ABSTRACT

Unemployment has almost always been traumatic for its victims. In earlier times, it threatened extreme privation, if not starvation. Still today, it dramatically decreases its victims’ standard of living, human capital, social standing, and self-respect. It is associated with poorer health, suicide, and family dissolution. Unemployment also entails considerable costs to society such as lost output, increased crime, decayed neighborhoods, and when extreme, political unrest. Why, then, is it tolerated? Why, especially, have workers and their advocates not demanded that employment be guaranteed to all? This article explores why what has always been foremost to workers’ interests – security of employment – has not remained one of labor’s foremost demands. It finds that the reasons have been complex and varied over time, including degrading work houses, workers’ focus on alternatives to capitalism, the fact that unemployment typically is suffered by a small portion of the workforce, the local character of most worker demands, the eventual provision of safety nets, and most importantly, the dominance of ideology that blames workers for their unemployment or holds that full employment is impossible to attain.
WHY HAS LABOR NOT DEMANDED GUARANTEED EMPLOYMENT?

Jon D. Wisman and Michael Cauvel

“A man willing to work, and unable to find work, is perhaps the saddest sight that fortune’s inequality exhibits under this sun” (Carlyle 1840, Ch. 4)

“Work is about a search for daily meaning as well as daily bread, for recognition as well as cash” (Terkel 1997).

“When I first saw unemployed men at close quarters, the thing that horrified and amazed me was to find that many of them were ashamed of being unemployed” (Orwell 2013).

Abstract: Unemployment has almost always been traumatic for its victims. In earlier times, it threatened extreme privation, if not starvation. Still today, it dramatically decreases its victims’ standard of living, human capital, social standing, and self-respect. It is associated with poorer health, suicide, and family dissolution. Unemployment also entails considerable costs to society such as lost output, increased crime, decayed neighborhoods, and when extreme, political unrest. Why, then, is it tolerated? Why, especially, have workers and their advocates not demanded that employment be guaranteed to all? This article explores why what has always been foremost to workers’ interests – security of employment – has not remained one of labor’s foremost demands. It finds that the reasons have been complex and varied over time, including degrading work houses, workers’ focus on alternatives to capitalism, the fact that unemployment typically is suffered by a small portion of the workforce, the local character of most worker demands, the eventual provision of safety nets, and most importantly, the dominance of ideology that blames workers for their unemployment or holds that full employment is impossible to attain.

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Unemployment has always been harrowing for its victims. Prior to modern times, it meant extreme privation, and even starvation. Despite today’s safety nets, it continues to dramatically decrease the unemployed’s standard of living, their skills, their social standing, and their self-respect. It is associated with poorer health, suicide, and family dissolution. Unemployment also entails considerable costs to society such as lost output, increased crime, and decayed neighborhoods. Why, then, is it tolerated? Why in particular have workers themselves not demanded that employment be guaranteed to all?

Prior to acquiring the franchise in the late nineteenth century, a demand for guaranteed employment would have met with little success. However, because workers constitute the

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majority of the electorate, with the franchise they could in principle have used their political power to override business interests and force government to provide jobs for all. Why did they not do so? Why has guaranteed employment not always been at the top of worker movements’ political agendas?

History reveals that a widespread and sustainable demand for guaranteed employment has been rare. While workers have at times supported, demanded, and even revolted to obtain guaranteed employment programs, calls for such programs have been few, sporadic, and not sustained over long periods. Hence the question: If guaranteeing employment is as good an idea as its proponents claim, why has it not always been more central to worker movements and the political platforms embraced by political parties supporting the interests of workers?

This article explores why guaranteed employment has not remained one of labor’s foremost demands. It finds that the reasons have been complex and varied over time, the principal ones being:

1. In early capitalism, there were instances in which the state provided employment for the unemployed, but it was within dehumanizing work houses that served to signal punishment for those who failed to find work.
2. Workers were at times convinced that capitalism was inherently exploitative and inhuman and thus focused on the need for its replacement by alternatives such as cooperatives or social ownership of the means of production as opposed to the narrower reformist demand of guaranteed employment.
3. Typically the unemployed constituted a relatively small percentage of the working population such that most workers felt that wages and working conditions were more pressing concerns. Thus the demand for guaranteed employment would more likely arise during periods of massive unemployment.
4. During crises, when the demand for guaranteed employment would be most likely, workers are at their most insecure, governments are severely budget constrained, and the political realm is highly polarized.
5. Workers’ struggles were usually with a single employer, or an industry, and thus their focus was local as opposed to societal. Moreover, when workers did turn their attention to unemployment, demands were often made of local governments that could not feasibly guarantee employment.
6. Since acquiring the franchise, workers have been successful in obtaining social assistance that has provided a degree of relief for the unemployed, thereby lowering the material hardship of unemployment.
7. The dominant ideology of every society has always been that which represents the interests of the elite. Within capitalism, this ideology insists that jobs are always available and thus the unemployed are either inadequately motivated or too greedy to accept lower wages, and thus to blame for their own unemployment. Given the pervasiveness of this ideology, it has been internalized by most workers themselves. A collateral ideological argument holds that full employment is impossible to attain.

This article explores these reasons for the lack of a sustained demand for guaranteed employment. It unfolds as follows. The first section provides a brief summary of the rise of unemployment accompanying the evolution of capitalism, the political threat this posed, and the

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2 See: (Attali and Champain 2005); (Darity 2010); (Forstater 1998; 2006); (Harvey 1989); (Kaboub 2012); (Mitchell and Wray 2005); (Palley 2001); (Vickrey 1992); (Wisman 2010; 2013a); (Wisman and Pacitti 2014); (Wisman and Reksten 2013); (Wray 1998a; 2007; 2006; 1999).
rise of organized workers in the nineteenth century who would so threaten the elite’s state that
the latter was forced to cede benefits and the franchise to workers. The second section
summarizes the advocacy for the right to work. The third section provides a brief history of
government programs approximating guaranteed employment. The fourth section provides a
summary of workers’ principal demands. Section five explores the reasons why guaranteed
employment has not played a more prominent role in worker history and politics. The article
ends with a few final reflections on the importance of ideology and why labor has generally fared
so poorly in its struggles.

