

Sindacato Austriaco -

AK EUROPA: Digitalisation and its economic and social potentials

This week, the European Office of the Austrian Trade Union Federation ÖGB, AK EUROPA and UNI Europa hosted a panel discussion on “Digitalisation”. In front of a packed audience, the invited guests learned about the ideas of the European Union on the digital single market and its impact on employment, markets and consumer and social behaviour.

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Katzian: “the proposal of the Commission should be viewed with a critical eye”.

Member of Austria's National Council Wolfgang Katzian, Chairman of the Union of Private Sector Employees (GPA-djp), opened the discussion with a short keynote on the Commission proposal: “The need for shaping the digital future has been recognised; its impact on the labour market and social security remain – as it is frequently the case in EU legislative procedure - largely ignored”. Together with social partners at national and European level it is necessary to develop an agenda for digital work, which places emphasis on social distribution issues. Apart from that, the EU would urgently require an employee data protection law. “We do not want to prevent the increasing digitalisation, but we want to use it as an opportunity for good work”, closed Wolfgang Katzian his opening address.

Constant accessibility puts severe strain on employees

Ursula Huws, Professor of Labour and Globalisation at the University of Hertfordshire, spoke of her research, which identified the severe strain on employees, a side effect of insufficiently regulated digitalisation: “Every area of work experiences an explosion of new definitions such as “Sharing Economy” or “Crowdsourcing”. In whatever sector employees operate, they have to log in to pursue their work. This means that a vast number of information and data respectively may be collected and filtered in accordance with indicators.” Constant accessibility would increasingly blur the line between work and leisure: “Companies and their employees are supposed to be permanently online; however, this poses the question, when the presence of employees in the net counts as working time and when it does not.”

Oliver Roethig, Regional Secretary of UNI Europa took a similar line: “A digital Europe can be a better Europe – a Europe in which growth brings higher quality jobs and promotes more social justice. But the benefits of digitalisation will not be reaped automatically. Targeted and balanced policies are called for to tap into the economic and social potentials the digital revolution entails.”

Joint declaration of ÖGB, Uni Europa und GPA-djp

A new trade union position on the challenges of digitalisation was also presented during the event: A joint declaration on "Digitalisation, Work and Employment in the EU". In doing so, the ÖGB reacts to the disappointing digital single market package of the European Commission. So far, the strategy of the Commission has completely ignored the impact on the labour market and the individual employees. Hence, ÖGB, UNI Europa and GPA-djp call for the development of a comprehensive agenda, which recognises the opportunities of digitalisation for employees and the European Social model.

MEPs support trade union demands

The declaration was supported in the European Parliament. MEPs Jutta Steinruck and Evelyn Regner (both S&D) also took part in the debate. Steinruck saw "exciting opportunities for growth in Europe." However, she warned against the impact on the fields of work and employment. One should not lose sight of these. It was the role of the EU to ensure that the digital revolution not only leads to economic growth but also to quality jobs and more social justice.

The Austrian Social Democrat MEP Evelyn Regner commented: "I welcome this declaration that, together with UNI Europa's critical assessment of the Digital Single Market Package, calls on the European Commission to ensure a broader focus in its digital agenda. Digitalisation has the potential to empower European citizens, to foster cohesion and to be inclusive of the needs, rights and ambitions of all Europeans – and the EU must ensure such potentials are realised."