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

Panel 21: Back to the future: is the sharing economy an opportunity for trade unions?

Participants:

- Michel Bauwens, P2P Foundation
- Florentin Iancu, Sindicatul IT Timisoara (SITT)
- Fredrik Söderqvist, Unionen

Discussant: Koen Frenken, Utrecht University

Moderator: Viktória Nagy, ETUC Youth Committee

Reporter: Magdalena Bernaciak, ETUI

Speakers in this panel made a conceptual difference between the online platform economy and sharing economy. Undeniably, both are driven by technological change, this is digitalisation, which is difficult to stop or oppose. Digitalization enables to arrange work differently by lowering transaction costs for buying labour. However, the main difference is that the non-egalitarian platform economy is based on capitalist principles, including profit-making like *Uber* demonstrates. Those principles are far less central in a genuine sharing economy. The latter, with its tendency towards mutualisation, resembles to a certain extent an economic system based on ‘commons’ that was put in place before the origins of industrial capitalism in the eighteenth century. Both, the platform and sharing economy, challenge trade unions, in particular in terms of their relationship with (bogus) self-employed or people working through platforms and freelancers, respectively. Yet, as the Romanian and Swedish examples demonstrated, existing labour market institutions and actors are mediating those challenges.

While it was agreed that the impact of the platform economy was quite limited so far in terms of numbers, its rapid growth and its potential undermining impact on workers’ terms and conditions outside the platform economy provoked concerns among trade unions. Nevertheless, the current practices of the platforms are not set in stone and could change via standardisation, self-regulation and social dialogue with the platforms itself in particular. In Romania, the platform economy is most dominant within the ICT-sector putting ‘everyone in competition with everyone’, as Florentin

Iancu called it, for particular tasks (but not jobs). The platform economy causes not only a further decoupling between the place where the work is done and where the profits are made, but also puts companies that are respecting working terms and conditions under pressure. Difficulties have been arisen for Romanian trade unions as current laws do permit them to organise (bogus) self-employed workers. This is in stark contrast with the Swedish case of *Unionen*, the largest trade union in the private services sector. Fredrik Söderqvist explained that self-employed workers are the fastest growing member category within *Unionen's* membership, especially due to a change in recruitment strategy. In particular, strongly based on marketing strategies, *Unionen* is offering those workers legal advice and various insurances against risks via its bargaining power vis-à-vis insurances companies.

At the same time, somewhat unnoticed, is the exceptional growth of self-organised non-profit initiatives, particularly at the local level, organising young knowledge workers. It alludes to a broad societal change in capitalism, especially driven by the autonomous endeavour of those workers, which adds a social-cultural or attitudinal explanation for the increase of the sharing economy than solely technological change. Young knowledge workers rather prefer to be self-employed than to be a wage-earner. To a certain extent, this self-organisation of freelancers resembles to the origins of the labour movement when the welfare state was still in its very infancy and unions were the forerunners of forms of social innovation and experimentation by offering various forms of insurance and became involved in the co-operative movement. The crucial question today is whether unions are able and especially (ideologically) willing to embrace the growing group of self-organised freelancers. This would imply extending the notion of a worker and overcoming their opposition to the dominant view of freelancers as 'little capitalists' as Michel Bauwens put it. Unions have the knowledge and experience about labour law and a past experience of organising freelancers. Thus, as discussant Koen Frenken stressed, unions are on the verge a historical encounter here: either freelancers will continue to set-up their own organisations for representation and local community-bonding or unions go back to the future by trying to reconcile the needs and interests of self-organised freelancers and subordinated (platform) workers. Potentially, the latter might transform the current form of unions by strengthening the transnational and virtual dimension. Are transnational e-unions, embedded in local communities, the future in the sharing and platform economy?