Unemployment, Repression, and the Rise of Worker Political Power

Before the rise of capitalism, workers in agriculture were generally fused with the land as
slaves, serfs, indebted peasants, or in indentured servitude. Those in crafts generally owned the
tools with which they worked. Although an unemployed class of paupers had always existed, it
was usually marginal. However, during the early evolution of capitalism, unemployment became
more widespread as a consequence of social dynamics which Marx termed primitive
accumulation to characterize the separation of producers from any ownership or control of the
means of production. Workers were pushed and pulled from their traditional rights to be on the
land that they cultivated. They were pushed by the enclosure movement and pulled by better
conditions in towns. The superior productivity of rising industrial production increasingly
bankrupted independent craftsmen. Workers were being proletarianized, turned into free labor—
freed from feudal fetters, but no longer retaining any ownership, control, or right of access to the
tools and resources with which to work. To survive, they had to locate employers willing to give
give them wage work. Those who failed in doing so would be unemployed. While this pool of
unemployed workers was functional for capitalists in holding down wage levels and imposing
worker discipline, it posed a political threat to the state when it grew too large. This threat was
especially acute during general downturns when unemployment soared.

The extent of this threat was captured early on in mercantilist economic thought, where
the political necessity of full employment served as a common end to most of the policies that
were advocated. Indeed, the threat posed by the unemployed led, at times, to their forced
emigration to colonies.

The urbanization that accompanied capitalism concentrated the unemployed in urban
centers where they collectively, and often spontaneously, revolted. The response to this threat
was to blame the unemployed themselves and impose upon them severe punishment. The jobless
were depicted as slothful and unwilling to seek work. The harshness toward the unemployed is
vividly captured in the time of Henry VIII by the Statute of 1536 that subjected them on first
discovered offense to a public whipping in the nude, on the second offense to whipping plus loss
of part of their right ear, and then on the third offense, should the unemployed still not be
willing to "put himself to labor like as a true man oweth to do [to] pains and execution of death" (Byrne

3 Landlords forced serfs and peasants off the land so as to more profitably use it for pasturage and commercial
farming.

4 A part of the pull is captured in the medieval German saying, “Stadtluft macht frei” (Town air makes you free).

5 Thus, as Marx noted, they were free in a dual sense: free from feudal fetters, but also free of any ownership or
control of the means of production. Consequently, “The wage worker…is compelled to sell himself of his own free
will” (Marx 1967, 1:766).
A slightly later response that will be addressed below was to put the unemployed to work in dehumanizing workhouses.

Rapid industrialization and urbanization during the nineteenth century created the possibility, as Marx anticipated, that the working class could organize and threaten violence against the elites’ state for redress. To reduce, and hopefully eliminate this threat, the elite-controlled state, in a manner unexpected by Marx, began bribing the working class with various benefits and with the franchise. Both strategies for calming working class revolutionary fervor resulted in a lowering of the amount of surplus that the ruling elite was able to expropriate. The elite knew of course that this promised to be the consequence, but the alternative of violence and revolution promised to be far worse. They realized, as Edward Muller and Mitchell Seligman observe, that “the presence of meaningful nonviolent possibilities of influencing the political process will inhibit the ability of revolutionary-minded dissidents to mobilize large followings” (1987, 444).

Marx famously contended that the state serves as the executive committee of the ruling class. Yet he also believed that the ruling class would behave in a self-destructive manner, or as he put it, “dig their own graves,” by letting capitalism’s presumed “contradictions” build until an increasingly revolutionary working class would overthrow the capitalist state and institute socialism. He failed to foresee that when faced with worker revolt, the state would bribe workers with the necessary benefits, and even the franchise, so as to defuse their revolutionary fervor.

By enabling workers to strive to better their lot peaceably within the system through the democratic political process, more forceful and extreme worker actions could be seen as no longer necessary. They would lose their legitimacy. Moreover, the focus was shifted from physical force to quell worker protests to persuasion, convincing the workers that their best interests were served by a free enterprise economy that delivers growth and dynamism. Workers had to be convinced that the best interests of those who owned and controlled the means of production were in fact in the best interests of the workers as well. Ideology would have to carry the weight. And helping to do just this job, Social Darwinism evolved to depict the social world as necessarily a competitive world in which the fittest survive, a necessary dynamic for social progress. Accordingly, the losers, the unemployed, are to blame – they are unfit, a view that could be internalized in the workers’ minds.

Nevertheless, worker welfare improved, “in large part due to major redistributive efforts including increased taxation, investment in education of the poor, and labor market reform” (Acemoglu and Robinson 2000, 1193; 1180). But given its critical importance to their well-being, why did worker movements not make guaranteed employment a central demand? In fact, a very few did and some social thinkers addressed why it should be implemented, but their impact on working class movements was relatively slight.

**Early Advocates for the Right to Work**

Given the hardships of unemployment – possible eviction, inadequate nutrition, lack of medical care—as well as the loss of social and self-respect, it is surprising that so few progressive social thinkers believed it a social responsibility—a responsibility of government—

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6 So widespread was the “blame the victim” ideology that even David Hume recommended imposing a tax on the poor to goad them into working more (1905, 247). Although the overwhelming explanation for unemployment was the slothfulness of the unemployed, Malthus added luck: “A man who is born into a world already possessed, if he cannot get subsistence from his parents, on whom he has a just demand, and if the society does not want his labour, has no claim of right to the smallest portion of food, and, in fact has no business to be where he is. At nature’s mighty feast there is no vacant cover for him” (cited in Bonar 1924, 304–5).
that all available workers be provided with employment. Indeed, the idea of a right to work only surfaces in the late eighteenth century as a component of what were being proclaimed natural rights, especially among members of the French Enlightenment. In January 1776, Anne Robert Jacques Turgot presented six edicts before the Counsel in which is found: “God, in giving humans needs made work necessary and thereby made the right to work a property of all humans, and this right is the first, the most sacred, and the most inalienable of all rights” (authors’ translation) (Turgot March 16, 2016). However, most economic thinkers (e.g., Quesnay, Smith, Say, and even Turgot himself) saw the unemployment problem as originating in Mercantilist privileges and rigidities and thus believed that if these monopoly and regulatory forces were dismantled and markets left free, then workers would readily find work.

Those who advocated a right to work generally did so within proposals requiring radical re-organization of society. One of the most noteworthy was Jean Baptiste Joseph Fourier, who, in a manner similar to Turgot, claimed a natural right to work (un droit au travail) stemming from the right to life (le droit à l’existence), which was possessed by all in a state of nature. Although people were no longer in this original natural state, they were now owed this right by society. Not only did all possess a right to work, but also to assistance should they be incapable of work (Fourier 2007, 190–96). He held that in his system of phalanxes, or communal forms of organization, these rights would be fully delivered.

