UBERIZATION OF SOCIETY AND WORKERS’ RIGHTS

Speech of Dimitris Theodorakis

Before I address digitalisation and the disruptions that platforms generate, I want you to picture a postal worker. 30 years ago, the postal worker would be in full-time employment in the public sector. Postal liberalisation and digitalisation have completely changed the postal world and more importantly postal work. Over time, liberalisation deteriorated working conditions. Then platforms came about and today, individual citizens compete directly through platforms with postal workers.

It is this uberization of our society that we must fight.

Online platforms are a symptom of our time. They exploit legal loopholes to disrupt traditional markets. Whilst platforms enable all of us to take advantage of new technologies, we must ensure that they fully respect social and fundamental rights. Digitalisation is both enabling and disruptive.

It must be shaped to serve people and planet first.

The risk of job automation is real, but it varies greatly across national economies. Robots and automated systems will not replace humans, but they will impact the world of work. Re-skilling at work must be our priority. All workers should have a right to re-skilling and up-skilling during working time. Given the ageing of our societies, all economic forces must commit to funded occupational training and education, especially for the most vulnerable.

Technological progress has given rise to the platform economy and the digital labour market. It brought along new forms of precarious employment and social dumping both online and offline.

We have moved from a job for life to a lifetime of different jobs.

Global capitalism intensifies competition between workers. Today workers compete online across from Mumbai to Berlin over tasks on big tech platforms. Work is work however and should be remunerated as such. Platforms must respect social and fundamental rights, they don’t.

We must not blindly celebrate job creation in absolute numbers as many would like us to. If the jobs created are precarious and paid under the living wage, there is nothing to celebrate. We need to re-focus on a Decent Work for All agenda.

Platforms are data driven. In our interconnected lives we produce data everywhere we go and in almost everything we do, including our work. We do not always know how our data is collected and for what it’s used. Whilst our data is bought and sold, our privacy and fundamental rights are often ignored. We must demand that platforms report their data, pay social security, and tax dues.

We must not accept that they undermine our labour and market standards, rely on educated and healthy workers, yet do not contribute to the societies in which they are embedded. We must make platforms accountable on the use of worker’s data.
When investing in new technologies, organisations should be obliged to develop complementary People’s programmes for re-skilling throughout the supply and value chains of their companies. As trade unions we believe it is urgent to democratise further our world of work through social dialogue structures at company and national levels that oversee the respect of worker’s data rights.

Artificial Intelligence, Data and Machine-generated wealth should be fairly redistributed to the workers through wage increases, re-training and working time reduction. This must be managed through Collective Bargaining. The benefits and wealth generated by data and AI must be redistributed equally and uniformly for the many and not the few.

A fair and just transition into the digital world of work is only possible through a large coalition of democratic and social forces. Platform generated wealth must be put to the use of the common good, notably our social security, our public services and our welfare states.

Gig workers must also get their fair share of those profits.

New forms of work that are enabled by new technologies and platforms are on the rise. These are driven by ever-increasing demands for more flexibility to the detriment of fundamental worker rights and protections.

More than the quantity of the new jobs, the main concern with gig work is the Quality of the jobs. Depending on the business models of specific platforms, we witness a wide range of employment relationships, notably self-employed work, mini-jobs, zero-hour contracts, and vastly precarious working conditions.

Gig work is presented as a quick complement to one’s income when for many it unfortunately becomes a vicious circle of precarity fuelled by algorithms. Low entry barriers to the labour market do not outweigh the risks that platform work entails.

Risks include insufficient social security protection, insufficient income security, lack of sustainable career options with the phenomenon of de-skilling, restrictions to freedom of association and the undermining of collective bargaining through the intended misclassification of workers as self-employed. Sector-specific concerns can be occupational health and safety and concerns with work-life balance. Platform tasks allocation by algorithm can increase discrimination and limit the autonomy of individual workers.

As trade unions we will continue fighting for fair and decent wages through collective bargaining. Platforms however do not play by the same rules. They misclassify workers and refuse to engage in sectoral bargaining. We must adapt the national legal frameworks to extend the coverage of collective bargaining to platform workers irrespectively of their status.

To stop the exploitation of labour by big tech capital, we join your call for a Fair New Deal. We need a broad coalition of Left political and economic forces to bring the deregulation of the labour market to a stop. Social dumping and the exploitation of workers must end.

