Public works for a degrowth transformation; jobs for all who want them

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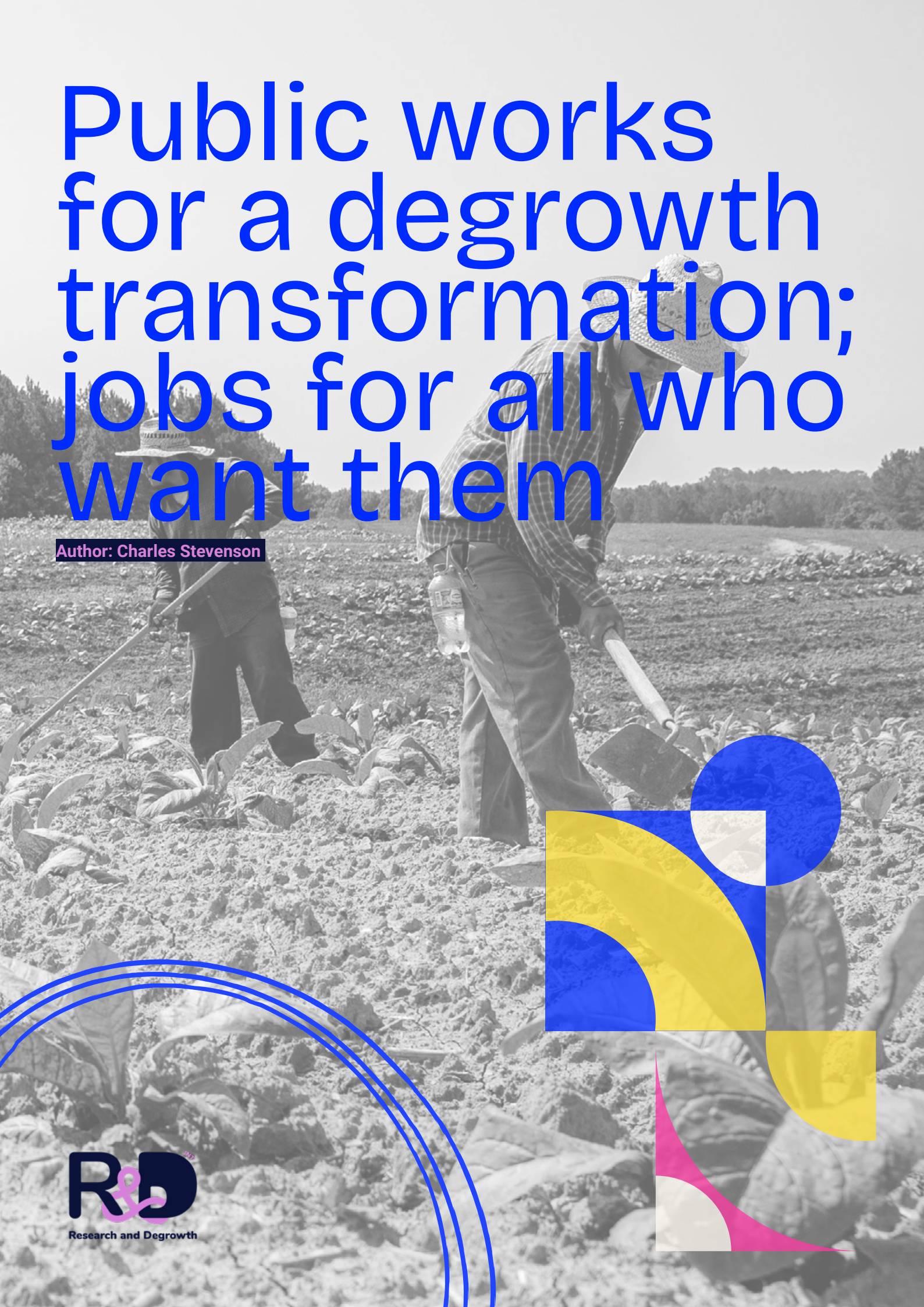

Research and Degrowth

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POLICY BRIEF

How many of us feel that our work contributes to ecological sustainability and social justice? As the planet heats up and inequalities deepen, our workforces remain employed to produce what is profitable, rather than what is needed. This mismatch results in a failure to allocate the requisite labour towards confronting the challenges of the 21st century. Worse, our societies continue to face chronic involuntary unemployment, while there is so much essential work that needs to be done. We describe an overlooked solution to both problems: a job guarantee designed to contribute to the reorganisation of our economies to meet human needs within planetary boundaries.