In England, the social thinker and reformer, Robert Owen, suggested a very similar solution to the problem of unemployment. He proposed that workers live and work in self-sufficient units known as “Villages of Cooperation,” which would feature farms, factories, and housing units grouped together to form parallelograms (Heilbroner 1999, 111). Though Owen’s vision blossomed into a plan for the complete reorganization of society, it was initially devised and presented as a means of providing relief for the unemployed (Harrison 1969, 12-13). Owen found little support for his ideas among either the “serious-minded people” or even among the radical reformers of his time. Though he presented his ideas to leaders in Britain, America, and Mexico, they never gained much traction (Heilbroner 1999, 112–13).

Apart from Owen, few social thinkers outside of France championed the idea of the right to work. Most English socialists gave the idea practically no notice, and mainstream thinkers none at all. Similarly, in Germany, although a few thinkers took up the question of a right to work, it never became widely embraced by intellectuals, much less the working class (Spengler 1968).

Government Programs Approximating Guaranteed Employment

While public works projects have been used to alleviate unemployment, this has seldom been done explicitly under the banner of a right to work. There were some exceptions such as the cases of Paris in 1848 and the U.S. during the Great Depression of the 1930s. Three more recent, albeit partial, instances include policies in Sweden, Argentina, and India.

The National Workshops of Paris

The idea of a right to work initially found its strongest expression in France, the country where it originated, playing a central role in the Revolution of 1848. A provisional government came to power and, facing threats of violence from mobs of workers, proclaimed on February 25, 1848: “The Provisional Government commits to guaranteeing worker welfare by providing them with work. It thereby guarantees jobs for all citizens” (author’s translation of French in McKay 1933, 9-10). National Workshops were set up to fulfill this guarantee (McKay 1933, 11-12). The economic crisis that began in 1846 generated massive unemployment. In the few months after their creation, the Workshops employed 120,000 and 50,000 had to be turned away (McKay
Workers were provided with regular wages, free medical care, and food allowances for themselves and their families, despite the fact that there was actually only enough work for approximately 10,000 men at any given time (McKay 1933, 25–6). The National Workshops were shut down after about a year, but inefficiency does not seem to have been the primary reason. The government had never seen the Workshops as anything but a temporary measure until elections and political stability were reestablished (McKay 1933, 77). The violent upheaval that followed the shutdown (the June Days Revolution) was put down with brutal force within a matter of days (Traugott 1985, 31).

**The Great Depression and massive government employment in the U.S.**

The ideal of a right to work received considerable attention during and in the wake of the Great Depression. The result during the 1930s was three job creation programs employing 1.4 to 4.4 million people each month (Rose 2013, 155). These programs had massive support. The number of applicants typically exceeded the number of available positions, and employment by the government was seen as preferable to direct relief in the form of income, food, or housing. Paradoxically, the overwhelming popularity of these programs prevented their expansion, as political opposition mobilized amidst fears that if they became too extensive and entrenched, the working classes would never permit them to end (Harvey 1989, 105).

Guaranteed employment was also advocated by FDR, and it was included in both an early draft of the Social Security Act of 1935 and the original draft of the Full Employment Act of 1946, but exorcised from the final versions of both. Seldom realized is that during World War II, the U.S. government became an employer of last resort, albeit without this intention, when it directly employed 12 million men and women—approximately 18 percent of the labor force. Eleven percent of the U.S. workforce—6.2 million workers—remained unemployed in 1939, 10 years after the onset of the Great Depression. Two years later, as the U.S. entered World War II, unemployment was halved, and by 1944, the unemployment rate fell to an unprecedented one percent. What happened?

The U.S. government began massive deficit spending and, far less noted, became a *de facto* employer of last resort, by placing over 10 million Americans in uniform and adding another two million to the Department of Defense and other agencies. War-stimulated demand employed an additional five million Americans. In all, employment rose by 17 million (Vatter 1985, 16–17), expanding the total labor force by 18 percent. In doing so, it drew minorities and women into the active workforce, breaking through barriers that had traditionally excluded them. In 1943, a “New Bill of Rights” was proposed, but not adopted, that would have entailed the “formal acceptance by the Federal Government of responsibility for insuring jobs at decent pay to all those able to work regardless of whether or not they can pass a means test” (Rose 2013, 170).

In his 1944 State of the Union address, Roosevelt advocated an “economic bill of rights” that would include the “right to a useful and remunerative job” and the “right to earn enough to provide adequate food and clothing, and recreation” (cited in Rose 2013, 170).

The success of the government’s ability to coordinate the war mobilization effort increased confidence that government actions could lead to permanent full employment (Wasem 2013, 11). This growing confidence, along with the increasing support for the right to work, set the stage for the Full Employment Act of 1946. The original draft of the bill affirmed that “all Americans able to work and seeking work have the right to useful, remunerative, regular, and full-time employment” (cited in Rose 2013, 170), obliging the Federal government to guarantee employment. Despite widespread public support, this provision of the bill failed to pass either
house of Congress, and a weakened bill was eventually passed and signed into law (Wasem 2013, 143).

It is worth mentioning that the increased acceptance of the right to work at this time was not unique to the United States. A number of other countries incorporated language concerning full employment and the right to work in their constitutions in the 1940s (Bailey 1950, 11). The Labour party in England “came into office in 1945 under the banner of eradicating the five giant evils of want, squalor, disease, ignorance, and unemployment” (Appleby 2011, 289). The right to work was also included in the United Nation’s Universal Declaration of Human Rights (Article 23, Section 1).

In the U. S., the Humphrey–Hawkins Full Employment Act of 1978 was the last attempt to strengthen government’s commitment to full employment, but it came forth in a political climate that was rapidly turning against labor’s interests. It came at the closure of the “Great Compression” (Goldin and Margo 1992), during which labor had made historically unprecedented gains as inequality decreased. Indeed, the turn against labor was so substantial that even progressive groups would no longer be found advocating guaranteed employment.

**Sweden**

While the most workers in the United States could expect from their government after the 1970s was a nominal commitment to full employment insofar as it did not threaten price instability, in Sweden the government implemented direct job creation, along with other measures, to achieve something closely resembling guaranteed employment. At one point in 1978, when the unemployment rate reached 2.2%, the Swedish government hired 45% of the unemployed (Ginsburg 1983, 131), offering up to six months of transitional public service employment to those who had exhausted other options (Kaboub 2007; Ginsburg 1983).

Unlike the other instances discussed in this section, the use of direct public employment to alleviate joblessness in Sweden does not appear to be the result of extremely high unemployment rates and demand for relief by workers. Ginsburg (1983, 215) describes it as the result of widespread acceptance of the Social Democratic ideology and political continuity, along with trade union support for the proposal. Yet, it does not seem to have been motivated by an ideological acceptance of the right to work. Lennart Erixon (2010, 678) describes the Rehn-Meidner model, which guided these policies, as the result of dissatisfaction with the standard Keynesian economic policies of the time. Furthermore, the guarantee of employment did not become entrenched as a right through legislation.

