

# TOUCHY ABOUT TECHNOLOGY

## JOBS AND THE CHALLENGE FOR THE LEFT

AN INTERVIEW WITH  
**MADY DELVAUX-  
 STEHRES** BY **LAURENT  
 STANDAERT**

A technological revolution is coming, on that point everyone seems to agree. Beyond this, there are no clear answers. Mady Delvaux-Stehres, a Luxemburgish Socialist MEP, argues for an industrial policy for Europe, a new education system, and a critical appraisal of how the Left thinks about robots and artificial intelligence.

**LAURENT STANDAERT:** What connections do you see between the future of work and advances in robotics and artificial intelligence?

**MADY DELVAUX-STEHRES:** The initial reaction, whether in the European Parliament or with people I talk to in the street, is: “We don’t want robots because they’ll take our jobs.” The experience of the last industrial revolution and its technological advancements shows this perspective to be a bit of fantasy. While jobs were destroyed, new ones were created too, though the process was nevertheless accompanied by social conflict. The primary concern must be ensuring a decent life for people over preserving the interests of industry, which should be a tool at the service of humanity. The current industrial revolution will change many things, as is already happening. But the qualitative difference this time is that it is not simply physical work that is being replaced by machines, some of the ‘intellectual’ work in the service sector is being replaced by artificial intelligence too. In the future, there won’t be trainee lawyers compiling hundreds of pages of case law anymore, artificial intelligence will do it.

**Will enough jobs be created to offset the jobs that are lost?**

**MADY DELVAUX-STEHRES:** That’s the real question. It’s easy to say that jobs will be lost, but it’s harder to know where the new comes will come from. Compared to the last industrial revolution, innovation and

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This article is available in its original language (French) on the Green European Journal website

**TECHNOLOGIE, JE T’AIME... MOI NON PLUS: LES DÉFIS POUR LE TRAVAIL ET LA GAUCHE**

Dans cet entretien, l’eurodéputée Mady Delvaux-Stehres parle des enjeux pour l’emploi, mais aussi pour la gauche et les forces progressistes en Europe, face aux évolutions technologiques.

production cycles are much faster. How can we keep up with this change whilst making sure that there aren't too many people left behind? With each cycle, there are winners and losers, but how can we best guarantee a safety net for those who need it?

#### **What are the top priorities in the face of rapid technological change?**

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**MADY DELVAUX-STEHRES:** Inequality! From which stem questions of social protection and education, both of vital importance. First, we must break the link between employment and social protection, and second, we must promote lifelong learning. Lifelong learning is especially complicated, we're talking about a new kind of education system based on different methods.

#### **Why and how would you go about changing the education system?**

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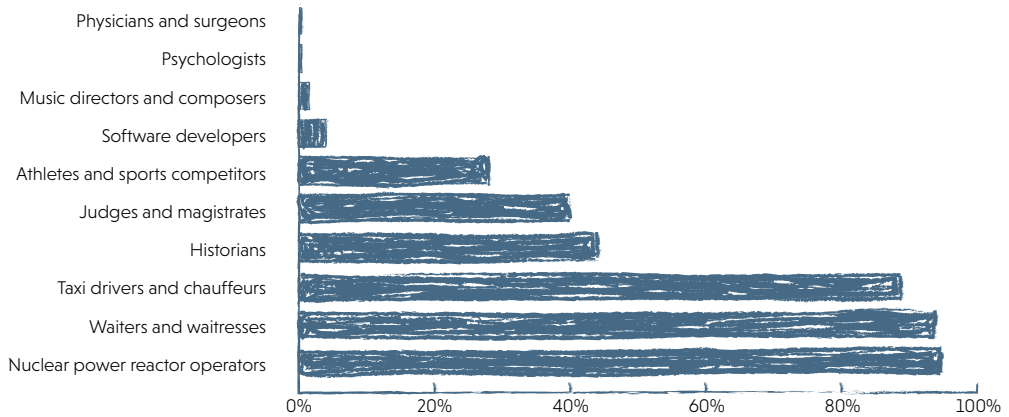
**MADY DELVAUX-STEHRES:** Education should inspire and teach creativity, imagination, and understanding of technology. But it's a sector that struggles to change and is weighed down by a big bureaucracy. Beyond these constraints, how can we teach creativity? Is everyone willing and able to be educated in this way? When we look at statistics for lifelong learning, it's clear that the people who benefit most are those with the highest level of education. We need to reverse this trend, but how?

For its part, the European Commission is working to define a matrix of different skills for different education levels, mapping the skills needed to cope with the current technological revolution. It's an important exercise as we strive to define which skills the education system needs to include. But in this debate, we often end up saying that we need to teach people how to code. I don't think this is the answer. Not everyone should learn how to code or is going to become a programmer. With longer life expectancy and changes in attitudes to work, we need to imagine a system where we leave school but can return later. In many countries, certainly in Luxembourg, there is an idea that you get an initial education and then that's it, you're set for life. I don't think that view of education will work anymore.

#### **Trends in education seem to be mirroring those in the world of work, could robotics and automation widen inequality?**

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**MADY DELVAUX-STEHRES:** Fears around widening inequalities are justified, not just in terms of education but income and wealth too. In today's world – without reform – I don't see who will pay for access to artificial intelligence and its benefits, when there are any, for the most vulnerable. There are enormous benefits to different applications of robotics and artificial intelligence, in the area of health for example, but who is going to fund access for the entire population? Social security systems



Risk of being replaced by a robot (calculation for the US, unspecified timeframe)

SOURCE: Carl Benedikt Frey and Michael Osborne (2013). *The future of employment: How susceptible are jobs to computerisation?* Oxford Martin Programme on Technology and Employment.

are becoming harder and harder to fund, and their link with employment is a problem for the future.

