

REPRESENTING THE BRAVE NEW WORLD OF WORK

AN INTERVIEW WITH
REINER HOFFMANN
BY **RODERICK
KEFFERPÜTZ**

Work is changing. Globalisation, new technologies, demographic developments, and cultural change are reshaping the world of work. How are the labour market, our understanding of work, and employees' interests changing? What is trade union politics in the 21st century? What support do employees need for the labour market of the future? And what role does Europe play in all this? We discussed these issues with Reiner Hoffmann, president of the German Trade Union Confederation (DGB) – one of the world's largest trade unions.

RODERICK KEFFERPÜTZ: We are in the midst of rapid technological change. Digitalisation is turning the whole world of work upside down. How should this transformation be handled?



This interview is available in its original language (German) on the Green European Journal website.

SCHÖNE NEUE ARBEITSWELT?

Die Arbeit befindet sich im Umbruch und die Arbeitnehmerinteressen individualisieren sich. Die Gewerkschaften müssen diesen Herausforderungen gerecht werden.

REINER HOFFMANN: Digitalisation is a major structural transformation that could bring about a significant reduction in jobs. At the same time, we don't know in which sectors and to what extent new work will be created. Adjusting to technological change will be a process of learning from experience, just as it was with the first, second, and third industrial revolutions.

So the question is whether we manage to put people at the centre of this transformation instead of just being led by what is technically and technologically feasible. If we stick with the technology-led approach, we will lose out. If we are to shape digitalisation from a people-centred perspective, then education and training are key.

Education and training to stay fit for a changing job market?

REINER HOFFMANN: You used to be trained and qualified for one job that would see you through to retirement but that hasn't been true for a long time. Since the 1970s, we have been discussing lifelong learning under the umbrella of the International Labour Organization. Far too little of that has been implemented.

What we are experiencing now is a crazy acceleration. Let's just look at the half-life of technological innovations: innovation cycles that used to take 15-20 years take six or nine months today. This acceleration means the half-life of a basic qualification is also significantly shorter today.

Because of these rapid changes, employees are obliged to constantly review their qualifications and when necessary adapt and update them, so they are constantly having to learn more. This requires completely different forms of lifelong learning from what we were used to. Education is a fundamental right and doesn't end with one's first professional qualification. In view of the pace of innovation today, it has to include continuing education. That's why we're fighting for a fundamental right to continuing education, and for its funding.

Who should pay for this right to continuing education?

REINER HOFFMANN: This is a new distributional conflict. We have a massive need for investment in education. That's a job for society and for business. Germany is rich enough to invest in education if the right people are asked to pay, for example through a fairer tax system. What's also needed are collective bargaining agreements, such as that already made by IG Metall with employers, giving employees rights to, and opportunities for, further training in addition to flexible working.

But not everybody is keen on lifelong learning. There are people who, after 20-30 years at work, do not feel like reinventing themselves.

REINER HOFFMANN: Education should be fun; it's hard to force people to do something. Unfortunately, our education systems aren't set up that way, they inspire neither curiosity nor joy. Many people see education not as an opportunity but as a form of pressure. They're afraid of not being able to keep up and of getting left behind. But that cannot be the motivation sustaining education in the long run. That's why our education system urgently needs to change. It needs to motivate people to keep coming back and keep learning – without them being forced to do so. Because anyone who has to learn, but doesn't want to, won't learn.

What challenges and opportunities does technological change bring for employees?

REINER HOFFMANN: We have to proactively shape this transformation in order to seize the opportunities and minimise the risks. Digitalisation undoubtedly offers numerous advantages. The new technologies can reduce traditional burdens such as dust, noise, and heavy loads. At the same time, however, new burdens arise, such as being constantly accessible, that is, the dissolution of temporal and spatial barriers. Working from home can provide some relief, but emails in the middle of the night are stressful too, of course. The DGB Good Work Index has found in surveys that many people suffer from this erosion of the boundary between work and home life as well as from increasingly intense and tightly-controlled working lives. These are completely new challenges for employees, and also for occupational safety.