In the latter decades of the 1900s, the government turned to the right, sapping its interest in providing unemployment to all (Erixon 2010). By 1993, unemployment rates in Sweden differed little from high rates in the rest of the European Union (Erixon 2010, 694).

**Argentina in Crisis**

In recent years, two developing countries have tried limited guaranteed employment programs. In Argentina, the government implemented an employer-of-last-resort program (ELR) beginning in 2002, following a massive economic crisis resulting in unemployment rates above 25%, widespread social unrest with rioting in the streets, and demands for change, including the creation of employment programs (Kostzer 2008, 2-8; Wray 2007, 31). Yet much of the impetus for actually guaranteeing employment came from the top rather than from below. Randall Wray

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7 Public opinion polls prior to the passage of the full employment bill of 1946 showed that over two-thirds of Americans thought that the government should provide jobs for any person willing and able to work but unable to find a job (Bailey 1950, 9).
attributes the idea to Labour Ministry economist, Daniel Kostzer, who had developed an interest in ELR proposals.

The Argentinian crisis was accompanied by massive inflation and currency depreciation, conditions that made the employment program attractive and more politically feasible as a temporary means of restoring stability (Wray 2007). The government’s response was Plan Jefes y Jefas de Hogan Desocupados, under which the government acted as an ELR. However, the legislation stopped well short of codifying a legal right to work. Employment was offered only to those with dependent children. There were other limitations as well, such as limiting the program to one person per household and offering only four hours of work per day (Wray 2007, 9). These restrictions underscore the point that the central purpose of the program was to address the crisis rather than embracing a right to work. Thus not surprisingly, the program came to an end in 2006 (Wray 2007, 31-2).

**Rural India**

Unlike many of the direct employment policies discussed above, India’s 2005 National Rural Employment Guarantee Act does explicitly guarantee the right to work. In fact, India has experimented with guaranteed employment dating back to 1965, when the state of Maharashtra passed its Employment Guarantee Scheme. This policy, which was a predecessor of the 2005 act, guaranteed employment to all willing adults living in the rural areas of Maharashtra (Wray 2007, 33). The 2005 act extended this nationally. However, despite the recognition of the right to work, there are a number of restrictions that impede government’s ability to fulfill it. As in Argentina, jobs are available only to one member of a household, and the amount of work is limited—in this case to 100 days per year. There is also the additional limitation that the program applies only to those living in rural areas (Wray 2007, 10).

There are some unique circumstances surrounding the use of a guaranteed employment policy in India resulting from a labor market that differs markedly from those in other countries, especially developed ones. Unemployment rates are typically very low in India, due to the lack of any safety nets provided by the government, private charities, or any other source. This forces workers to accept any job, even at wages below subsistence levels. Furthermore, there is substantial underutilized labor in the agricultural sector (Kamath 2010). These circumstances appear to have played a large role in paving the way for acceptance of guaranteed employment programs. According to Raghav Gaiha (1996, 1202), the Employment Guarantee Scheme in Maharashtra passed unanimously in the State Assembly in 1978, primarily based on the argument that the law would generate income during periods of low demand for agricultural labor, while also improving infrastructure.

**What have been Labor’s principal Demands?**

Although workers have always viewed unemployment as a problem and have often united in spontaneous action against unemployment, along with issues such as rising food prices (see e.g. Lieberman 1986, 12; Davis 1989, 210), they have only rarely demanded guaranteed employment. The nature of these spontaneous actions are captured by the observations Gordon Phillips on the early British labor movement, “the whole history of popular struggle represented a continuous and unplanned search for solutions to the immediate problems of insecurity and oppression, rather than the pursuit of any known and accepted remedy” (1989, 26). Though workers have also frequently taken more coordinated and deliberate actions, such efforts are not typically focused on the problem of unemployment, let alone on an employment guarantee. The sketch of labor’s demands presented below is indicative of their range.
As will be seen below, in Europe, organized workers and the political parties dedicated to their interests struggled principally for limited work hours, a minimum wage, restriction on child labor, safer working conditions, education for their children, and the franchise.

In France, the minimum program advocated by the Parti Ouvrier Français (POF), created in 1880, included political freedoms along with economic demands such as shorter work hours, restrictions on child labor, a minimum wage, free education, changes to tax law, “employers’ responsibility for on-the-job accidents, [and] the control of mines and railroads by workers” (Lieberman 1986, 197-8). The demands issued by the Confédération générale du travail, (CGT) in 1918 included many of these same demands, along with the public works, social safety nets, and issues specific to World War I, such as peace and the payment of war debt through a tax on profits (Saposs 1972, 33-4). Similarly, John Davis (1989, 192) notes that in the early 1900s the Socialist Party in Italy demanded greater regulations of working conditions and the use of labor of women and children, a minimum wage, limitations on hours worked, tax reform, the provision of education for the poor, better legislation on industrial accidents, and a pension system.

In Spain, the Confederación Sindical de Comisiones Obreras (C. S. de CC. OO), organized in the 1960s, began with a focus on attaining higher wages and better working conditions, but later sought such changes as greater political freedoms and “free education, decent housing for workers, [and] workers’ participation in managerial decisions” (Lieberman 1986, 92-93). In Germany, the DGB’s (Deutscher Gewerkschaftsbund (DGB)’s, “Principles of Economic Policy,” formulated in 1949, demanded social safety nets, nationalization of several industries, “a fair share of the total national economic product”, and co-determination of management decisions for organized labor, in addition to full employment (Lieberman 1986, 153-4).

Histories of labor movements in Britain (Phillips 1989), France (Magraw 1989), Germany (Geary 1989), and Italy (Davis 1989) reveal that many of these demands, such as improvements in wages and working conditions, and the limitation of hours worked, have been common throughout the history of capitalism and were prominent dating back to at least the 1830s in the case of Britain (Phillips 1989, 29). Another major historical focus of labor has been work organization, as protests over piecework, the pace of work, and the behavior of factory foremen were also common (Magraw 1989, 68-9; Phillips 1989, 29).

Some workers’ organizations wanted even more drastic and revolutionary measures, seeking to replace capitalism rather than reform it. This will be discussed in more detail below.

