lack of opportunity for better options within reach, the availability of a modest basic income offers little by way of a credible threat to leave in the hope of gaining better employment elsewhere.¹³ Precarious workers tend to move horizontally rather than vertically in the labor market and are likely to end up in employment that is qualitatively not different from the earlier position (Kalleberg, 2018; Kalleberg and Vallas, 2018).¹⁴

Increased opportunities for automation allow employers to embrace the opportunity a basic income-induced exit strategy offers *them* in terms of cheap labor shedding. It provides novel options for employers to reject employees by making it less 'socially costly' for them to lay off workers in response to profitable technical innovations. Paradoxically, in the context of slack labor markets where new low-cost technologies trigger major changes in the demand for labor, basic income may turn out to subsidize *involuntary unemployment*. It could make it easier—more socially acceptable—for employers to get rid of jobs that workers would actually prefer to keep, given the alternative of involuntary unemployment and living off a modest basic income with reduced access to adequate economic security.

These four arguments suggest that while exit-based empowerment through basic income is attractive in the abstract, under plausible conditions of contemporary labor markets and the contentious politics of welfare state reform, it may unfortunately weaken rather than strengthen the robust capacity of precarious workers to advance a credible threat of exit.

6. Preventing the exit trap?

What should basic income proponents conclude from all this? Is there no positive link at all between basic income and worker empowerment or are there ways in which our critique of the basic income-induced exit strategy can be used to constructively navigate the case for exit-based empowerment past these limitations?

Under conditions where wage labor is the main path for earning a living and to fully participate in the social and economic life of one's political community, strategic exit (threatening to leave in order to get a better deal) will be the most relevant form of exit for precarious workers under a basic income. Unfortunately, precisely under those conditions, our objections to the basic income-induced exit strategy and the difficulty for precarious workers to demonstrate a credible threat to exit apply with full force. However, what if instead the basic income were sufficiently high to secure a 'culturally defined respectable standard of living' (Wright, 2010, p. 217), combined with access to an infrastructure of social

13 Migrant labor is an additional factor to take into account when considering the credibility of exit threats under conditions where there is intense competition for precarious jobs. Under most proposals, recent immigrants would not be eligible for a basic income. The presence of a 'migrant reserve army of the unemployed' puts further downward pressure on the bargaining power of resident precarious workers who may be considering strategic exit under a basic income scheme. We thank Dennis Spies for this point.

14 McVicar *et al.* (2019) have found that in particularly for women and those with low educational attainment, contingent employment is likely to function as a 'trap' rather than a 'bridge'.

participation enabling opportunities for recognition and esteem beyond the employment contract (Wright, 2010; Birnbaum, 2012, ch. 2)?¹⁵

When basic income is embedded in this wider context of support structures and opportunities, exiting the labor market to pursue other options presents a more realistic and appealing possibility. This, in turn, could reduce the availability of cheap labor and precarious workers competing for unattractive jobs. Employers may indeed respond to labor reductions by increasing wage offers, as Calnitsky (2018) observes in his study of the Mincome experiments mentioned in the previous section.

This wider reform agenda also reveals possibilities to *combine* the promotion of exit options and direct voice strategies in fruitful ways, thereby showing how basic income could support rather than challenge the collective empowerment of disadvantaged groups (Stern, 2016; also Wright, 2000, 2004, 2010; Calnitsky, 2018). Erik Olin Wright suggests that shifts in labor supply will make employers fear wage escalation and the destabilization of labor markets due to firms fiercely competing over workers. This would make them far more receptive to demands for the collective organization of (and stable collaboration with) workers, thereby supporting the power of unions. ‘Where workers individually have easier exit options, employers may have greater incentives to agree to new forms of collective cooperation with organizations of workers’ (Wright, 2004, p. 84).

In light of these considerations, there are two points to make. First, insofar as labor markets tighten and workers’ bargaining power increases as the aggregate and unintended result of individual decisions to work less or even temporarily withdraw from the labor force, the relevant mechanism involved is clearly not strategic exit. Equipped with our distinctions between different forms of exit, we are able to categorize the effects observed in Calnitsky’s study to sort possible mechanisms at work. The main explanation for why wage rates offered and actual wages on new hires grew in this context seems to be that in the local labor market of Dauphin at the time, the Mincome experiment allowed some workers (mainly young parents and adolescents finishing school) to reduce hours worked or even quit their job. This tightened the small, local labor market implying that business needed to increase wages offered to attract labor.