Job insecurity in times of ecological crisis

The crises of the 21st century need no introduction. We are living through a mass extinction event alongside social deprivation, war, and instability. In Europe, one in five (96.5 million people) are at risk of poverty or social exclusion. In Southern Europe in particular, the newly impoverished tend to be unemployed workers as structural unemployment has become endemic. Concurrently, work-related stress and working time have increased for many as the advent of the digital economy erodes the separation between work and rest. In its sixth assessment report, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change concluded that "limiting global warming to 1.5°C would require rapid, far-reaching and unprecedented changes in all aspects of society."

One unanswered question regards the labour required for this root-and-branch economic transformation. Who will do this work? The current solution at the European level is that it will be provided by the private sector. One limitation of this approach is that the private sector invests to make profits, while the sectors that need to grow (e.g., care, mass transport, nature restoration) are not profitable.

In this context, Research & Degrowth is calling for social-ecological transformation: a transition away from an economy that only produces what is profitable so as to redirect our productive capacities towards fulfilling human needs within planetary boundaries. Degrowth requires phasing out unnecessary and damaging sectors and scaling up

others. This transition means that many workers will need to move from one sector to another, and to be trained in new, socially useful skills – whether they are currently unemployed, underemployed, or employed in what the anthropologist David Graeber called *bullshit jobs*: "a form of paid employment that is completely pointless, unnecessary, or pernicious."

While the European Commission estimates unemployment in the European Union to stand at 5.7%, youth unemployment is almost three times higher at 14.5%. A study into the cost of unemployment found that, in Spain, an unemployed worker cost the state €19,991. This figure represents a remarkable 90% of the mean Spanish annual salary.

Moreover, official figures often underestimate the true extent of unemployment. In 2023, 27.1 million Europeans were *underemployed*, accounting for over half (51%) of the demand for jobs. With the casualisation of the labour market, unemployment is becoming intertwined with precarious work as evidenced by the rise of in-work poverty. A European Commission study found that precarious employment affected 25-30% of the workforce – rising to 40-45% in sectors like hospitality and construction. Similar to unemployment, underemployment and precarious work entail hardship and a lack of security for workers. They also represent underutilized productive capacity which could be directed towards meeting public challenges.

Finally, European job security faces immense pressures from an array of changes including US tariffs, automation, off-shoring, and the rise of artificial intelligence. A coherent industrial policy designed to counteract these challenges is needed.

Public works for social-ecological transformation

To counter the interlocking challenges of the 21st century, we propose an underutilised transformative policy: the job guarantee. A job guarantee provides the labour required to achieve social-ecological transformation. It also puts an end to involuntary unemployment by offering up to 30 hours of

weekly work to all those who seek it, paid at a living wage. It is voluntary, and enrolment never constitutes a condition for receiving welfare benefits. It is based on the principle that no one is unemployable, and that we all have a role to play in society.

The ambition of the job guarantee is set to increase as social-ecological transformation accelerates. In the short term, the state can act as an employer of last resort in sectors that can be ramped up rapidly. This policy was deployed, for example, in the United States through the creation of the Civilian Conservation Corps during the Great Depression. In the initial phase of this programme, 18- to 25-year-old men were employed to build infrastructure and restore nature (see section on empirical evidence below). Between 1933 and 1945, it mobilised three million men, typically for six to twelve months each – the largest non-military initiative of this kind in the country's history.

In Phase 1 of the job guarantee proposed here, the state would turbocharge the capacity of social and ecological sectors by distributing participants to targeted organizations (see Table 1). A similar model is already active in the Swiss National Service. Both for-profit and non-profit organisations across the country advertise positions that fulfil a social or ecological objective through a centralised government "civil service" agency. Participants in this civil service apply for positions and are integrated as normal employees for a contracted period with the government paying them a stipend. A crucial difference between the Swiss model and the job guarantee is that enrolment in the job guarantee would be voluntary and would never represent a form of conscription. A second difference is that the job guarantee aims to provide workers with permanent, secure employment. A third is that a job guarantee is geared not just to cover gaps or train young people, but to produce necessary goods that the market economy is currently underproviding

Indeed, in Phase 2 of the programme, the state expands its capacity to employ workers in industrial and technical sectors. The programme is part of a broader industrial policy aimed at decarbonising our economies, stopping the mass extinction event, and achieving high levels of sovereignty in food and energy provisioning. In some contexts, this industrial policy could rely on increasing investment in necessary sectors. In others, it would require bringing strategic sectors under public ownership. While this policy brief focuses on the question of labour in this social-ecological transformation, the long-term goal centres on providing Universal Public Services – systems ensuring everything required to live life with dignity (i.e., housing, water, energy, food, education, healthcare, childcare, specialized and elder care, internet, transport, and recreation) to all.