In the United States, the Noble and Holy Order of the Knights of Labor, formed in 1869, accepted skilled and unskilled labor, blacks and women, as well as white men. Yet, in spite of somewhat radical demands for the time, it did not militate for guaranteed employment. “Its agenda included an eight-hour workday, prohibition of child labor, a graduated income tax, nationalizing of public utilities and railroads, equal pay for equal work, and the establishment of cooperatives to offer an alternative to manufacturing with wage labor” (Appleby 2011, 218). The National Labor Union, which was organized around the same time, similarly advocated for the eight-hour day and producers cooperatives, along with public land reform and a national labor party (Karson 1958, 10). The American Federation of Labor (AFL) and the Congress of International Organizations (CIO) came slightly later, and eventually merged in 1955. The original constitution of the joint AFL-CIO listed “improved wages, hours and working conditions” as its first goal, along with other objectives such as securing collective bargaining rights and promoting unionization (cited in Goldberg 1956, 236-7).
When Walter Reuther became head of the United Auto Workers after World War II, “he threw himself into lobbying Congress for full pensions, health care, and workers’ wage protection during bad times” (Appleby 2011, 321). Notably, as with the AFL-CIO, guaranteed employment was not included in his demands.

Have labor’s demands never included guaranteed employment? As was seen earlier, there have been a few instances, the most notable being French workers in the late 1840s and U.S. workers in the 1930s. However, this demand has never been kept alive in a sustained manner. Two post-World War II examples, both without consequence, merit mention all the same: the DGB in Germany and the Martin Luther King-led March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom in 1963. The “Principles of Economic Policy” formulated by the DGB demanded “full employment for all those willing to work” (Lieberman 1986, 153-4), while the organizers of the March on Washington in 1963, sponsored by American labor organizations, including the AFL-CIO, included among their demands “a massive federal program to train and place all unemployed workers.” But most labor organizations, both in Europe and the U.S., focused on issues other than unemployment, and even when the issue was addressed, they stopped short of calling for an employment guarantee and did little more than pay lip service to the idea of public works (Garraty 1978, 191).

But why has Guaranteed Employment not been a Central Demand of Labor?

Examination of the history of labor’s struggles does not reveal a single cause for why workers rarely included guaranteed employment among their principal political demands. Yet there are a number of specific reasons that stand out, most notably that workers, like all members of society, have been subject to the dominant ideology that has legitimated classic capitalist institutions and practices. This section surveys the principal reasons why guaranteed employment has not been prominent in the history of labor.

Degraded Workhouses

In early capitalism, the unemployed were harshly judged, often corporally punished, by being placed in government-run dehumanizing workhouses. These workhouses were utilized less with the intention of aiding the unemployed, than as a means of punishment (Garraty 1978, 48). Further, “the jail-like workhouse forcibly separated husbands, wives and children in order to punish the poor for their destitution, and discourage them from the dangerous temptation of procreating further paupers” (Hobsbawn 1968, 69–70). With such an alternative, it seems that even the insecurity and destitution that accompanied unemployment may have been preferable, as evidenced by the fact that “poor people were known to sell the shirts off their backs to avoid the workhouse” (Garraty 1978, 84). Yet in spite of their unpopularity, they existed for about 350 years, appearing in the U.S. during the nineteenth and first 40 years of the twentieth century as poor houses, usually on farmland. Workhouses served to mitigate the blemish and threat that the unemployed posed to governments’ legitimacy.

Struggles for Socialist Alternatives to Capitalism

Early capitalism constituted a harsh and cruel world for workers. Living standards declined and as workers lost the community of the traditional agrarian culture and moved to urban areas, they lived in severely crowded hovels without sanitary facilities, surrounded by

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8 Though a disclaimer notes that not all supporting organizations necessarily endorse all of the stated demands.

9 However, the first workhouse on record was founded in Amsterdam in 1596 with the stated intent of “reforming rather than punishing” criminals who had committed minor offenses (Garraty 1978, 44).
crime and violence. As an example of their impoverished material condition, in Great Britain during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, diets for workers’ families were insufficient for children to grow to their full potential or for adults to have sufficient energy to be fully productive. They were very short and skinny, and life expectancy was only about 40 years (Deaton 2013, 83, 91).

Not surprisingly, many workers would be receptive to the claim that capitalism needed to be replaced by a more humane system. Revolutionaries promising to abolish capitalism and offer a more attractive alternative often found ready followers. Such schemes drew attention away from reformist ideas such as guaranteed employment and toward revolutionary struggle. For example, not all workers enthusiastically supported the National Workshops in Paris because “to early exponents of the communist ideal it seemed insufficiently radical” (Rosanvallon 2013, 114). It is likely that radical organizations, such as the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), which proclaimed, “Instead of the conservative motto, ‘A fair day’s wages for a fair day’s work,’ we must inscribe on our banner the revolutionary watchword, ‘Abolition of the wage system.’” (cited in Brooks 1969, 87), would have viewed guaranteed employment in the same way.

At the opposite extreme, some workers appear to have resisted calls for guaranteed employment out of fear that they would be perceived as too radical. The original constitution of the AFL-CIO, for instance, makes no mention of full employment, let alone guaranteed employment, among its objectives. What it does emphasize instead, is its intention “to protect and strengthen our democratic institutions . . . and to preserve and perpetuate the cherished traditions of our democracy” and “to protect the labor movement from any and all corrupt influences and from the undermining efforts of communist agencies” (cited in Goldberg 1956, 236-7). Apparently they found it necessary to distance itself from socialism and communism in order to maintain legitimacy.

**Unemployment afflicts a minority of the workforce**

One reason why workers may not have demonstrated a frequent or consistent demand for guaranteed employment is that unemployment typically affected a relatively small minority of workers. While unemployment is a threat to virtually all workers, individual workers may view the probability of losing their jobs as minimal if the incidence of unemployment is low. Under such conditions, workers may focus their demands on issues that they believe have more direct relevance to their well-being such as higher wages, safer working conditions, a limit to work hours, and the elimination of child labor. As Bert Cochran notes, “. . . the unemployed considered the lack of a job a temporary misfortune, not a vocation” and those who have been unemployed for a long period of time tend to become less politically active, not more (1978, 78).

**Crisis, worker insecurity, budget constraints, and political polarization**

Nearly all of the few instances of large-scale direct government employment came forth during periods of persistently high unemployment. Not unexpectedly, the demand for policies to mitigate the problems of the jobless abates when relative prosperity returns (see e.g. Folsom 1991, 28). However, whereas periods of high unemployment are hardly uncommon, the demand for guaranteed employment has been rare.

