The Death of the Worker: AI, Robots and the UBI Illusion

Izvor: https://minbarlive.com/videos/imagine-a-world-where-everything-costs-nothing-but-you-still-can-t-afford-it

> An analysis of how automation and AI are eliminating human labor across warehouses, driving, and farming, while Universal Basic Income is presented not as a solution but as a control mechanism. The video argues that replacing wages with government handouts breaks capitalism's consumer loop and risks creating a system of programmable, permission-based survival.

SAŽETAK

The video examines the accelerating disappearance of human workers from the economy, citing Amazon's one millionth warehouse robot, Waymo's 500,000 weekly paid rides, and driverless John Deere tractors. It traces the historical link between productivity and wages, showing that from 1948 to 1979 both rose together, but from 1979 to 2025 productivity rose 90% while pay rose only 33%. The speaker argues that Universal Basic Income, pushed by tech figures like Elon Musk and Sam Altman, is not a fix but a reworking of a 1960s crisis plan that would replace wages—money you are owed—with a political handout that can be reversed. He details the $3.7 trillion annual cost of $1,200 monthly checks, the failure of a robot tax, the distorted incentives of current aid, and the results of OpenAI-funded UBI trials showing reduced work hours and spending that goes straight back to corporations. The video then connects UBI to central bank digital currencies and programmable money, citing Bo Li of the IMF and Shenzhen's digital yuan lottery, warning that such money can be restricted by who, where, and how it is spent. It contrasts two endgames—state ownership of machines versus corporate ownership with state-funded UBI—but concludes both leave the individual dependent on a centralized digital paycheck. Real-world failures like the 2013 Xerox data center crash that stopped food stamp cards in 17 states and the 2025 federal shutdown that halted food aid for 42 million Americans illustrate the fragility of such systems. The talk ends by comparing wages, a claim you hold over the world, to Big Tech's UBI, a claim the world holds over you, and warns that without ownership or alternatives, people become captives rather than customers.

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- Amazon's warehouse staffing has dropped to an average of 670 workers per facility, the thinnest in 16 years, while its robot count reached one million in July 2025.
- From 1979 to 2025, US productivity rose 90% but worker pay rose only 33%, breaking the previous link between productivity and compensation.
- A 2013 Oxford study by Frey and Osborne estimated 47% of US jobs are at risk of automation.
- OpenAI-funded UBI trials paying $1,000 a month showed participants worked 1.3 fewer hours per week and spent an extra $310 monthly, mostly on food, rent, and transport.
- The US stimulus payments of 2020–2021 saw only about 26% spent, with the rest saved or used to pay down debt, unlike wages which are spent out of necessity.
- IMF Deputy Managing Director Bo Li stated that central bank digital currency can be 'precisely targeted to set who is allowed to have it and what it could be spent on.'
- The 2013 Xerox data center crash halted food stamp cards in 17 states, and the November 2025 federal shutdown stopped food aid for about 42 million Americans, showing the fragility of centralized benefit systems.

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Imagine a world where everything you want costs practically nothing, but you still can't afford it. AI is supposed to make everything cheaper — cars, rent, groceries, all free. It's the ultimate utopian dream. But capitalism is a closed loop: businesses need workers to make products, and workers need wages to buy them. If you eliminate the worker, you eliminate the consumer. When nobody has a job, who is left to buy what the AI is making? This isn't a tech upgrade. It's a corporate execution for the global economy, and it's already started.

The Quiet Erosion of the Workforce

The death of the worker doesn't start with mass firings. It's more subtle than that, and most people don't even realize it's happening. In July of 2025, Amazon switched on its one millionth warehouse robot. That sounds impressive, and it is, especially when you consider it's close to matching the 1.56 million human workers on its payroll. But robots and warehouses aren't a new thing — Amazon's been using them for a decade. What has changed is the size of the workforce. The average Amazon warehouse now runs on around 670 workers, the thinnest staffing in 16 years. The building still ships your order; it just needs fewer people to get it to you.

The warehouse in Shreveport, Louisiana, is Amazon's most automated warehouse. It gets by with 25% fewer people than a standard warehouse. Nobody there got fired. Those jobs never existed in the first place. The erasure of the human isn't confined to warehouses either. By March 2026, Waymo was running 500,000 paid rides a week across ten American cities, and none of those trips saw a wage going to a human driver. The paying customer was still there, but the person behind the wheel wasn't.

Automated vehicles are also taking over farm work. According to the Farm Bureau, there are over 2.4 million jobs that desperately need filling. If humans don't do the work, the autonomous machines will. Companies like John Deere, who now market fully driverless tractors, see it as their duty to fill in that space — and it'll boost their profits, too. With every sector that automates, the human workforce is being slowly marched to the edge of extinction.

The Punchline of a Decades-Old Warning

And it's not like no one saw it coming. Walter Reuther, who ran the United Auto Workers, warned us about it back in the 1950s when he toured a new Ford engine plant. An executive pointed at the automated equipment and asked how the union planned to collect dues from the machines. Reuther shot back, asking how Ford planned to sell them cars. Decades later, capitalism has reached the punchline of that joke: an AI that makes everything is worthless if nobody can afford what it makes.

