

Democratising Work in the 21st Century

Article by Isabelle Ferreras

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With digitalisation and shocks like the Covid-19 pandemic and extreme weather, the world of work is changing rapidly. But this transformation should not become an inevitability that workers must passively endure. Rather, it should be a democratic process shaped and decided by workers themselves. On the sidelines of the European Trade Union Institute's Blueprint for equality conference, we sat down with Isabelle Ferreras, who has co-authored a new book calling for a re-organisation of the economy, to discuss democratising work in the 21st century.

Green European Journal: Digitalisation and automation are transforming how we work. How do you see the new face of work?

Isabella Ferreras: What is most notable about digitalisation is the loss of work's physicality. As soon as jobs adopt technological tools that allow remote or computer-assisted working, workers cease to come together in the same place. In Marx's analysis of the first age of industrial capitalism, the concentration of workers in factories was an important factor in the development of class consciousness. It enabled the working class to shift from what he called a "class in itself" to a "class for itself". The opportunity to come together in one place, at a frequency imposed by industrial capitalism, meant that workers could get to know one another, take their breaks together, talk to one another. They realised that they shared very similar lives and problems that needed shared solutions.

The digitalisation of the economy individualises the experience of work. You might find an engineer based in Delhi, another in Boston, and a third who is subcontracted to write some lines of code from South Africa or Ukraine all working on the same project. All these people interact via an online platform, without getting to know one another and without the opportunity to realise that they are all part of the same "work investment" necessary for a business. By work investment, I mean all the workers required to successfully produce something or provide a service.

So the fragmentation of work, brought about by digitalisation, leads to a less social experience of work and, in the end, a loss of power for workers?

As this fragmentation has taken root, workers have grown more aware. Workers aspire to something else. We can see this in two ways. First, since the pandemic, there is a massive rise in people changing careers because they aspire to more meaningful work. There was a real misery for "non-essential" workers slaving away in front of their computers, stuck at home with this interface. In the hope of keeping their workers, some British companies have embarked on a full-scale experiment: the biggest ever trial of a four-day working week has just begun in the UK. About 50 businesses are implementing it, offering a better work-life balance for the same salary. Workers are expected to be just as productive over four

days and gain a better quality of life.

Second, businesses are going to great lengths to improve job satisfaction. This is essentially a retention strategy whereby companies work to increase job satisfaction so that employees remain loyal. Employers are giving workers more say in decisions that affect them, such as combining working from home and the office.

In France, a survey conducted by the *Association Pour l'Emploi des Cadres* (APEC) in January 2021 revealed that 9 out of 10 managers are listening much more, building bonds within teams, and empowering employees as a result of the pandemic. This is an opportunity to be seized. On 16 December 2021, the European Parliament passed a historic resolution demanding, among other things, a revision of the European Works Council Directive. In *Democratize Work*, we call for a collective veto right for workers so that they can influence decisions taken by company boards or works councils.

The opposite trend is the growing physicality of work in the care sector. What does the rising need for care, both for people and the planet, mean for the world of work?

Alongside the trend towards automation is a realisation that we're going to need more human labour and, let's hope, not more unrecognised and unpaid exploitation. Taking care of both the planet and other human beings, like through public services, requires more and more work but nobody is talking about paying for this work. Neglecting the remuneration side of care comes from misconceptions about the future of work.

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The intrinsic content of all jobs has changed with each technological revolution. But the key issue we must grasp here is that there's much more work for us to do so that we're no longer dependent on our energy slaves [the quantity of energy required to replace human labour]. We must also formalise that part of the care sector which just exploits women's labour. Equalising living standards and giving men and women the same number of opportunities means investing massively in childcare, for example.

The climate and biodiversity emergency will also reshape economic and working life. The EU is trying to manage this shift through the European Green Deal and the promise of a "just transition". How do you view this approach?