The requirements for occupational health and safety regimes must therefore be brought up to date. We have long been calling for an anti-stress regulation that classifies today's stress factors. We need clear rules for work in the digital workplace, from the 'right to disconnect' to the comprehensive recording of working time. Employees must be allowed to decide when to switch off their mobile phones and computers, and they should be paid if they are still checking their emails in the evening.

Along with the digital transformation we are also seeing cultural changes. The way we think of work is in flux. For some, work is a means of earning a living, for others it is their identity and a source of meaning. Is there an emerging divide within the world of work between those who work to live and those who live to work?

REINER HOFFMANN: These changed attitudes are especially noticeable among young people who have completely different expectations from working life. This shift also has something to do with prosperity. People can take advantage of flexible working arrangements provided their material wants are reasonably well satisfied. That's one clear change. Another is that people are more likely to say that they want to focus on their families, or to do more travelling, or to educate themselves – and not just once they reach retirement age.

But with all these changes, one thing remains central: work is the foundation for reproduction, income generation, and social cohesion. Work is more than a means of subsistence. Certainly, that has to be guaranteed, but work also has an integrating function because it ensures one's participation in society. This social function of work explains why I oppose an unconditional basic income, which sidelines, stigmatises, and excludes people.

But the world of work is fragmenting. There are different values, new forms of employment are emerging, and interests diverge evermore. Is work still a relevant platform for political mobilisation? Can a trade union bring these differences together?

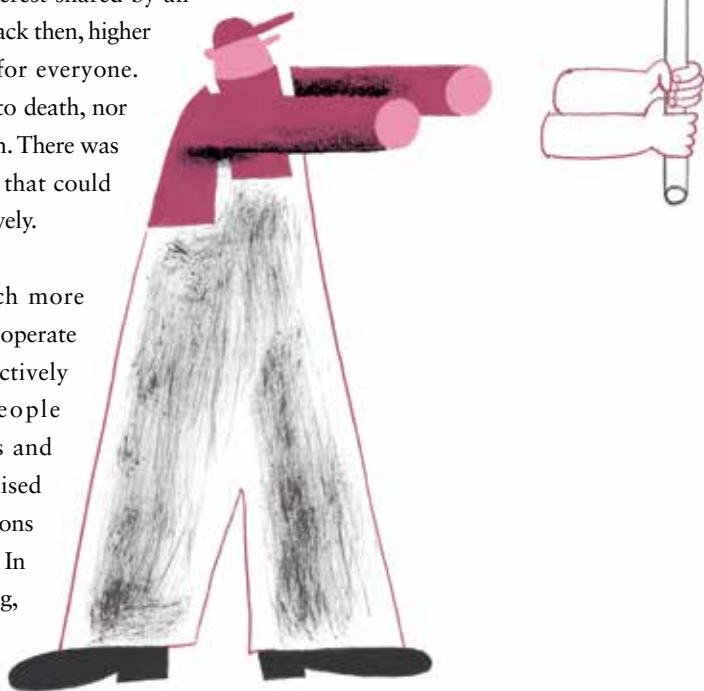
REINER HOFFMANN: As a collective body, we have to. Trade unions are member organisations and as a member organisation we are only able to act if the members act together and in solidarity.

One of the challenges we now face is the increased individualisation and variety of lifestyles. There is no longer one single interest shared by all employees, as in the past. Back then, higher wages were the priority for everyone. Nobody wanted to starve to death, nor to work themselves to death. There was a single collective interest that could also be represented collectively.

Today, interests are much more differentiated. We have to operate constructively and productively with this diversity. People expect individual choices and possibilities, not standardised solutions but diverse solutions for different life situations. In terms of collective bargaining, we have already offered solutions of this kind.

Can you give an example?