So Big Tech had to come up with a solution: **Universal Basic Income**. The idea is simple — the government hands out a monthly check to every adult. The bills get paid, stores still sell some products, and everyone is happy. At least that's the idea. But a wage and a government handout are completely different things. A wage is money you're owed for work you've done. A UBI check is a political decision, and a decision can be reversed. Once that payment is your sole means of survival, whoever signs it owns you.

When the American Dream Became a Nightmare

The roots of it can be traced back to the moment the American Dream was shattered. In 1964, AT&T was a powerhouse. Making a phone call took a massive team effort. Employees had to push plugs into a switchboard while linemen climbed poles in the pouring rain. Over 750,000 people ran that single network, and they used those wages to buy cars and homes with a white picket fence. The American dream was in full flow, and the numbers backed it up. According to the Economic Policy Institute, American productivity rose by 108% between 1948 and 1979. At that same time, worker pay rose by 93%. It was capitalism in its pure form: build more, sell more, pay more.

And then the American dream became a nightmare. From 1979 to 2025, productivity rose by another 90%. But worker pay? It crawled up by just 33%. The work kept getting more valuable, but paychecks lagged behind. None of this was a surprise. The

signs were always there. In March 1964, a group of 35 leading economists, scientists and activists calling themselves the ad hoc Committee on the Triple Revolution warned **automation** would kill the American worker. They predicted the link between having a job and having an income would permanently collapse. Their solution was a guaranteed income from the government for every single person. So the idea being floated around Silicon Valley billionaires isn't new. It is a reworking of a six-decade-old crisis plan.

The committee had a bold vision, but their timing was wrong. 1960s technology was primitive, the job market remained strong, and humans were essential. But this time it's different. Oxford researchers Karl Frey and Michael Osborne ran every job in the American economy through a computer model in 2013, asking how many AI could feasibly take over. The answer came back at 47%. That's close to half of the jobs in the country, and you don't get told which half you're in. Economists have argued with the results ever since, but the reality is impossible to ignore. Previous generations of machines still needed people. Somewhere in the loop, the loom needed a weaver. The assembly line needed hands on it. The AI wave is taking aim at the chain itself. The companies buying the technology admit it themselves. The proof is in the number of new hires and job posts.

The Illusion of Trickle-Down

But that presents its own problem, one that's built entirely on an illusion. When companies use AI to replace workers, they save millions, even billions, in labor costs. But that money isn't being used to lower prices or build new opportunities. Instead, they funnel it back into the stock market. In 2024, the S&P 500 companies spent a record $942 billion buying back their own stock. Think of it like cutting a pizza into ten slices and you buy back two from yourself, and then you claim the remaining eight are worth more. You didn't make a new pizza or hire a new chef. You just manipulated the supply to inflate the price and pocketed the profits.

That artificial demand reaps massive benefits for shareholders. But for ordinary Americans, that wealth doesn't trickle down. When the money piles up at the top, it stays there. Economists use the term velocity to track how often a dollar changes hands in a single year. American velocity peaked in 1997, sitting at 2.192. But then it came crashing back down, and by the spring of 2020, it hit 1.126, the lowest number ever recorded. By early 2026, it had only crept back to about 1.4. That means the dollar is passing through fewer hands. Fewer hands means fewer consumers.

Say the government starts handing out $1,200 checks to every American adult. The total bill would come to almost $3.7 trillion every single year. That is more than Social Security, Medicare and the US military budget combined.

A basic UBI program would consume 55% of the entire federal budget. Moving money around by slashing budgets would not solve it. So how do you fund it? Easy: tax.

The Robot Tax Idea

In 2017, Bill Gates said that if a robot takes a human job, it should be taxed like the worker it replaced. South Korea did exactly that. It cut tax breaks for automated factories, creating the world's first robot tax. It's a nice idea, but not one that works at scale. A robot doesn't earn a salary. It's an asset on a balance sheet. You can't take a cut from a non-existent wage. So if taxing the robots isn't possible, the government needs to look inward. And that's when the suffering really ramps up.

The Strings Attached to Current Aid

Current government handouts are complicated and messy, and they come with strings attached. A 2022 study by the Atlanta Fed showed that a family increasing their household income from $54,000 to $55,000 a year could lose more than $25,000 in child care support. A $1,000 raise ends up costing 25 times that in lost aid. Americans are already being punished for trying to succeed. A nationwide UBI program would amplify that across the entire population. It would be a tool for bureaucratic control, and Big Tech is pushing hard for it.

Big Tech's Push for UBI

In 2017, Elon Musk told the World Government Summit in Dubai that universal basic income would become a necessity as automation spread. Four years later, Sam Altman published his essay "Moore's Law for Everything," arguing that AI would generate enough wealth to pay every American adult a yearly income by 2024. He added a second version called Universal Basic Compute, where instead of cash, you would get a slice of the AI itself. The people building the machines to replace the workers are the ones pushing for UBI. It could be corporate generosity, or it could be the last desperate attempt to keep people buying things. And Altman has put his money where his mouth is.

