



Policy Note

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DEMOCRATIC RENEWAL AND THE GREEN JOB GUARANTEE

PAVLINA R. TCHERNEVA

We are living through a moment of deep division across our politics, economies, and environment, a division that stems from a deliberate forgetting—a self-induced amnesia, if you will. For decades, political parties have treated the working family as a slogan rather than the foundation of a healthy society. This amnesia was aided and abetted by mainstream economic theory that treated the economy as a financial machine, not a social ecosystem.

The abandonment of family wellbeing, and working people in particular, created a void now being filled by authoritarians. I would like to propose a project of democratic renewal capable of mending our social fabric while addressing the defining challenge of our age: the climate crisis. This project begins with a simple, radical, and fundamentally democratic idea: guaranteeing the right to a decent, living-wage job to everyone who seeks one.

The Great Abdication of the Public Purpose

The postwar promise—that each generation would enjoy a standard of living superior to the last—has been broken. This was no accident, no act of God, nor inevitable law of economics. It was a policy choice. Neoliberal governments abandoned their most basic covenant with their citizens:

Institute President PAVLINA R. TCHERNEVA is a professor of economics at Bard College and founding director of the Bard-OSUN Economic Democracy Initiative.

The following remarks were delivered as the keynote at the joint Global Forum for Social and Solidarity Economy (GSEF) and International Centre of Research and Information on the Public, Social and Cooperative Economy (CIRIEC) conferences in Bordeaux, France, on October 29, 2025.

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to ensure a foundation of material security from which a life of dignity and participation can be built. Most governments never had permanent policies to guarantee true full employment, but over time also abdicated their other social functions.

For a generation, policies have promised “jobs” but delivered precarity. What passes for “full” employment today is, for many, contracts without security, wages without a living, and work without dignity. This was the great bait-and-switch of the postwar social contract: the promise of a good job was replaced with the anxieties of the gig economy and stagnant wages.

Privatization, deregulation, slashing of government budgets, and negligent underinvestment created the void now being filled by authoritarians. When families face crushing debt, hollowed-out towns, and work that no longer provides security, the desire for change becomes inevitable. Faced with a choice between continued decline and a strongman or a strongwoman who promise to burn it all down, the strongmen become seductive, even when they target the very institutions that represent our best hope for collective action.

In the United States, the sabotage of the public sector has reached previously unseen levels that can put even Reagan and Thatcher’s sabotage of the welfare state to shame. The project is no longer merely pro-corporate, it is deliberately nihilistic. The goal of the current administration is to break the administrative apparatus in all its forms, to subvert the law, shut down the government (as it did very recently), point to the wreckage as proof of the government’s failure, and offer itself as the only solution. It is a classic authoritarian playbook.

The Imperfect but Essential Role of the Solidarity Economy

So, what remains when the public sector abdicates? What remains when the functions of the government are deliberately handicapped? The answer is both inspiring and a damning indictment: we are left with the solidarity economy. We are left with the raw, human impulse to care for one another.

In places like France, this solidarity economy has a more formal, robust architecture (as witnessed by the truly inspiring broad coalition gathered here today). It is a landscape of cooperatives, mutual associations, and social enterprises. It is a world where citizens, recognizing the failures of both the unfettered market and retreating state, organize themselves to meet human needs. It is a *parallel republic of mutual aid*,

demonstrating that another economy—that puts people over profit—is not just possible, it is already being built in the fissures of the old one.

In the United States, we lack this dense, historical network. Our hyper-individualistic culture has often militated against such formal collectivism. But to say that Americans lack solidarity would be a profound error. It is simply expressed differently. Today, it manifests in a remarkable, and often overlooked statistic: more Americans volunteer than the citizens of any other developed nation on earth. According to data from the World Giving Index (CAF 2024) and the US Census Bureau, tens of millions of Americans regularly give their time, unpaid, to soup kitchens, youth mentorship programs, environmental cleanups, and community centers.

This solidarity-based support came to life with breathtaking speed when California burned earlier this year. During the Palisades Fires in January 2025 and so many other climate-fueled disasters, it was not a fleet of government vehicles that first arrived to assist the most vulnerable. It was firefighters—yes, some paid, but many, many others who work on volunteer basis. It was neighbors. It was community groups using social media to coordinate. It was impromptu networks providing food, clothing, transport, and shelter. It was humanity at its most magnificent, a testament to our innate capacity for care.

But here is the predicament: these heroic actions are not a substitute for a functioning social safety net. A society that relies on the spontaneous goodness of individuals for basic survival is a society that has failed. Mutual aid is what we do when the system collapses, but its purpose is *dual*: at its core it is the continuous practice of community building. It is about participation, reciprocity, skill, and resource-sharing, collective care, and creative pursuits—the very fabric of a strong community.

Yet today, these vital community-building functions are entirely cannibalized by the urgent need to respond to crises. We gather to put out fires and feed the hungry—laudable acts, but not reliable infrastructure. It should not have to be this way.