Several factors may curb the likelihood that workers push for guaranteed employment during periods of high unemployment. First, workers are extremely vulnerable when unemployed, focusing their attention on meeting immediate needs rather than long-term societal changes. They often face threats such as evictions and food shortages. Similarly, workers have little bargaining power in periods of high unemployment. Note that historically, strikes are less
common when unemployment is high and workers have greater fear of losing their jobs (Magraw 1989, 66-7; Geary 1989, 109).

Second, governments find themselves more constrained during periods of high unemployment since they are typically accompanied by multiple economic problems such as inflation and dysfunctions in financial sectors. Although this does not preclude the implementation of a guaranteed employment program, as the case of Argentina demonstrates, it deflects attention to solving problems that appear less threatening to the business class. Furthermore, government debt rises in times of crises, providing the excuse of inadequate fiscal means. The current sovereign debt crisis in much of Western Europe is resulting in cuts to social safety nets as unemployment soared. Gaining additional rights and protections is likely to seem like an implausible political goal for workers struggling to maintain what they already have.

Relatedly, Mian et al. (2014) find that economic crises lead to weaker governments, along with increased political and ideological polarization. Thus, though demand for guaranteed employment may be expected to increase when unemployment is high, ideological opposition is likely to increase as well. Businesses face falling profits, and guaranteed employment could mean raising wages and tax burdens, thereby impairing a return to recovery and profitability. **Local Focus of Organized Workers**

The threat of unemployment affects workers differently, varying substantially according to age, race, gender, industry, occupation, and region, with consequences for their ability to join together in collective action. It is doubtlessly easier to organize a group of people in the same place or who share certain characteristics than a diffuse and heterogeneous group.

Such heterogeneity helps explain why workers have generally chosen to make demands of particular employers or industries and why the unemployed frequently make demands of local rather than national governments. Folsom (1991) provides numerous examples of times when unemployed workers organized to demand public works programs and relief from city governments. Early in the history of the United States, for example, these demands were more common than petitions to the federal government to ease the problem of unemployment. Until the Great Depression, unemployment was treated as a local rather than a federal problem (Wasem 2013, 15). As with firms and industries, a focus of organized workers on local governments may help explain the rarity of demands for guaranteed employment, as guaranteed employment appears beyond the means of local governments. Moreover, labor unions, especially those in the United States, preferred to make gains through the use of strikes and collective bargaining, rather than through the governmental process (Garraty 1978, 181).

At least through the 1930s, “union proposals for dealing with unemployment were primarily self-protective,” as the unemployed tended to leave the union and thus were no longer union constituents. The major unions in Europe typically advocated programs such as early retirement incentives, raising the minimum age of schooling, and banning married women from the workplace in order to reduce the workforce (Garraty 1978, 191). Paul Le Blanc claims that the structure of unions also prevents them from playing a large role in demanding guaranteed employment. With the rise of “business unionism,” union leaders are rewarded for securing gains for exclusive groups of workers, rather than to represent the working class as a whole, an incentive structure that makes union leaders more conservative and transforms unions into

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10 Perhaps in good part due to racial segregation in southern states, Martin Luther King’s march for jobs addressed the federal government.
special interests rather than “a social movement in the interest of all workers” (1999, 75). Thus, as Phillip Harvey notes, those most likely to give the support needed to secure guaranteed employment are either lacking in political power or unlikely to devote considerable attention to the task (1989, 113).

Lastly, business firms’ attempts to cultivate a sense of community to better maintain morale and productivity encourage workers to focus their quest for better deals within firms themselves. This sense of community may also place the responsibility for unemployment on a dominant local firm. For instance, unemployed workers in Detroit once organized a demonstration at the Ford plant because they felt the company had a moral obligation to help those who had worked hard for the company (Folsom 1991, 303).

**Reduction of Material Hardship with Social Assistance**

The success of labor in forcing governments to create safety nets reduced the material hardship of unemployment and thus the likelihood of more radical demands such as guaranteed employment. These social programs have varied greatly over time, from the first unemployment benefit scheme in England (National Insurance Act 1911) to the more generous schemes generally available currently in the European Union. These benefits, as well as the franchise, have their origins in the need to draw workers away from their more revolutionary stances. The shadow of the Bolshevik Revolution, in particular, prompted governments to institute programs to assist the unemployed. Workers demanded “work or maintenance” and governments found the latter less threatening to capitalism (Acemoglu and Robinson 2000; Garraty 1978, 147-8).

Substantial further gains came during the Great Depression and until the mid-1970s. The Great Depression delegitimized the ideology of laissez-faire and gave legitimacy to government intervention in the economy to improve the welfare of the people generally. Inequality substantially decreased, education was significantly more democratized, universal health care was instituted in most of Europe, and worker rights greatly expanded. In the United States a so-called “social compact” was made among the government, labor, and business. As Le Blanc describes it, labor accepted “the right of private business to own the economy” in exchange for wages and fringe benefits from business and low unemployment rates and social welfare policies designed to “give security to the young, to the unemployed, and the elderly” (1999, 104–5). Though workers did not win the guarantee of employment, they were pacified by higher incomes and the greater security that came with these social welfare policies.

Similarly, in Germany, Mitbestimmung (co-determination) dates back to 1918 and become legally required in 1976. It mandates worker participation in management decision-making, thereby providing workers with a sense of being partners in firms as opposed to opponents. It plays a key role in a social compact among government, business, and labor that builds a sense of social solidarity, deflecting attention from issues such as guaranteed employment. Attempts to adopt similar social contracts in Great Britain were aborted by the rise of Thatcherism.

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11 Challenging Marx’s prediction of an increasingly militant and revolutionary working class, Thorstein Veblen contended that “The growth of the capitalistic system presently brought on trade-unionism...an organized attempt on the part of the workmen to deal with the question of capitalistic production and distribution by business methods, to settle the problems of working-class employment and livelihood by a system of non-political, businesslike bargains” (1961, 449). This seems to have been truer in the U.S. than in Europe.

12 Ironically, unemployment is highly demoralizing and welfare increases that demoralization insofar as it debases and humiliates them by making them the recipients of public “charity,” thereby accentuating their powerlessness.
It should be noted that the first push for a full employment bill in the United States came after unemployment insurance had been installed via the Social Security Act of 1935. However, workers feared the termination of New Deal programs following World War II, and union members expected attacks from business following the war, as had been the case in the aftermath of World War I. Millions of workers went on strike in both 1945 and 1946, leading to many of the benefits listed above as part of the social compact, as well as a continuation of many New Deal policies (Le Blanc 1999, 96).