The Largest UBI Test in America

OpenAI poured $24 million into a nonprofit called Open Research to run the largest UBI test in American history. For three years, 1,000 low-income participants were paid $1,000 a month. Another 2,000 people got $50 a month. For comparison, the results showed that the main test group spent about $310 more a month than the comparison group. Most of it went to food, rent, and transport. They also worked about 1.3 fewer hours a week. On the surface, it sounds like a dream, but take a closer look and it's a grim prediction of the future. The money arrives from the state, working hours drop,

and the cash immediately goes straight back out. It lands in your account and it's gone before the month ends.

Stimulus Payments and Spending Behavior

The US government has already run its own version of this. Between March 2020 and March 2021, the Treasury sent out 476 million stimulus payments worth $814 billion. The New York Fed tracked where the money went and discovered a fatal flaw. About 26% of it got spent. The rest was saved or paid down debt. A wage gets spent out of necessity. A free handout is like a lottery win. The two are fundamentally different. The company is counting on that money to survive. Only it will see a fraction of it. That's how capitalism dies. The consumer becomes a biological conduit for big corporations. They aren't part of the economy anymore. At that point, any money you do have isn't yours. It's controlled.

Programmable Digital Currency

In October 2002, Bo Li, deputy managing director at the International Monetary Fund, sat on a panel and explained what a digital currency could do. More specifically, what a **central bank digital currency**, or CBDC, could do. This is the money that the central bank hands out directly. It sits in its own system instead of at a commercial bank. Li said that this kind of money could be programmed for specific uses like welfare payments, shopping coupons, and food stamps. Then he spelled out what that means: the money can be, quote, "precisely targeted to set who is allowed to have it and what it could be spent on." Someone else would decide what your money is for.

When the Bank for International Settlements surveyed 93 central banks in 2025, it found 91% working on some form of digital money. Most of that work is wholesale, meaning that money is moving between banks, but the consumer version is the one governments keep hesitating on. One city didn't wait. The city of Shenzhen ran a lottery for digital yuan in October 2020. Nearly 2 million people applied and 50,000 won. The money could be spent at pre-approved stores inside one specific district. It was non-transferable and it had an expiry date. It's like a regular gift card that you need to use. It seems harmless, but when a government starts programming your money, you are chained to the system. They control your daily life. There's no need for police or a bank to enforce the rules. The restrictions are contained within the money. Your livelihood is dictated by a setting on a computer, one that someone else can change.

Two Possible Endgames

Humanity is nearing the end game, and there are two ways it plays out. The first scenario sees the state own the machines. It runs the automated farms and the delivery network, and it hands out what they produce. In the second scenario, a

handful of mega-corporations own the AI revolution and the state funds the public UBI, so those firms have somebody left to sell to. But for the ordinary American, the results are the same. You don't own a single piece of the technology that produces wealth. There's no alternative retailer or supplier. Your entire survival depends on a digital paycheck issued from a centralized department that you can't argue with.

Fragility and Real-World Failures

Nassim Taleb, a former options trader, warned that a system like this is fragile. There is no backup. There is no plan B. Everything works just fine until it doesn't. America has already seen a small version of that. In 2013, Xerox ran a maintenance test on a backup generator at its main data center. The system crashed, cutting power to the servers and network connection for the U.S. Food Stamp Program in 17 states. Benefit cards stopped working at a market basket in Biddeford, Maine. Shoppers pushed full carts to the register and watched as their state-funded cards declined. They were forced to leave the store with nothing. Then in November 2025, food aid for about 42 million Americans stopped during a federal shutdown. The situation was so dire it had to go to court. While government lawyers argued, millions of Americans were forced to rely on food banks just to survive. The technology worked that time, but the money stopped anyway.

Now we're being asked by Big Tech to trust the process, to put our entire future in their hands. You would still have rights, you'd still be able to vote, and you would still have your passport. But your ability to spend would be dictated by lines of code. You would be limited to certain products, certain manufacturers, and certain conditions. This is a battle American farmers have been fighting for a decade.

Machinery That Isn't Really Yours

As technology advanced, so too did their machinery. Now, if they replace something as simple as a water pump, those on-board computers fire off an error code that locks down their entire engine, rendering it useless. It needs an authorized engineer to plug in proprietary software and approve the repair. A machine the farmers bought and paid for isn't really theirs.

Wages and Permission

An income that you can't spend without permission works much the same way. For centuries, wages bought goods, and those purchases paid for the next round of wages. The AI revolution keeps the supply chain intact. It just wipes out the human element. It eliminates the wage and replaces it with something that comes with terms and conditions.

A Claim You Hold vs. a Claim Held Over You

A wage is a claim of value you hold over the world. Big Tech's version of UBI is a claim the world holds over you. Automated factories will continue to come online. The only question is whether you'll be a customer or a captive.

#automation #universal basic income #AI and jobs #central bank digital currency #programmable money #labor economics #corporate power

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