**In most cases, Most European governments continue to draw significant proportions of their revenues from taxing employment.**

**MADY DELVAUX-STEHRES:** Experts and studies are divided on the crucial issue of whether technological change will mean fewer jobs, as many jobs, or more jobs – the most important thing is to be prepared. Everywhere people are talking about the difficulties in funding pensions, health insurance, unemployment benefits, and so on. Taxes are levied on salaries so if there are fewer jobs, we're headed for trouble. And yet all this time, we're seeing lower taxation on businesses and capital. We no longer dare to tax the rich, it's crazy! I've seen lots of potential ideas and innovations in terms of taxation in my political career but in reality, the same formulas are always trotted out. It's like with value-added tax;

because it already exists, it's less painful to put it up by a percentage point. We need to think about other systems of funding, but it's a taboo subject at the European level. Tax touches on core competences of the nation-state and today the European Union is a system of competition between member nation-states. An EU country that decides to introduce a new tax becomes paranoid that it's not competitive enough for investors compared to its neighbours.

**You mentioned a tax on robots...**

**MADY DELVAUX-STEHRES:** Oh dear, what a disaster! But it stayed in my parliamentary report.

**Why a disaster?**

**MADY DELVAUX-STEHRES:** Industry screamed that a robot tax would put the brakes on innovation, which is not totally false. More fundamentally, in practice, how do you define and identify a robot? Beyond the idea of a

tax, today it's important and useful to have classifications. A robot vacuum cleaner is not the same as a driverless car, a drone, or a surgical robot. And if robots are the new 'workers', then we need to know what we mean by robot. Going back to taxation, if robots aren't an option, I see potential in a financial transactions tax. Of course we can imagine all sorts of taxes, but the reality is that there is very little willingness to discuss them, even in the European Parliament.

**Regardless of the categories of robotics or artificial intelligence, does their advance force us to break the financial link between social protections and the employment of humans in traditional jobs?**

**MADY DELVAUX-STEHRÉS:** I do think so as I said earlier but we've yet to have this debate.

**Studies show that the jobs at greatest risk of robotisation and automation are in Central and Eastern Europe. What will happen regarding inequalities between countries, not just within them?**

**MADY DELVAUX-STEHRÉS:** Inequalities between European countries are well established, they are very worrying as they are, and there is a very real risk of them worsening. The problem has been clearly identified but we don't have a real answer – European structural funds are a drop in the ocean. On the other hand,

artificial intelligence could be an opportunity for countries to concentrate know-how in a specific region. The European Commission supports this approach with programmes such as that supporting the pan-European network of digital innovation hubs.

**This issue of disparity and non-convergence between EU countries is indirectly related to another question raised by your report: do we need a European industrial policy?**

**MADY DELVAUX-STEHRÉS:** We don't really have big European champions. We have national champions. I'm not a specialist in industrial policy, but it seems to me that the desire to prevent monopolies or large conglomerates within the European Union at any cost is not helping European presence at a global level. Only large European industries can hope to compete with China and the United States. But today this idea is sometimes considered heretical in Europe. Our small companies are being bought by American and Chinese investors, they aren't bought by Europeans. For example, a Belgian robotics company I recently visited couldn't find any capital in Europe, but then Chinese investors made them a fantastic offer. The Chinese firm Midea has purchased German giant Kuka. French start-up Aldebaran Robotics, creator of the Nao robot, has been taken over by the Japanese group SoftBank for the same reasons.

### Will digital economy and technology be on the agenda for the 2019 European elections?

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**MADY DELVAUX-STEHRÉS:** The large Member States are developing strategies and calling for action from the Commission, so technology will feature in the campaign. However, a wider societal debate still has to take place, difficult as it is. Today, there's lots of talk about data protection and the Facebook scandal, but profound systemic changes are not on the table. People don't want to scare voters.

### Is technology a real problem for the Left in Europe? Does the Left see technology as anti-worker?

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**MADY DELVAUX-STEHRÉS:** This is a debate I've recently had in my own party. I'll give you my point of view: I think that a party of the Left should be open to modernity and the future, and that we can't be against technology. We have to take ownership of technology, to place it at the service of workers, social cohesion, and the fight against inequality. If we don't, conservatives will use it against the majority of the population.

### In Europe, are there any points of consensus among the Left on the question of technology?

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**MADY DELVAUX-STEHRÉS:** No, there aren't. I despair at this mistrust. People focus on a single aspect, which is "jobs are being lost, so we're against it", but that's not an answer. ■



#### **MADY DELVAUX-STEHRÉS**

is a Luxembourgish Socialist MEP. She is vice-chair of the Legal Affairs committee and substitute in the Economic and Monetary Affairs committee. She was rapporteur of the report on Civil Law Rules on Robotics and Chair of the Working Group on Robotics and Artificial Intelligence. Prior to being elected to the European Parliament in 2014, she held various ministerial positions in Luxembourg over the past 20 years. She was notably Minister for Education and Minister of Social Security, Transport, and Communication.