	Phase 1	Phase 2
Sectors employing the most new workers	Sectors in which the state is already embedded Urgent social and ecological work that can be rolled out rapidly (e.g., ecosystem restoration, childcare)	Newly socialised strategic sectors for social-ecological transformation (e.g., renewables-based energy systems, building retrofits) Public services (e.g., housing, mass transport)
Employment arrangement	Through the state	Through the state (for national-scale projects such as communication and rail) Through a range of other local governance structures such as Public Commons Partnerships (for food production, housing, some forms of energy production)
Focus	Retraining	Permanent employment in resilient public services

Table 1: The evolution of the public works performed through the job-guarantee programme and their corresponding employment arrangements and focus.

By redirecting productive capacity away from damaging and unnecessary sectors, the programme reduces overall material and energy use. First, much of the work that is required for social-ecological transformation (e.g., care, ecosystem restoration) is labour- rather than energy-intensive. Second, those sectors that do require increased material throughput (e.g., mass transport, building retrofits) provide alternatives to the wasteful, individualised systems used today (e.g., cars, uninsulated buildings).

In the first phase, the proportion of workers employed by the state is expected to rise. In the second phase, it stabilises or even decreases through the deployment of governance tools such as Public Commons Partnerships, in which the state works with cooperatives or community trusts to facilitate commoning practices in sectors such as agroecology and healthcare.

Nationally and regionally determined objectives and industrial policy set guiding priorities for which sectors to scale up and which to phase down. Nonetheless, the aforementioned governance structures enable some portion of the programme to be locally administered. Wherever possible, local communities can make their own decisions about how to increase food sovereignty or expand renewables-based energy systems, for example. In addition, Public Commons Partnerships foster workplace democracy, allowing the programme to provide a petri dish for innovations in workplace conditions and democracy.

In this way, the policy sets public standards with which the private sector must compete. One of the most important of these norms involves working time. Introducing a job guarantee paid at a living wage for 30 hours of weekly work cuts working time across the economy. Reducing working hours results in tangible ecological and social benefits in and of itself. Not only do shorter workweeks lead to lower ecological footprints and enhanced well-being, but workers participating in four-day workweeks are just as productive as those working five.

By pushing the economy towards universal employment at reduced working hours, the job guarantee constitutes a major transfer of power from capital to workers. The latter no longer rely on private companies for jobs. They are therefore less likely to take demeaning work with no workplace democracy and low pay when they can work with dignity on the most pressing projects of our time. The job guarantee constitutes what André Gorz called a "non-reformist reform", in that it fundamentally alters the rules of economic engagement for ordinary people. Once implemented, it provides a pathway towards more radical demands and deeper social-ecological transformation.

The programme also competes directly with the private sector for talent. Participants are therefore not all paid at the minimum wage. Instead, a tiered income remunerates work based on skill level, encouraging retraining. Part-time participation in the programme is also possible for workers who prefer to perform more unwaged work in care or art, for example.

Retraining constitutes a core dimension of the job guarantee, given that it is enacted in an economy shifting from production based on profitability to fulfilling human needs within ecological limits. Workers in socially or ecologically damaging sectors are provided with the skills required to build Universal Public Services that are resilient to the instability of the 21st century. The focus on retraining, particularly in Phase 1 of the programme, creates a workforce that is more resilient to the accelerating changes of our time.

The job guarantee results in an increase in public spending, and requires federal funding to be implemented. In the long term, the available evidence suggests that job-guarantee programmes pay for themselves. A recent study of the job guarantee implemented in Marienthal, Austria estimated that the programme's costs could be negligible given the state savings in traditional unemployment benefits, in addition to taxes and social insurance contributions from participants (see section on empirical evidence below).

The job guarantee acts as a powerful automatic stabiliser as more people enrol in the programme during economic downturns. This increased demand raises public spending, boosting activity across the economy. During economic booms, some workers find alternative wage labour, decreasing public spending automatically and cooling the economy. Pavlina Tcherneva, preeminent expert on the job

guarantee, describes its economic effects as follows: “As an anti-cyclical economic stabilizer, it creates employment in times of greatest need, such as recessions. As an employment safety-net, it addresses pandemic, technological, or climate-related job losses. The program is also self-limiting, shrinking when other parts of the economy furnish their share of well-paying jobs.”

