

Panel 19: ‘The future of work: perspectives from the ILO’

Moderated by ETUC confederal secretary Esther Lynch, three panellists from the ILO Global Commission on the ‘Future of Work’ talked about the initiative and the broader challenges facing the ILO.

Susan Haytor presented the initiative, stressing the importance of promoting equity, security and inclusion in the current context of rising inequality and ‘building walls’. The Commission is the second stage of three in this project, the first having been national-level dialogues in 2016 and the final being the ILO centenary in 2019. The initiative revolves around four ‘conversations’: work and society, decent work for all, the organisation of work and production, and the governance of work. The final report will be released in January 2019 and is intended to be concise, solution-oriented and ‘disruptive’. Haytor felt that while there had been a strong focus on trade unions in the discussions, there had not been enough on employer organisations who are having a big influence by directly lobbying policymakers.

As ex officio member of the Commission, Luc Cortebeek was able to give an insider’s view. He stressed that the aim was to look beyond just digitalisation and AI to all aspects of the world of work and the effects that big changes will have on decent work and social protection. For the commissioners, ‘work’ is considered important not just for material reasons but also for the meaning it can bring to people’s lives. Cortebeek argued that the governance role of the ILO and its unique tripartite structure must be guaranteed and that things which are not backed by workers’ organisations are too fragile to stand firm against political fluctuations. However, as the primacy of politics has become standard, unions have been pushed back and the ILO attacked by employers’ groups.

Emmanuel Julien from the ILO’s Enterprises Department posited that there exist several worlds of work, with marked differences between world regions when it comes to working time, work participation of men and women, and dangerous work. He argued that the biggest characteristic of work today, and therefore the biggest challenge facing the ILO, is informality. Julien went on to point out that the majority of trade is now between developing countries, with regional blocs already forming, and that one problem in this context is that many of these countries are tempted to leapfrog regulations and social dialogue. These are also the countries where social partners are weaker. Julien felt that, while keeping the objective of regulation and without departing from tripartite participation, the ILO should be focusing more on enterprises. Only 9% of SMEs are formalised and a huge percentage of this informal work is in sub-Saharan Africa. He argued that it is a mistake to think that globalisation makes everyone alike: the future of work is also the future of enterprises. The companies of tomorrow will be smaller and more open in terms of flexibility and outsourcing than those of today.

In the discussion that followed, there was a question about whether the ILO should be doing more to limit and regulate the changes that are happening rather than helping to develop them. Haytor emphasised that for the ILO the future of work is not just about technology, and that it is human-oriented rather than growth-oriented. Esther Lynch thought that while the technology is racing ahead there is indeed a lag in what we know about it; there are sometimes deep prejudices already coded into the machine (as an example, she suggested typing ‘trade unionist’ into Google images to see what kind of stereotypes appear).

On the unclear legal nature of the final outcome of the Global Commission, Cortebeek admitted that when it came to regulation, the differing definitions of ‘worker’, ‘independent’, etc., will be a complicated issue. Finally, on the role of Europe, Haytor stated that the ILO looks to Europe to see how to shape regulations, as it has one of the best tripartite structures. Julien thought that what the EU can bring to the ILO does not concern the substance of outcomes but rather a culture of facilitation and bridging gaps.