

EDITO

WORK IN MOTION

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We used to talk about being in work or out of work. Today people increasingly lie somewhere in between: working part-time, ‘gigs’, or from project to project. Since the financial crisis of 2008, stagnant wages, precariousness, and rising inequality have become ever more common in Europe. Many continue to enjoy secure employment, the trend away from it is taking grip. Technology’s speed and reach are reorganising the time and space in today’s world of work. Crucially – amid demographic change, globalisation’s uncertain future, and long-term migratory patterns – peoples’ attitudes and expectations are evolving too.

The nature and purpose of work could be overturned in the years to come. Work in Europe is under attack and the first results are grim. Studies show that concerns over the scarcity of traditional employment feed resentment of political and economic elites, and are twisted into fear of the other. Yet work’s upheaval promises much good too. Flexibility and the automation of our most arduous and repetitive tasks extend human capacities, creativeness, and our ability to cooperate. However, it is not just about our jobs. For centuries, work has held a central place in our lives – social, political, and personal. It funds welfare states, marks identities, and drives personal accomplishment. How we recast work will shape our future society, from its social institutions and education systems, to its very sustainability and the lives we lead within it.

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With technology pushing the pace of production ever faster, the future of work is a subject of fear and fantasy. Yet though the weavers of 19th-century England smashed mechanised looms, the industrial age did not lack for work. In today's Europe, the same fears of machines casting humanity into obsolescence mirror some people's anticipation of fully automated leisure. Two perspectives on technology may be said to clash on fundamentals: a left-leaning narrative worried that the working class will be replaced and that of the tech billionaires looking forward to the robots. Faced with such uncertain prospects, some seek to seal off the national welfare state. Most just accept that entrepreneurial, atomised work is the best we can expect.

Despite technology's promise, growth in labour productivity per hour has plateaued, and even begun to retreat in some countries. Studies are divided on technology's eventual impact. Landmark Oxford Martin School research calculates that 47 per cent of US jobs are at risk from automation, while a cross-country OECD study estimates a mere 9 per cent. While many analyses predict a job market where skills and pay are polarised, the critical question of who will control the 3D printers, artificial intelligence, and data – our future means of production – is too often missing.

What's undeniable is that work is increasingly precarious for many. Labour law is being picked apart as we regress towards insecurity. Digital platforms, by no means just them, have skirted the established duties of employers. While forms of work resembling those of the past re-emerge, governments have looked on approvingly, or at a loss. New regulation will have to match the global reach of employers with ambition and clarity. Labour codes will need to reconcile the flexibility of modern (self-)employment with robust social protection, one of many challenges that progressives must answer in the years to come.

Too easily, Greens slide between the extremes of imagining a world without work and rejecting further liberalisation. Yet institutional

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constraints in the name of protection can limit autonomy and freedom. Flexibility can allow for variety and independence and more balance between 'free' and working time could give people more opportunity to look after themselves and those around them. Breaking the connection between employment and quality of life offers a way out the dilemma. Part-time should not mean poverty. Welfare should not depend only on work. A societal shift relegating work from virtue to activity is needed. Trade unions and employers will have to reinvent themselves too to face new realities.

Four challenges stand tall for the Greens. First, they must build dialogue and, at times, alliances with business and organised labour to construct a shared vision of work's place in society. Second, lifelong learning will be central to this bargain to ease people's movement between working life and education. Third, beyond education, a fresh equilibrium between work and the rest of our time is needed. Proposals for a basic income, as trials continue across Europe, are starting to ask the right questions. Yet basic income cannot mean surrender to the invisible hand; achieving the social and economic changes we (and the planet) need will still take direction. So, finally, the forging of a sustainable industrial policy supporting Europe's role in the world is essential for shared prosperity. These challenges are European in nature: stark disparities in wages, working conditions, and regulation bear testament to the scant attention the European Union has paid to social issues since Maastricht. The as-yet-vague European Pillar of Social Rights and the forthcoming European Labour Authority are possible signs that, as 2019 elections approach, political space for action is opening up.

Work's present and future are not functions of immovable forces, there are powers at play and choices to make. Faced with the defining question of our time, Greens and progressives must avoid nostalgia or trepidation and realise instead that work's transformation is in our hands.