The relationship between the cost of job loss and demand for greater security is inherent and even explicit in the notion of flexicurity—the term for a policy goal that has recently become more common in Europe. Under flexicurity, workers are expected to tolerate flexibility for businesses, characterized by low firing costs, in exchange for greater social security in the form of high levels of unemployment insurance as well as benefits from other social welfare programs (Eriksson and Li 2008, 211–2). Such policies presume that workers will accept a greater probability of losing their jobs in exchange for social programs that will lower the cost of job loss. The Danish model, for instance, puts special emphasis on retraining so as to return those laid off to employment as rapidly as possible. It would not be a huge step for the Danish model to morph into a full scale ELR.

In addition to social safety net policies, the rise in dual-income households has also decreased the material insecurity associated with unemployment. If two family members are employed, the unemployment of one does not lead to a complete lack of earned family income, even if it still leads to financial hardship. The rise of dual-income households would thus have an effect similar to the introduction of unemployment insurance.

**The Power of Dominant Ideology**

Although all of the above dynamics contribute to a more complete understanding of why workers have not often or more persistently demanded guaranteed employment, behind them all is a more pervasive and powerful force: guaranteed employment does not conform to the dominant ideology of capitalist societies which is generally internalized by practically everyone in the society, including workers.

The dominant ideology within every society has always been that which represents the interests of the elite. Marx was the first to fully recognize this: “The class which has the means of material production at its disposal, has control at the same time over the means of mental production, so that the ideas of those who lack the means of mental production are subject to it” (1845, 172). During the greater part of history, an aristocracy controlled access to land and the dominant ideology legitimated their privileged position. Under capitalism, the owners of capital control access to the means of production and an ideology rose to dominance that legitimates the institutions and practices of capitalism.

Class or other group-based hierarchy or inequality can be maintained by either physical or ideological force. This has been recognized by social thinkers since Machiavelli. Physical force can be expressed as threat of death, torture, imprisonment, or slaughter of kin. Ideological control, by contrast, is generally expressed through the manipulation of social discourse.

According to Jim Sidanius and Shana Levin,

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13 Although Marx’s theory of ideology is often dismissed as merely exhibiting his political biases, Schumpeter, from the other end of the political spectrum, thought otherwise: “Marx was the economist who discovered ideology for us and who understood its nature. Fifty years before Freud, this was a performance of the first order” (1954, 35).
“...almost all perspectives on legitimizing ideologies suggest that their power is derived from their consensuality. Legitimizing ideologies are believed to be effective in regulating group-based inequality because they are often endorsed by dominants and subordinates alike. All other things being equal, the greater the degree to which both dominants and subordinates agree on the veracity of hierarchy-enhancing legitimizing myths, the less physical violence will be necessary to keep the system of stratification intact” (2001, 316).

Subordinates must be led to believe that their inferior status in terms of income, wealth, and privilege is as it must be. And strikingly, Elizabeth Haines and John Jost find that “people may be more willing to accept relatively illegitimate accounts than is commonly assumed...[and the authors] found that people misremembered the explanations that were given to them as more legitimate than they actually were” (2000, 232). As Tolstoy quipped, there are “no conditions of life to which a man cannot get accustomed, especially if he sees them accepted by everyone around him” (2000).

The owners of capital have understandable reason to oppose guaranteed employment. As they see it, guaranteed employment would be fiscally costly, it would reduce competition for jobs, raise the general wage level, and create potential discipline problems. Thus it could be expected that within capitalism, views would evolve that would be unfriendly even to the concept of guaranteed employment.

Historically, social thinkers and policymakers have denied the existence of involuntary unemployment (Ginsburg 1983, 7). Indeed, many mainstream economists continue to do so as the logic of their theory reaches that conclusion. If the unemployed were to seek employment in earnest, wages would be bid down until it would be profitable for firms to hire all available workers. The fact that this does not happen is testimony to the unwillingness of some workers to actively seek employment and accept the available jobs. Thus according to this ideology, the unemployed are lazy and their refusal to find work constitutes a crime against society (Garraty 1978, 40-2). It was this line of thinking that legitimized the practices of physically punishing the unemployed, throwing them into jail-like workhouses, or in more modern times cutting welfare. Even Democratic President Bill Clinton embraced this view and shepherded through Congress the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 which cut public assistance so as to force the unemployed to seek jobs. More recently, while arguing against the extension of unemployment benefits in 2013, many conservatives made the case that these benefits give people an incentive to remain unemployed—thus perpetuating the belief that unemployment is a free choice made by the unemployed to avoid work (Caldwell 2014). High unemployment in most of Europe is currently leading governments there to trim back assistance to the unemployed to force them to seek employment.

Within this ideological climate, the unemployed are vulnerable to internalizing the cause of their condition as their own fault, signaling failure and thus a painful source of embarrassment. Professor of psychiatry James Gilligan claims that the inability to find a job is the foremost driver of shame and worthlessness (2011). Garraty (1978, 182) argues that the

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14 Even John Stuart Mill, whose sympathies were generally with the workers and the less fortunate wrote: “When the pay is not given for the sake of the work, but the work found for the sake of the pay, inefficiency is a matter of certainty: to extract real work from day-labourers without the power of dismissal, is only practicable by the power of the lash” (Mill 1909, 363). Mill also believed that it would lead to excessive population growth.
disempowering effects of unemployment go a long way in explaining the dearth of political efforts of the unemployed.

Unions are also blamed for unemployment insofar as they block wages from adjusting to the levels necessary for labor markets to clear, such that all that is for sale is sold. This view has historically been widely held by firms, politicians, economists, social workers, and the media alike (Folsom 1991, 194).

Another argument flowing out of the dominant ideology is that government is too big and incompetent to successfully implement such a program (Wisman 2013b). Workers would be employed in wasteful manners doing make-work projects of no social value at considerable taxpayer expense. Further, a guaranteed employment program would merely expand governments’ powers at the cost of liberty (Harvey 1989, 108; Ginsburg 1983,15-6).

Those holding the most extreme anti-government positions even go so far as to insist that the duty of assisting the unemployed should fall to private charities. During the early years of the Great Depression in the United States, many, including those in the media, frequently made the argument that charities and not the government should provide aid to unemployment workers (Folsom 1991, 238). The wealthy, understandably, generally support the private charity approach since it frees them of the obligation of providing for the unemployed through taxes.

The dominant ideology also generates fear of higher government debt. In Europe, as in the United States, concerns about the national debt often derail attempts to provide public works projects (Garraty 1978, 159; 191). In the United States, language regarding a commitment to a balanced budget was eventually included in the 1978 full employment bill, as the government’s directive to provide for full employment became watered down (Harvey 1989, 111). Even unions have, at times, accepted the argument that public works programs should only be adopted insofar as they do not compromise the ability of the government to balance the budget (Garraty 1978, 191).

