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Shaping the new world of work – The impacts of digitalisation and robotisation

Panel 19: Negotiating the new world of work – what role for collective bargaining?

Participants:

- Thorsten Schulten, WSI
- Anna Ilsøe, FAOS
- Benoit Gerits, industriAll Europe
- Denis Pennel, Eurociett

Moderator: Torsten Müller, ETUI

Reporter: Ricard Bellera, ETUI

‘Digitisation is directly linked to the process of capitalist rationalisation. The main drivers are not to make workers happy or to improve their working conditions, but to reduce costs and to maximise profits. The impact of digitalisation depends on power relations at both workplace and political level and it depends on what kind of regulation you have: if it is more or less efficient’. The introduction given by Thorsten Schulten about the nature of digitalisation and the need to overcome ‘naïvity’ when facing its main challenges clearly set out the framework for this panel. In both his and Anna Ilsøe’s presentations, the difference between the positions of employers and workers’ representatives was identified as the main obstacle to starting negotiations on the subject that in the coming years will be such an influential force in the world of labour. The interventions of two practitioners, Dennis Pennel and Benoit Gérits, stressed that it is not only about positions and strategies, but also about developing a radically different narrative.

Thorsten Schulten emphasised that the central aim in facing digitalisation is to ensure a political framework that reinforces, develops and extends collective bargaining. The challenge is not only to adapt the content of agreements to new forms of work, but also to extend their coverage to the growing population of workers that are not employees in the legal sense but are rather outside of the bargaining system, such as crowdworkers, the self-employed and freelancers. As a reference point, Schulten presented the current debate in Germany, where a Green Book on ‘Work 4.0’ was published by the Federal Ministry of Labour; its main idea is a ‘new social compromise on flexibility at work’. At the end of 2016, this first initiative will lead to a White Book with concrete legal measures. This tripartite approach has revealed the difference between positions. While

employers see digitalisation as an opportunity to remove any kind of regulation, unions defend time sovereignty, minimum remuneration, the strengthening of co-determination and collective agreements on training, and many other issues.

Anna Ilsøe described the philosophy of employers that defend deregulation as: 'do not scare the platforms away'. The research done by FAOS (University of Copenhagen) about the digitalisation of service work makes it clear that these differences in position begin with the definition of 'digitalisation'. It is important to distinguish between, on the one side, the digitalisation and automatisisation of work itself and, on the other, digitalisation in terms of the transformation of traditional jobs into 'tasks'. Concerning the responses of social partners, Ilsøe identified three different arenas: the unilateral, which is concentrated on lobbying the state and the EU; the bipartite, which centres on negotiation and informal dialogue; and finally the tripartite, which is starting to develop in some forums. For now, the main activity takes place in the unilateral arena through analysis, political projects and national and international dialogue. Currently only a few remarkable initiatives exist in the tripartite arena: mainly focused on training, but there are also some innovative framework agreements at municipal level.

As the practitioners made their interventions, it became clear that these fundamental differences are to be found not only in positions, but also in narratives and strategies. Dennis Pennel, managing director of the International Confederation of Private Employment Services (CIETT), presented the history of collective bargaining in the temporary work sector as a useful exemplary case. In his view, agency work was disruptive 50 years ago while today it has become 'standard work', with the development of third party relationships due to become increasingly important in the near future. Offering intermediation and services to online workers will be a key element to achieving strategic success. In relation to this point, Benoit Gérits, Deputy General Secretary of industriAll European Trade Union, remembered that industriAll decided in its last congress to make a choice between 'tasks' and 'jobs' and that finally they had chosen employment as a strategic focus. Digitalisation and the individualisation of working relations are used by free riders to avoid any regulation of labour rights and corporate responsibility. Reregulation is needed to combat this tendency and unions are urged to find legislative ways to support negotiation and agreements, with particular emphasis on such elements as working time or tax policy.

The Q&A helped to identify other important challenges that should be considered when developing union strategies around the issue of digitalisation. If previous experiences of organizing freelancers can be taken as a guiding example, the challenge of developing a unionised labour force among online workers begins with their identification. This is not clear in platform work and it requires a specific legal framework. Furthermore, the transition from agreements based on 'real work' towards others that will regulate digital work demands a specific strategy. Finally, it seems clear that, as in other cases, the very different degrees

of social dialogue in European states - in terms of development, depth and representativeness - may be considered an obstacle. A stronger initiative by European institutions, especially the Commission, is required to ensure that digitalisation will not further deepen the loss of territorial and social cohesion in Europe.