The fact that we must rely on mutual aid for basic survival in the twenty-first century is not a sign of our virtue, but a measure of our collective failure. Response systems should be a core, permanent function of the public sector, backed by the full resources of government, not the exhausted generosity of volunteers already working a 60-hour week. Here the US

can borrow a page from the more robust social and solidarity economy coalitions around the world.

Regenerating Democracy: A Project of Economic Participation and Citizenship

This is a defining moment. It requires more than just defeating authoritarian figures at the ballot box; it requires defeating the *conditions* that make them attractive. It requires a positive, compelling project that guarantees economic security and dignity and the construction of a true economic democracy.

At the center of this mission, I would argue, must be a relentless battle against insecure work and the fear of job loss. It is impossible to be a full participant in the democratic life of a nation when your mind is consumed by the logistics of survival. Precarity is the enemy of deliberation, of community engagement, of the long-term thinking and doing that democracy requires.

Therefore, the cornerstone of this new project must be a nonnegotiable demand for decent, well-paid employment for all. This is not a niche policy. It is the bedrock. It is the reaffirmation of a basic belief that a job is more than a paycheck, it is a source of dignity, of social connection, of purpose. It is the conviction that work is socially necessary and foundational to our wellbeing. We must demand that no person who wishes to find good work should be denied that opportunity and that no one who works full time should live in poverty.

From the Ground Up: The Job Guarantee in Theory and Practice

Such a promise can be met by an open-ended, nationally funded, locally administered public service employment, also known as the job guarantee (Tcherneva 2020). It is a program that provides employment opportunities at basic living wages on demand to anyone who needs them, whatever their circumstances.

A job guarantee is not a mere jobs program. It is a fundamental and structural reform that delivers key economic benefits. In conditions of pervasive precarity, it establishes a stable core for the labor market and a labor standard, setting a *de facto* minimum benchmark for wages and benefits that all private employers must meet to attract workers. By providing a living-wage job on demand, the job guarantee gives workers a viable exit strategy from precarious work. Its most transformative effect is setting this new, nonnegotiable baseline.

Second, it ends the cruel practice of using mass unemployment to fight inflation: a practice utilized by central banks around the world for macroeconomic management, rooted in the concepts of the natural rate of unemployment and the nonaccelerating inflation rate of unemployment (the NAIRU).

The job guarantee is a genuine alternative to the NAIRU. It functions as the economy's most effective automatic stabilizer. When the economy slows down and the private sector sheds jobs, the program expands, creating the missing employment opportunities and providing a lifeline that maintains family incomes and consumer demand. When the economy recovers, the program helps workers transition to other, higher-wage employment opportunities. This makes the destructive NAIRU doctrine obsolete, replacing the buffer of mass unemployment with a buffer of good jobs. It replaces the tolerance for mass joblessness with a framework that builds skills and provides a transition pathway for workers, while supporting socially useful work. As I have discussed in my own work and we have demonstrated empirically at the Levy Economics Institute, the job guarantee does not introduce unwanted inflationary pressures. Indeed, it is countercyclical and stabilizing (Tcherneva 2020; Wray et al. 2018).

Crucially, this guarantee must be part of a broader ecosystem of support. It must be coupled with robust public services—healthcare, childcare, education—that free individuals to participate in work and civic life. And it must include unwavering support for those who cannot work. A job guarantee is not about forcing everyone into work; it is about guaranteeing the opportunity for those who want it in a society that cares for all its members.

And here is the beautiful synergy: the very solidarity networks I talked about—the co-ops in France, the mutual aid societies and social enterprises in the US, *are* the perfect delivery mechanism for a job guarantee. These organizations are already embedded in their communities. They understand local needs. They are built on a model of democratic participation. A federal job guarantee program could partner with these entities, funding them to scale up their operations, turning volunteer efforts into permanent/paid positions, expanding existing projects dedicated to community wellbeing. It would formalize our support for the social and solidarity economy, resourcing it with the power of the public purse.

This idea is not new. In a certain sense it is deeply American. In Franklin D. Roosevelt's 1944 State of the Union

address, he proposed a Second Bill of Rights, an “Economic Bill of Rights.” The very first right he listed was “the right to a useful and remunerative job.” And it was a core demand of the Civil Rights movement in the ’60s. It is also deeply French—as the first demand to guarantee the right to paid work was articulated in the 1793 draft of the French Constitution. But it is also deeply international, as it is enshrined in Article 23 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. It was also in the original charter of the International Trade Organization (the WTO’s predecessor), which demanded that each nation maintain true full employment in order to reap the benefits of global trade. And yet, such a policy is nowhere to be found in any major nation. It is the great unanswered call of the twenty-first century.

But we are not starting from scratch. We have critical experimentations that light the way. In the past, the US New Deal showed the transformative power of public employment, building much of our national infrastructure and fostering a generation of artistic and cultural wealth. Today, we have other inspiring examples. France’s Zero Long-Term Unemployment Territories is a groundbreaking experiment operating on a simple, powerful principle: no one is unemployable and there is no shortage of socially useful work that needs to be done and no shortage of people who want to do it. The program matches the unemployed with unmet community need and has become the gold standard in Europe for informing other experiments on the continent.