The EU's "just transition" fails to ensure the necessary pace and approach. It lacks real commitment to the democratic principle for governing the transition. Everybody concerned should be mobilised so that they themselves take the decisions which will affect them. It's also a question of effectiveness. Some industries will not decarbonise quickly enough, so we have to envisage shutting down certain companies. Imagine the employees concerned not having a say on whether or how to put their company out of business? Leaving their futures to the market? It's crazy! Who would think that is the right approach?

It's vital to inject the principle of democratisation into companies so that workers have real clout. This can be done via a collective veto right for workers. In many countries, the institution required already exists: the works council. Workers are represented on it through their union organisations. For every decision about the transition, workers must be full co-deciders, especially on the conditions in which their company will close.

We might think it unrealistic to imagine that people will agree to shut down their own companies, which is precisely why we also need a "decommodification" of work. It's about providing individual career security. Hence the idea of implementing a job guarantee at the European level, financed by the EU but administered and managed locally. That's what we proposed in the opinion piece which led to *Democratize Work* and was inspired by the work of [Pavlina Tcherneva](#). Such a scheme could create and fill positions that make sense for the area and the people that occupy them, rather than dehumanised workplaces. It would require a local employment committee that brings all stakeholders to the table to agree on the needs of the micro area (approximately 8500 inhabitants).

What's happening in France with "Zero Long-Term Unemployed Areas" (*Territoires zéro chômeur de longue durée* — TZCLD) is highly relevant from this standpoint. In France, 40 per cent of jobs created so far are in care for people and 40 per cent are in care for the planet. This spring, the Walloon government in Belgium also decided to allocate 100 million euros to trial a similar scheme. Nineteen projects have been submitted. These areas could lay the groundwork for a job guarantee funded by the state, which acts as the employer of last resort.

You often talk about the different social welfare models of EU member states. Can we really imagine a common European social model?

Given the magnitude of the problems, the European level is the most appropriate. We must move towards a deepening of democracy at the European level. This is the thrust of Thomas Piketty's proposals for a [new European democratic treaty](#), as well as the promising progress made by the Conference on the Future of Europe.

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The announcement of a European "job guarantee" would be a very powerful signal when it comes to the nagging problem of a democratic deficit at the European level. Imagine if Europe could guarantee a job no matter what? If you were hit by the crisis and the need for your company to shut down or to make a rapid transition – you would decide with your local community what that would look like. It wouldn't be Europe taking control in the transition, but Europe supporting and enabling a genuine green transition – as [Dominique Méda](#) says.

At one point, there was a move in this direction with the Youth Guarantee, for example. Is it the right model?

No, the Youth Guarantee isn't enough. But it's clearly a first step that we can build on for

greater impact. In Brussels, for example, the region's public employment agency has put in place a very extensive version of the Youth Guarantee, which cut youth unemployment from 32 per cent to 25 per cent between 2014 and 2018. This was a success that shows it's possible to act at a European level on issues such as work and unemployment. It seems to me that it's a matter of political will and political priorities.

How do you assess the state of the European trade union movement?

We are undoubtedly going backwards at the moment. Union membership in countries where it isn't automatic, like Belgium, is falling.

During my studies in the United States, I discovered that unions were once very powerful there, contrary to the idea we have in Europe. But their organisations were wiped out through concerted capitalist efforts. Today, only 6 per cent of American workers are unionised. But there are many signs of a revival. Amazon, Starbucks, Apple, and others, are panicking in the face of revitalised unions. These fights are very tough in the American context because to gain the right to be represented by a union, you have to win a vote, on a case-by-case basis; one site or store at a time. Workers' rights, despite being enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, are not taken seriously at all in the US. Bold initiatives like the *Clean Slate for Worker Power* report, which calls for a complete overhaul of labour law, coupled with the current grassroots organising offer grounds for hope.

Unions everywhere must renew themselves from within. If they have historic legitimacy and are to have it in future, it's because they are collective vehicles for worker representation. They can build solidarity beyond the workplace - "cross-company" solidarity as Georges Friedmann, the godfather of French sociology of work, called it. For the moment, they are sticking to the sectors where they still have some strength, often defending the vested interests of their traditional types of workers - in other words, white men. This is dangerous. They should think of themselves as laboratories of democracy and become champions of inclusivity. They need to succeed in attracting workers with migrant backgrounds, women, and all the minorities who are present in the workplace but are not seen in union organisations.