However, the Mincome setting and its local labor market were arguably far distanced from key constraints and trade-offs that would be likely to confront a realistic basic income project today. In searching for feasible paths to fund and legitimize a substantial basic income in advanced welfare states, the basic income is likely to compete with other programs, making the net impact on accessible exit options (in this case, reducing hours worked or labor market withdrawal) uncertain. Still, assuming the latter *would* be improved, the fact that precarious workers today tend to face globalized, slack labor markets and are widely subject to the pressures of automation, makes the labor market tightening effect questionable. The response may simply be to do away with the jobs—automation—rather than offering higher wages.

Nonetheless, linking our different categories of exit to the Calnitsky study nicely illustrates a possible link between labor reductions enabled by an unconditional income

15 Suppose, for instance, that in addition to the basic income, all workers retain full access to investment in human capital and support for job matching or relocation, facilitating taking up another job or even pursuing self-employment (Taylor, 2017). These are the ‘enabling components’ of active labor market policy (Bonoli, 2010).

guarantee and increased bargaining power that *may* be triggered or strengthened if exit options are genuinely improved and are plausibly assumed to remain available over time (as in the Wright-inspired scenario sketched previously). It is crucial to see that this is not evidenced for the impact of strategic exit because in this case, workers are not using the threat of exit as a means to improve their labor market prospects. Hence, it does not challenge our arguments against basic income as a basis for strategic exit but instead offers a possible reformulation of the case for exit-based empowerment through basic income, referring to the possible impact of a different type of mechanism.

Second, focusing on how different forms of exit and direct voice instruments may fruitfully interact in Wright's scenario, the particular dynamics involved in this argument depend greatly on a favorable context being in place and on the level of the basic income that would be implemented. In view of the hollow threat objection to more realistic forms of basic income and the exit trap scenarios we have identified, it is simply unclear why the latter should be expected to improve the collective bargaining power of workers and firmly lead us in such a transformative direction (Gourevitch and Stanczyk, 2018). In short, it does not show that a politically realistic basic income pitched at a modest level would increase or drive employee-driven pressure on employers to improve work conditions. Wright's scenario is attractive, but it clearly belongs to the realm of distant possibilities rather than policy alternatives that are firmly within reach. This visionary and speculative, real-utopian type of theorizing has great value as a source of inspiration and imagination (Wright, 2010; Van Parijs, 2013). Yet, if basic income-induced exit is not merely advanced as a sketchy, long-term aspiration but as a concrete policy tool here and now, the argument fails to offer a relevant reply to the exit trap argument. It offers no explanation for why we should expect the introduction of feasible modest forms of basic income *within existing capitalist structures* to empower precarious workers in a way that would trigger or support the dynamics envisaged by Wright.

7. Conclusion

The interests, opportunities and well-being of the most vulnerable workers in the age of precariousness are rightly considered an important and urgent policy priority. Arguments making the case for exit-based empowerment through an unconditional basic income call attention to the insufficiency of direct voice strategies and existing forms of social insurance for addressing the relative powerlessness and exploitable dependency of precarious workers. The basic income proposal offers a foundation from which to criticize the inadequacy of existing safety nets and to identify desirable pathways for welfare state reform.

However, while basic income may be valuable for many purposes, in this article, we have criticized the claim that basic income-induced exit offers an effective and robust strategy for improving the bargaining power of precarious workers vis-a-vis employers. Understanding the many barriers to exit that would remain in place under a feasible basic income policy and the complex interactions between a modest basic income and the bases of workers' (collective) power shows that basic income alone is insufficient and potentially counterproductive for providing an empowering form of exit.

In our view, overt reliance on basic income, as suggested by strong exit advocates such as Karl Widerquist (2013), could end up trapping workers into precarious existence and, in some cases, even make them worse off than before. Instead, we suggest the long-term

objectives linked to exit-based empowerment are best served by a broader strategy, placing greater emphasis on how specific forms of exit interact with voice mechanisms and collective bargaining power. The precise role a basic income can play in these more complex scenarios remains to be investigated in much more detail.

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