India’s Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) is the largest job guarantee program in the world, enshrined into law as a basic human right. While not universal, it guarantees 100 days of wage employment per year to every rural household. While imperfect in its implementation, it has been a vital lifeline for millions, raising wages, reducing hunger, and creating crucial public assets like roads, wells, and irrigation systems. It has empowered women and Dalits (formerly “untouchables”) by providing them with an independent source of income and bargaining power. There are many other examples, large and small, in Africa, Latin America, and Asia.

Argentina’s Plan Jefes y Jefas de Hogar was implemented after the 2001 economic collapse, and inspired by a model my colleagues and I developed in the US. It was instrumental in preventing a total social meltdown, putting millions back to work—predominantly women—on projects that benefited their

neighborhoods, and it was an undeniable demonstration of the anticyclical economic stabilizing features of such programs.

The link between the macroeconomics of the job guarantee and the localism of the Social and Solidarity Economy (SSE) is the key strategic insight. Its implementation demands a powerful coalition of full employment advocates, Social and Solidarity Economy organizations, and local governments to drive a transformative agenda. This coalition must champion the federal funding required to scale proven models. The French Zero Long-Term Unemployment Territories provide an excellent proof of concept and it is imperative that the French government not only restore the program’s funding, but expand it to realize its full potential. Local governments, acting as laboratories for such demonstration projects, are also essential for building political momentum from the ground up. Research from the UK, France, and Belgium shows that the cost of unemployment and poverty support per person is equivalent to a living-wage job. And these are only the monetary costs—costs of personal and social scarring from unemployment are far greater (Tcherneva 2017). A job guarantee is not an expense. It is an investment that eliminates these existing, unnecessary costs.

Reconciling Our Economy with Our Planet

Guaranteeing decent employment to all, however, is not enough. We must also reconcile our economy with our planet. We are facing the ultimate challenge that binds all others together: the climate crisis. We are witnessing an ecological backlash, a political movement that frames the necessary transition to a green economy as a threat to jobs, a cost too high to bear. This is false.

The costs of climate change are not hypothetical future expenses. They are already here. They are paid in the burned homes of California and incinerated outback of Australia, the flooded streets of Valencia and Southern Brazil, the worst drought in a century in Zimbabwe, Malawi, and Namibia, and record breaking heat in central Asia.

Climate change does not care if we recognize it or not; its intensified events are here, and their costs are high. The only social unit that ultimately bears these costs are people—their lives, their health, their ability to function.

The question is not *if* we will pay, but *how* and *to whom*. Will we pay reactively, in the form of disaster relief and lost productivity? Or will we pay proactively by investing in a

transformation that creates massive numbers of good jobs, builds climate resilience, and shares the social benefits widely?

A green job guarantee is an essential vehicle for this transition, which is why it was hailed as the most crucial component of the Green New Deal Resolution in the US (Meyer 2018). The job guarantee answers the Paris Accord demand that a just transition for the planet requires a just transition for workers. The job guarantee is the answer to ecological backlash as it guarantees that no one will be left behind in the transition, and good jobs will be created in the new economy for all. The job guarantee directly addresses the fear that environmentalism means economic loss.

So, what would such a program look like? It would be part of an all-hands-on-deck approach: a massive, ongoing public employment project, powered by the Social and Solidarity Sector, to rewire the economy for the twenty-first century.

Building Physical Resilience: Retrofitting homes and public buildings for energy efficiency, restoring wetlands and forests as natural flood barriers, and building the infrastructure for a decentralized, renewable energy grid.

Strengthening Community Systems: Expanding public transportation, developing local and sustainable food systems, managing watersheds, and caring for our public lands, for our most vulnerable community members.

Pioneering a Circular and Innovative Economy: Staffing repair cafés and tool libraries to eliminate waste, installing clean energy systems in underserved communities, and advancing community-wide recycling and composting programs.

Once again, there is no shortage of climate work to be done and no shortage of people who can do it.

This is not make-work. This is the essential work of our time. It is work that the private market, left to its own devices, will not do at the scale and speed required because it does not generate sufficient short-term profit. It is public purpose work. A green job guarantee supercharges the urgent climate work before us. It provides the social solidarity, the dignity, and the empowerment needed to undertake this great task together. It answers the question, “What is the economy for? And how do we rebuild it?” with a clear, moral answer: The economy is for enabling people to build a decent, secure, and sustainable life for themselves and their families on a healthy planet.

The Choice Before Us

The choice before us is between continued decline and democratic renewal. The path we are on leads to more fracture: more political extremism, more economic anxiety, more ecological unraveling. The path I have proposed—centered on the guarantee of a decent job to all powered by a network of doers, such as the one gathered here today—is the thread that can stitch a new fabric together. It is the tool for democratic regeneration, the mechanism for resourcing the solidarity economy, and the engine of a just ecological transition. It is a practical solution and a moral imperative.

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