A truly Social Europe would regulate platforms and extend worker’s rights and protections to all platform workers. But it would also imply fairer tax regimes and more accountability for Multinational Companies and their supply chains.
A truly social Europe would strengthen sectoral social dialogue to permit upward wage convergence. Unfortunately, we witness the opposite with the latest European Court of Justice ruling undermining the autonomy of social partners and stopping further social legislation.

EU regulation is lacking when it comes to platform workers and platforms take advantage of legal loopholes. Platform companies pick the cheapest collective bargaining arrangements and dissolve traditional sectoral boundaries. Their business model is based on reducing their responsibilities towards their workers by not recognising them as employees. They think they can pick and choose; we must not let them off the hook. Giants such as Amazon today pick the worst collective agreement for their workers according to the country, they operate in. Europe has become a kind of “à la carte” tax regime.

Single market legislation is misused by platforms and Multinational Companies to the detriment of workers and citizens. Fundamental social and workers’ rights must be upheld to deliver fair and decent conditions. For that we need to implement far more binding measures than the empty words of the European Pillar of Social Rights.

E-commerce operations today put in question our very own democratic and social values. Think of the postal worker and then of the real cost behind the exploitative mention of ‘free delivery’ for our consumer goods?

What is the real cost for our planet of this technology enabled online marketplace? Our cities are clogged up with delivery vans that run on diesel and our high streets are empty or boarded up because no one goes shopping physically anymore.

We, the Progressive, Left and ecological forces must unite to make the Single Market serve the greater common good.

We must end the abusive exploitation of workers! We need to stop the downward spiral of austerity and aim to improve the welfare of European citizens. This requires re-investing in public services, shifting investments into education and training, and strengthening the fundamental role trade unions must play in shaping our future world of work.

I spoke of e-Commerce before on purpose. In the EU we witness the negative consequences for workers and for citizens of neoliberal dogmatism. 20 years ago, postal liberalisation introduced competition into the public postal service.

It has been a total failure. There is no real competition in the letters market. The prices for postal services have increased. The quality of the service and its fundamental public mission has deteriorated to the detriment of European citizens and postal workers. Jobs were lost and for those that remained the conditions have worsened significantly. Postal offices are closing down. Postal subcontracting is sometimes comparable to some forms of platform work. In several European countries, any citizen can use their own car to deliver the mail as a self-employed.

I ask you is this what we want for our future postal and public services? Are we uberising our societies?
It will be in the mandate of this European Parliament to revisit the Postal Services Directive and avoid the destruction of the post as we know it. I call on you to join UNI Europa Postal Campaign and defend decent jobs for all market players, for an accessible and affordable universal postal service in the future.

Let’s defend the public missions of the posts. This campaign speaks to the hearts of all EU citizens, we must take a stand and halt neoliberal forces that want to destroy the postal service in the name of profit and market efficiency.

In the previous mandate, we compelled reporting obligations on the companies to limit the precarious working conditions that prevail in the last-mile delivery of e-Commerce goods.

A lot remains to be done to bring forward decent employment guarantees. What’s more, platform giants are today developing their own delivery networks to replace our jobs with precarious self-employed jobs and no trade union rights. They undermine social and labour legislation by refusing sectoral collective bargaining. As societies, we must oblige them to do so.

30 years ago, exactly today, the East German government announced that all GDR citizens could visit West Germany and West Berlin. It was the beginning for the demise of the wall. Today we are called again as societies to make political choices. We must confront the rise of far right and fascism in Europe. They want to erect new walls between citizens and non-citizens.

Platforms also erect invisible walls between workers competing against each other. We must reverse the neoliberal agenda of this Europe. Self-regulation has failed. The invisible hand of the market has produced a situation where 42 men own half of the world’s wealth. Calling for market regulation isn’t radical… it is a moral imperative!

We must stop Multinational Companies and platforms from practicing social dumping and tax avoidance to the detriment of the workers and citizens. As trade unions we will continue the fight for fundamental worker’s rights, to bring about decent jobs and good working conditions.

The new world of work must be shaped through collective bargaining and multi-sectoral alliances. We will continue developing union and worker power to rebuild the labour movement. This is the best way to curb the rising tide of inequality across our societies. We call on you to urgently join forces and work towards a fair and just transition into the digital world of work, one that serves humans and the planet first and foremost above profit.

I wish you a lot of strength for the struggles ahead in your parliamentary term and look forward to working towards a better Europe together.