In the past few decades, inflation has been one of the most important arguments against guaranteed employment programs and government policies to lower unemployment in general. It is widely accepted that any attempt to push unemployment below its “natural” rate would lead to inflation. This relationship between unemployment and inflation, captured by the Phillips curve, implies that providing jobs to all would be impossible without runaway inflation (Ginsburg 1983, 23).

Acceptance of the view that unemployment is needed to control inflation has had a major impact on public policy (Ginsburg 1983, 28). In the U.S., concern over inflation became the primary argument against the 1978 U.S. full employment bill (Ginsburg 1983, 70), and the bill was eventually altered to provide the government with a dual mandate—to attain both full employment and price stability (Wasem 2013, 155). In the end, the law ended up having no impact at all on the government’s employment policies (Ginsburg 1983, 76).

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15 Many advocates of an ELR program believe it would create an initial inflationary shock, especially if ELR wages were set above minimum wages. Also, its introduction would increase aggregate demand if the increase in government spending were not offset by cuts in other government spending or increases in taxes. However, Mitchell and Wray (2005) and Wray (1998b) argue that after its introduction, it would be anti-inflationary, or failing that, at least non-inflationary. But would not guaranteed employment embolden workers to demand higher wages? Wray counters this possibility by noting that...

“...while workers have the alternative of ELR jobs, employers have the opportunity of hiring from the ELR pool. Thus if the wage demands of workers in the private sector exceed by too great a margin the employer’s calculation of their productivity, the alternative is to obtain ELR workers at a mark-up over the ELR wage. This will help to offset any wage pressures caused by elimination of the fear of unemployment.” (2007, 18).
Harvey (2007, 117) identifies the stagflation crises of the 1970s as a major turning point in the United States in the quest to attain the right to work. Stagflation was the simultaneous occurrence of high unemployment and high inflation. Since Keynesian economics was devised to deal with one or the other, it no longer appeared relevant or even correct. This was accompanied by a loss in faith in the ability of government policies to guarantee jobs for all workers (Harvey 2007, 117-22). Indeed, an increase in the level of unemployment became tolerable (Ginsburg 1983, 25).

A rise in nationalism also served to deflect worker attention. For example, in France toward the end of the nineteenth century, ideology was redirected from workers’ demands for a fairer share to national protectionism that took on a “violently xenophobic and anti-Semitic” character. As Pierre Rosanvallon puts it, “The transition from revolutionary radicalism to ultranationalism was one of the period’s most striking examples of ideological and political reclassification” (2013, 144). The ideology emphasized protecting “national labor” against immigrant workers and to give it substance, it was proposed that employers using foreign workers be subject to a special tax. Street demonstrations grew in the 1890’s with attacks on Italian immigrants in the north of France. Although such actions were opposed by socialist parties and unions, they were powerless to stop them (Rosanvallon 2013, 147). Workers in the U.S. also joined in racism against the influx of Chinese workers. A referendum on Chinese immigration passed with overwhelming support in California in 1879. Even members of the Workingmen’s Party and Knights of Labor participated in physical attacks on Asian workers (Rosanvallon 2013, 163).

The effectiveness of turning workers against each other in terms of race and ethnicity has borne fruit for the elite. Transnational research has found a strong correlation between social homogeneity and redistributive policies. The more heterogeneous the society, the less the expenditures on social programs (Alesina and Glaeser 2006). Further, “…across the United States, the states with the smallest percentage of African Americans in their population offer the most generous social benefits” (Rosanvallon 2013, 163).

Protectionism can also play an ideological role by generating a kind of solidarity not unlike that of patriotism. So too did imperialism. Cecil Rhodes famously offered, “He who would avoid civil war must be an imperialist” (cited in Rosanvallon 2013, 142). As Rosanvallon puts it, “Colonialism…counterbalanced and camouflaged domestic inequalities by depicting the nation as a community in confrontation with the rest of the world” (2013, 143). As a result of the solidarity that this ideology inspired, workers have commonly supported policies that attempt to “export the problem” of unemployment; e.g., the tactics favored by European unions in the 1930s to combat high unemployment included “the repatriation of foreign workers . . . high protective tariffs and mounting campaigns urging consumers not to buy foreign-made goods” (Garraty 1978, 191).

Worker attention in both the U.S. and Europe is currently being diverted to blaming immigrants for their lack of employment, thereby directing more of their energy and political capital to limiting immigration and less to demanding employment from their governments.

Although ideology can be identified, its internalization into people’s minds is, of course, not directly visible. However, survey data can serve as a rough proxy. The authors’ analysis of data from two large surveys, shown in the appendix, provides further confirmation of the role that ideology plays in explaining why workers do not demand government guaranteed employment.

Concluding Thoughts
Primordial humans, living as hunter-gatherers, survived in a world in which all had access to the means of production. With the rise of civilization about 5,500 years ago, elites took control over the means of production, principally land, and workers were tied to this land as slaves, serfs, indebted peasants, or indentured servants. With the very much later rise of capitalism, workers became free in the sense that they were no longer tied to the land and directly exploited by the lands’ owners. However, they were also freed of any ownership, control, or ready access to the means of production, which came to be owned and controlled by an elite capitalist class. Ironically, when workers became the most juridically free in the history of civilization, they also became the most separated from the means of production. To survive, workers had to find capitalists who would be willing to permit them to use their capital. In return, the capitalists took their surplus output, what remained of their output after their subsistence wages. But some workers would not be successful in locating capitalists willing to hire them and they would be left without legal potential to acquire the subsistence necessary for their survival.

The question that set this article in motion is why, especially once workers gained in principle a substantial degree of political power with the franchise, did they not demand guaranteed employment? A number of forces played a role, the most significant of which has been ideology. The dominant ideology of capitalism, representing the interests of the owners of the means of production, is hostile to providing workers with the security of guaranteed jobs and this ideology is internalized by the workers themselves.

The root of why unemployment exists is the inequality in the ownership of the means of production. Some of those without ownership fail to locate owners or their agents willing to hire them. And since the very beginning of social and economic inequality, ideological frameworks have legitimated societies’ distribution of income, wealth, and privilege. Ideology is the most effective political weapon. This hoodwinking concerning inequality has, since the rise of civilization, been a major, somewhat neglected, sub-narrative of the human story (Wisman and Smith 2011). The fact that workers within capitalism accept the inequality in the ownership and control of the means of production and not demand the right to employment is part of this story.

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