



Statement of PES Employment and Social Affairs Ministers:

Workers' rights in the digital economy

Adopted at the PES meeting of Employment and Social Affairs Ministers of 24 October – Luxembourg

As the new Commission is being put in place, we want to remind all Commissioners tasked with the objective of making the EU fit for the digital age not to overlook the social changes technologies bring to work and call on them to take the well-being of workers as a core criterion for the success a more digital Europe.

Europe is indeed facing new challenges, such as the fourth industrial revolution, digitalization, artificial intelligence (AI), automation and climate change. In terms of opportunities, it is time to put forward socially and environmentally sustainable jobs. And as for the uncertainties, we reaffirm the social democratic ambition to respond to workers' insecurity. It is time to take the next step and create a European Union that puts people first, where all workers are protected, benefit from decent jobs and can rely on adequate and accessible social protection. A European Union where nobody is left behind. This must include those who are now working in the digital economy.

The transformation of work, the digital revolution, digital working and rapidly evolving labour markets must not undermine European working, employment and social standards. We want to shape the changes brought by new technologies in a way that improves the lives of digital workers and their families and gives them the same rights and working conditions as workers in the traditional economy.

We are all getting used to ordering services on a phone app or goods via internet. But let's be clear: a teenager delivering meals on a bike is not an entrepreneur, neither is a mother of four children, driving people through the city after her day-job in order to make ends meet. We need to ensure that those people are neither treated as start-ups in the making nor as second-class workers, but with the respect and rights they deserve.

It is obvious that the labour market of the 21st century can't be the resurrection of the labour market of the 19th, with a *digital lumpenproletariat* working paid per task, without social protection and without knowing if they will get enough work to make a living.

We are committed to make the European Pillar of Social Rights a reality for its citizens. All rights and obligations, including full social protection, have to apply to all actors in the same way – no matter if online or offline. Workers' status must be clear either as an employee or self-employed if we want to prevent precarious work and a new form of digital dumping. New forms of employment such as platform work too often combine the obligations (payment and working conditions set by a platform) of the employee with the risks (being responsible for paying taxes, social contributions and social protection) borne by the self-employed.

We support platform workers and any other kind of non-standard workers, including self-employed workers when they are calling for health insurance, income security and pension rights. We join them in their fight for



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works councils, for unionisation and for collective bargaining rights. This is why we have strongly supported transparent and predictable working conditions and access to social protection for all workers and the self-employed in the Council.

Yet there is much more to be done to make sure that the digital era transforms our societies and our quality of life for the better. We are determined to fighting in-work poverty, zero-hour contracts, and other forms of precarious work. We are convinced that workers should have the right to disconnect communication devices outside the agreed working hours in order to ensure a good balance between professional and private life and prevent work related illnesses. We want to protect worker's privacy against invasive use of data and unfair rating systems.

The rise of artificial intelligence is the next digital challenge ahead. In any case, AI is a challenge for the world of work and society as a whole. AI could lead to the greater automatization of some jobs, it will change the way some activities are carried out, and reorient some professions from routine tasks to problem-solving and complex communications activities. It needs a human centred approach. To fulfil this aspiration, it will be crucial to ensure a transparent, fair, secure and reliable use of AI. Ethical guidelines are necessary but not sufficient. We need clear rules for the use of AI and institutions that ensure their application.

In order to make innovations and technological developments available to everyone we have to ensure that education, training and lifelong learning are available to young people as well as to people in the middle of their careers and senior citizens. Lifelong-learning has to become a right, not only because the economic progress requires it but also because the societal change must not leave anyone behind. To give people the chance to learn new skills we support in-work education and time for training. Paid educational leave must be made available for all workers.

With such proposals we want to strike a fair balance between the promises of technology and the protection of workers. For workers and citizens to look at the future with confidence, Europe needs to ensure that everyone is prepared well for the jobs of the future, that new jobs are paid well and provide the same social security as traditional work. This is our objective. We are very glad to share it with the new Commissioner for Jobs, Nicolas Schmit and will stand by his side to better protect platform workers and to implement the European Pillar of Social Rights.

We, socialists and democrats, have always been the one who made sure the benefits of progress reach all in our society. This was true during the first industrial revolution, we will make sure it happens in the digital age too.

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Hubertus Heil	Federal Minister of Labour and Social Affairs, Germany
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