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Conference Abstract Proposal

Policy Opportunities in the Global Crisis Being Created by AI, Robots, Desktop Manufacturing and BioMedicine

In the last two decades robotics and the communication and information technologies that allowed global coordination of production eroded manufacturing employment in the North. Now robotics and artificial intelligence are beginning to fundamentally change the relative profitability and productivity of investments in capital versus human labor, creating structural unemployment at all levels of the workforce, from the North to the developing world. As the cost of robotics and expert systems fall the percentage of the population that can find employment will also fall, stressing economies already trying to curtail "entitlements" and adopt austerity. Two additional technology-driven trends will exacerbate the structural unemployment crisis in the coming decades, desktop manufacturing and anti-aging medicine. Desktop manufacturing threatens to disintermediate the half of all workers involved in translating ideas into products in the hands of consumers, while anti-aging therapies will increase the old age dependency ratio of retirees to tax-paying workers.

Ignoring the limits of humans in relationship to accelerating technology, economists and public policy makers are largely in denial about the emerging structural unemployment, insisting that new jobs for humans will be created as they were in the transitions from agriculture to industry, and industry to post-industrial society. Instead of re-discovering the Left goal of eliminating unnecessary toil and expanding leisure, Left economists insist that only perfidious capitalists and conservative policies prevent full employment. Techno-utopians on the other hand promote magical thinking solutions, such as universal ownership of equities in a supposedly skyrocketing future stock market, or universal access to free, self-replicating desktop manufacturing with free product designs. Neo-Luddites, predictably, call for curtailing technological innovation to preserve human labor.

In order to enjoy the benefits of technological innovation and longer, healthier lives we will need policies that consciously control the pace of replacing paid human labor with a universal basic income guarantee (BIG) or "citizens dividend" provided through taxation and the public ownership of wealth. The intensifying debate over the reform of "entitlements" is the ideal opportunity to propose a new social compact that replaces the model of education/salaried work/pensioned retirement with one of life-long citizenship obligations in return for the citizens dividend.

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