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I do, however, want to believe in the renewal of European trade unionism. If I had to give one piece of advice to the unions, it would be to ensure that they always practice what they preach internally when it comes to their goals for social transformation. They will be all the stronger for it.

The other key actor is the state. So many of the challenges we face are global but public authority remains national...

At the heart of my work lies the premise that companies are political entities. We have to understand that we can no longer collectively tolerate them as despotic exceptions in a

society that claims to be democratic. We must find a way of inserting these companies into the democratic architecture. When our states were strong and borders were closed to capital (until the 1970s), they “supervised” and taxed despotic companies.

Today, this compromise has collapsed. It’s not just for moral reasons that we should be concerned about the situation of workers, but for political and democratic reasons too. We can no longer tolerate such political power in the hands of private actors who monopolise the right to govern these entities, who are transnational and who elude government, and who have ended up occupying a position in our national politics that is far too important. Our states are political dwarves who can no longer wield the authority necessary to ensure that our societies’ political priorities are upheld — respect for planetary boundaries being the absolute critical priority.

There are two options. There is the slide towards the techno-despotism of Elon Musk, who thinks that technology will save us, that the enlightened despotism of a few capitalist companies will enable us to get a grip on all our problems, including the climate. It is completely delusional. But there is an alternative: the democratisation of these entities and their re-insertion into the political architecture.

Is the modern state equipped for this task?

In Europe, it is. If we look at the European Union, it is already very advanced in its construction, and could at any moment decide to impose conditions on companies active on its soil like forbidding them from interfering in democracy. The EU and its member states can set conditions for internal democracy within companies – in other words, democratise them.

In Europe, we already have a tool: European works councils. There are over 1000 companies that are large enough to be considered active at the European level and who have set up a European works council. It’s a directive that dates back to 1982 and is being looked at again. Of course, companies want as little revision of this directive as possible so that these councils have little power. But European Trade Union Confederation wants to expand its rights. The good news is that a resolution passed on 16 December 2021 by the European Parliament supports this.

I argue that we should give them equal power in corporate governance so that European works councils approve decisions just as boards of directors do. It would change the relationship between states and companies. Today, companies do everything to limit the ability of governments to regulate and tax them. But people themselves are both citizens in society and citizens at work. It’s obvious that the young generation joining companies today has all of these concerns about the climate. Any environmental regulations introduced at the European level would be received differently by companies if their governance decisions (corporate strategy) had to be signed off by the majority of workers’ representatives, as we argue in *Democratize Work*.

Questioning the role of work in our lives also represents a cultural shift. How can education systems support the transformation of the meaning of work?

I nurture the optimism of the will that Gramsci called for. I’ve been following what’s

happening in the education sector, and I've been very struck by how active learning methodologies have become mainstream and Montessori a benchmark. At university, most of us now use flipped learning, which was unthinkable 20 years ago. Our educational system is pushing for independence. But the betrayal comes when young people enter the economic system. Whether in companies or in the public sector, they are robbed of their ability to influence the rules and decisions that affect their work. It's surprising that there haven't been more revolts. The explosion in chronic illness and burnout in particular highlight this breaking point. Being robbed of their ability to influence their work has become unbearable for workers.

To try to retain talent and tackle demotivation in organisations that the pandemic has put under considerable strain, the business world has suddenly said that it cares about the "meaning of work" and the "meaning of our mission". Meaning can imply anything, but in the absence of political rights in the economy, there is an epidemic of alienation in the Marxist sense of the term. When companies wonder how they're going to attract young people and complain that people aren't dynamic enough at work, I respond by saying that they need to understand the violence that they exert. Young people are about to enter a difficult world with a changing climate. We tell them to act responsibly and mobilise, but that in the corporate world, they must keep quiet. It's a pretty unbearable experience of alienation. But I don't think it will last.



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