REINER HOFFMANN: Following the last collective bargaining round of the Railway and Transport Workers' Union (EVG) in Germany, employees were given a choice. At the second stage of the overall wage rise, each employee could pick between 2.6 per cent more money, six more days of holiday per year, or a shorter working week. 56 per cent opted for more holiday and 42 per cent for the wage increase.



But solutions of this kind are not enough. We need new definitions of the concepts of employee and employer. In the platform economy, with platforms such as Helpling, Uber, or Lieferando, the operators do not see themselves as employers but simply as mediators for services between self-employed workers and their customers. They don't want to take on the responsibilities of employers.

However, it is clear that a driver at Uber is not self-employed. First, a driver cannot decide the fare. If they really were self-employed, then drivers could decide for themselves how much it costs to drive someone from A to B. But he or she can't do that because Uber has full control over pricing. And second, Uber pockets 20 per cent per trip as a fee. So this is a classic employer-employee relationship. But the platform providers of this world simply don't want to know – they pay no taxes, no social security contributions, and do not even offer decent basic wages.

What can be done about it?

REINER HOFFMANN: We are discussing new definitions of employer and employee with the European Commission that will specify who has what rights and obligations. Since platform-based services are offered worldwide, national regulations won't work. The European level is therefore a minimum requirement. In the long run, we really need global rules.

Speaking of the European level, do other European trade unions share your views on the working world of the future? Is there a shared common vision, or are the ideas very different?

REINER HOFFMANN: The European trade unions share many ideas, but their contexts are very different. In the southern European countries, where unemployment rates are much higher than elsewhere, the approach to these topics is completely different. But here, too, we have things in common.

The rapid changes in the world of work through digitalisation and globalisation are starting to break down all kinds of barriers, and people everywhere are feeling increasingly insecure, regardless of their specific national context or conditions. Everywhere, they are asking themselves whether they really have to start a further education course at 60 or whether they will make it to retirement age in their current job. And many are not only thinking about themselves but also about their children and grandchildren and wondering what will be available to them. Many people no longer believe in the promise of prosperity – that one day my children will be better off than me.

This gradual loss of control leads to a crisis of trust in established political institutions. People do not trust them to be able to handle these upheavals. That also means they turn to right-wing populists and their simple solutions.

But protectionism, racism, and exclusion are an additional danger, not a solution. The unions, which stand for cosmopolitanism and anti-racism as principles, have to handle this. Employees want new sources of security, security frameworks they can depend upon for protection at work and in their private lives.

What role can the EU play in building the new security frameworks needed?

REINER HOFFMANN: The European Pillar of Social Rights, for example, could play a central role.¹ For this, we need to do more than just maintain the status quo in terms of the social standards that have prevailed for the last six decades in Europe. We need more and better European standards in the labour market and in social policy. The race to the bottom, on wages, on social achievements, the ever-longer working hours, represent neither an economically nor socially appropriate European response to globalisation and digitalisation. The Pillar of Social Rights offers a big opportunity. This is also thanks to the European Commission. But it is important now that the EU Member States fill this pillar with life. To do this, the European Commission has to push forward with setting European standards in the coming years.

The progressive forces in society, whether political parties or European trade unions, must together lead the fight for a Europe of solidarity. We have to provide answers to these challenges; answers that go far beyond the status quo. The aim must be to shape modernisation, from infrastructure to the European energy transition to 'decent work'.



REINER HOFFMANN

is president of the German Trade Union Confederation (DGB) and chair of the executive board of the Hans Böckler Foundation.



RODERICK KEFFERPÜTZ

is a board member of the *Green European Journal* and works for the Green-led regional government as an advisor in the Strategy Unit of the State Ministry of Baden-Württemberg, Germany.

¹ The European Pillar of Social Rights is a set of social rights based around 20 principles which the European Commission and its Member States subscribed to work towards in 2017. bit.ly/2HoeFKi