In addition, the minimum wage instituted by the job guarantee creates a wage floor across the economy. Given that the private sector would have to compete with public-works programmes, this benchmark could put an end to starvation wages and reduce in-work poverty. Moreover, this benchmark for wages reduces inflationary pressures stemming from wages. Mainstream economists argue that a trade-off exists between unemployment and inflation: they believe that if unemployment falls too low, inflation will rise. This framework led to the theorisation of a non-accelerating inflation rate of unemployment (NAIRU). The idea is that unemployment should not descend below this NAIRU to avoid spiralling inflation. As a result, central bankers raise interest rates if unemployment approaches the NAIRU, causing social immiseration in the name of price stability. Paradoxically, little empirical evidence exists to support the NAIRU. The job guarantee provides an alternative approach by creating a buffer stock of employees paid at a living wage while retaining skills from which the private sectors would need to hire. In this way, the job guarantee ensures that full employment can be achieved alongside price stability.

Furthermore, the programme provides an essential tool for counteracting the disappearance of good jobs in left-behind areas, and for re-localising production. Didier Eribon’s *Returning to Reims* paints an evocative picture of the ravages of deindustrialisation in northern France. Eribon describes the loss of dignity associated with mass unemployment, poverty, and social exclusion. He also highlights people’s sense of abandonment by the political left in these areas, and their resulting shift to the far-right National Front (now National Rally). Previous job-guarantee programmes (see section on empirical evidence below) have provided a renewed security for blue-collar workers whose jobs have been automated (or off-shored), and allowed them to transfer their skills to emerging sectors. Ensuring that jobs are created in left-behind areas becomes the purview of industrial policy and the nationally determined objectives discussed above. For example, the government could plan the construction of a solar-panel factory in an area that had previously relied on coal mining. In this way, workers would no longer have to abandon their local areas to find work in cities.

Without having to worry about where their next paycheck will come from, workers have greater opportunities for political engagement. While the programme accelerates social-ecological transformation, a working time reduction reduces the pace of life and creates space for pursuing interests outside of formal employment, and pushes people to question what really matters to them. Cultural

change is a precondition for a deep social-ecological transformation and transition to a degrowth economy. Without altering the capital-labour relation, that cultural shift will never occur.

Empirical evidence

No public works programme exists with the scope or ambition of the one outlined here. Most previous job guarantees, including the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) mentioned above, functioned as a sponge to soak up the involuntarily unemployed during a crisis. Nonetheless, these programmes always leave a mark on the places in which they are enacted. The CCC planted three billion trees and built thousands of kilometers of hiking trails and roads, as well as other infrastructure. (It also excluded women, however, and was enacted through a system of racist segregation.)

Today, a number of job-guarantee programmes exist in Europe, supported by the EU and primarily focussed on ending youth unemployment. A recent study of the job guarantee implemented in Marienthal, Austria, found overwhelming benefits. Not only did the area achieve full employment, but many participants – who had been unemployed for long periods – used the experience of the job guarantee to transition to new jobs outside the programme. They described strong improvements in well-being, including mental and physical health, more structured routines, collective purpose, social connection, and community recognition. No economic drawbacks linked to the evolving job market were detected. Finally, even after the programme ended in March 2024, participants reported benefits persisting over time.

A similar programme, *Territoires zéro chômeur de longue durée* (TZCLD), was launched in France in 2017. It finances jobs in the solidarity economy. Mayors of towns in the pilot regions participating in the programme have described the positive effects the new incomes have had on the local economy as a whole. While a final report is expected in the summer of 2025, eight new territories were added in March 2025, bringing the total to 83 actively participating territories. Other municipalities have requested the programme on the basis that it costs less than alternative anti-poverty measures and unemployment benefits.

The most famous job guarantee in the hispanophone world is the *Jefas y Jefes de Hogar Desocupados* programme. Deployed within six months in response to economic crisis and sky-rocketing unemployment in Argentina in 2002, it employed heads of household for a basic wage in community work, infrastructure, and care. The programme demonstrated that the government can act as an employer of last resort. In this way, it was federally funded but locally administered. Extreme poverty fell by a quarter. The policy also had a potent macroeconomic effect as an automatic stabiliser. It left a material mark on Argentina in the form of schools, community centers, public housing, and health clinics.

It has also increased women's participation in the economy, providing a formal source of income, autonomy, and recognition for their work. In fact, the most common critique of the policy was that it was phased out without proper substitution – thus failing to lift families out of poverty over the long term.

