Panel 5: The impact of the digital transformation on job quality

The key focus of this panel was on how the emergence of labour platforms – as one key element of digitalisation – is transforming not only labour markets, but also public debate about work and employment. The newness related to digitalisation is reflected not only in the emergence of new terminology but also in the emergence of new notions of workers and the employment relationship more generally.

The panel considered whether digitalisation is better understood when taken as a completely new aspect of the economy, or rather as a part of a broader trend towards casualisation, informalisation of work and the spread of non-standard forms of employment. Key questions discussed were: What are possible responses to the impact of gig/platform work on the labour market? What is needed for a creation of sustainable and "good work" in the digital economy? What can be done to curb the exploitative nature of some of the new forms of work, and a race to the bottom in terms of pay, quality of work and employment?

Irene Mandl from Eurofound presented results from a recent survey conducted by Eurofound which looked at the nature of platform work and the implications for employment. Mandl emphasized the need for a more a broader qualitative approach which not only looks at the number of jobs lost and created – but that also looks at the qualitative aspects of work and employment taking into account the following dimensions: (1) the conditions of work as regards the distribution of tasks and the physical and psychological implications; (2) the conditions of employment in terms of who controls which aspects of the work performed; and (3) industrial relations in terms of the new relationship between employee and "employer". Mandl concluded by highlighting the following effects of platform work on job quality: on the positive side platform work provides easier access for potentially disadvantaged labour market groups; it offers the opportunity to determine the work-life balance – which however depends on whether platform work is the main job or the second/third job; and closely linked to this platform work provides room for more autonomy and flexibility. The negative impact includes the lack of collective representation structures because platform workers are very dispersed and therefore difficult to organize; it increases income insecurity and differentiation according to the complexity of the tasks performed; since platform workers are mainly considered as self-employed there is an increasing problem of social protection and pension.

Pamela Meil from the Institute for Social Research in München looked at the whole issue from a sociological perspective. Her key theme was whether platform work can be seen as a major disruption of existing employment patterns or whether it is business as usual. In some respects platform work shows similarities wit the world of work as we know it: it is often linked to outsourcing of tasks; it involved a high degree of standardisation of tasks and it creates a downward pressure on wages due to the largely unregulated nature of the platform labour market. One important new aspect is however the complex relationship between client, worker and the platform in which the platform merely is the technical mediator between client and worker and which involved no ownership of output. Against this background, Meil identified some key trends: (1) we see more precarious employment – but developments are complex and difficult to assess because there is an increasing differentiation of platform work: one that involves a high degree of cognitive piecework with an extreme division of labour; and one that involves bids and contests with the performance of very complex tasks. Meil finished her presentation highlighting the regulatory challenge depending on where workers perform their work; i.e. regulation of wages, social protection and protection

against non-payment of wages has to take into account that the new world of work is geographic / region-based; platform-based and depends on the category of the worker.

Regulation also was the key issue of the presentation by Valerio De Stefano from the Catholic University of Leuven. He stressed the platform economy actually reinforces current trends of increased casualization of work, zero-hour contracts and the emergence of new employment relationships. The key question in all of this is: How do we define "worker" or "employee"? and the key issue to be taken into consideration is who controls the work? The problem is that according to differences in national legal traditions and expectations there are large differences across Europe. This also means that platform workers are often mis-classified as self-employed workers even though the platform controls the work they perform. Based on the use of new technologies the platform defines and monitors the nature of the work performed and it defines the wage received in return. In many cases, the courts denied the re-classification of workers based no the argument that platform workers have the freedom to decide whether or not to accept the work. The problem, according to De Stefano, is however, that if you say "no" too often you will not be considered for the allocation of tasks anymore. In fact, platform workers have no real choice.

The panel was closed with a commentary from Barbara Surdykowska from Solidarnosc. Her key theme was that platform work represents a key challenge for trade unions in creating a sense of solidarity among the new platform workers which are increasingly fragmented both geographically and in terms of the work process. The key question unions are facing is: How can these workers be organized? In particular against the facts presented in the previous talks: technological unemployment, precarious working conditions and the insecure legal status of these workers. She closed her comment with a plea that unions have to pursue new roads to come to terms with the challenges posed by the emergence of new forms of work related to the platform economy.