The largest job guarantee in history, still in operation today, is the *National Rural Employment Guarantee Act*, enacted in India in 2005 and renamed the *Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act* (MGNREGA). It ensures that every adult member of a rural household could receive at least 100 days of paid work annually, particularly in public works like infrastructure development, water conservation, and rural road construction. It has also increased women's participation in the economy, providing a formal source of income, autonomy, and recognition for their work. The scale of the MGNREGA has demonstrated the viability of a demand-driven, government-run job creation programme. As expected, it expanded massively during the Covid-19 pandemic to reach an astounding 75.5 million active households in 2020-2021.

Taken together, the available empirical evidence on previous job-guarantee programmes highlights several benefits: full employment, economic stability, poverty reductions, public value creation, new labour standards, higher levels of social inclusion, and skill development for participants. No wage-price spirals or demand-driven hyperinflation has ever resulted from the implementation of a job guarantee.

Public support

At a time of rising political polarisation, few proposals poll as highly as the job guarantee. In France, 79% backed the policy. The Center for Working-Class Politics found that support for a federal job guarantee in the US stood at 59%, transcending demographic, partisan, and gender lines. The same study shows that running on a job guarantee increased support for candidates compared to other progressive policies like a minimum wage or higher taxes for the rich. This conclusion makes sense in the context of capitalist realism and decades of propaganda about the so-called *undeserving poor*. It is far more politically advantageous to argue that everyone who wants to work should get a job. This tactic does not mean that the job guarantee substitutes welfare policies, thereby forcing people to enrol in it. Instead, it offers a weapon for progressives to win office and transform the economy.

Critiques

Several critiques have been levelled at the job guarantee. One is that such programmes have been historically difficult to maintain over the long term, and are vulnerable to political attacks. The *Indian National Rural Employment Guarantee Act* provides a counterpoint to this claim, but the argument remains that a job guarantee must be defended once it has been implemented. Here, the logic of non-reformist reforms – policies that improve the material basis of people's lives and create appetite for deeper transformation – remains pertinent.

A second critique is that the job guarantee could lead to a kind of *workfare* in which access to social benefits is contingent on enrolment. In this brief, we have emphasised the voluntary nature of the programme. Many people prefer the structure and purpose that come with work to standard unemployment or welfare benefits. Based on the empirical evidence discussed above, the assumption remains that these people will choose to enroll in public works for other reasons in addition to the monetary incentive. The job guarantee would be enacted alongside – not in replacement of – existing welfare programmes.

A third objection is that public investment at scale crowds out private capital. The most comprehensive analysis of the examples discussed here finds that the opposite is true. Public investment tends to "crowd in" the financial sector as new avenues of economic activity appear.

Conclusion

At a time of concomitant social and ecological crises, the solutions preferred by establishment politicians do not match the scale of the work at hand. **New thinking is required both to revitalise economies struggling to recover from decades of shocks, and to ensure resilience in the face of mounting instability.**

Everyone wants a chance to be part of something bigger than themselves, and to help confront the epochal challenges of our time. Few metrics are more damning of our governments' efforts than the collective sense that we are being asked to do very little to fight climate breakdown, the mass extinction of life on earth, poverty, loneliness, rising fascism, femicides, or the emergence of new zoonotic pathogens.

The need for a job guarantee is surpassed only by the surprising lack of discussion surrounding this policy. This programme offers twin solutions to the social harm caused by involuntary unemployment, and to the question of the labour required for social-ecological transformation. It also has the potential to set standards across the economy in terms of the living wage, working time, working conditions, and workplace democracy. Phase 1 can be rolled out immediately. The job guarantee offers the majority of workers an escape from bullshit jobs towards the deprived sectors that matter most: art, care, nature conservation, nourishing food, clean energy, quality housing, and world-class public services. **In other words, it catapults degrowth from theory to practice.**

The clear limitation to such an ambitious policy is that large fiscal outlays would be required in the short-term to roll it out. Over the long term, the evidence from less ambitious programmes is that investment in public works and universal employment generates more revenue than it costs. A second limitation is that the programme outlined here would require a complex reorganisation and expansion of the public sector.

While the scale of this programme may seem daunting, our current moment is calling out for bold, pragmatic responses to the crises we face. Moreover, the job guarantee is not just good policy; it's good politics. Support for the job guarantee is strong, and it should be used as a rallying cry for mass movements of ordinary people set on making the economy their own. In the context of real threats to job security, the far-right presents little more than bromides about reducing immigration. By offering job security and a sense of shared public purpose, a job guarantee provides a concrete political alternative.

The need for "rapid, far-reaching and unprecedented changes in all aspects of society" is clear. **The question currently facing policymakers is not whether they are doing their best, but whether they are doing enough to rise to this challenge**.

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