

**Project 24-03-20-SE****Katholische Arbeitnehmer-Bewegung Deutschlands e.V.**

(KAB Deutschlands)

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E-mail: [mechthild.hartmann-schaefers@kab.de](mailto:mechthild.hartmann-schaefers@kab.de)**New work – social and just! – Let good grow in Europe**

**Preliminary remark** on the current situation: it's been all change since last year. The global coronavirus pandemic has transformed our lives. To protect other people and ourselves, many things that used to be taken for granted are no longer possible. And it was and still is not possible for many European seminars to be attended in person. This is most regrettable – after all, the European idea also lives on encounters and dialogue – but may also be an opportunity for us to question the familiar and things we've grown accustomed to, and to give visions more scope in our lives and to champion them. Or to phrase it as Pope Francis did in his recently published social encyclical "Fratelli tutti":

*"The pain, uncertainty and fear, and the realisation of our own limitations, brought on by the pandemic, have only made it all the more urgent that we rethink our styles of life, our relationships, the organisation of our societies and, above all, the meaning of our existence." (no. 33)*

**Current developments of the (paid) work society**

Europe is in a process of digital transformation of the economy, labour and society. The EU Commission regards the "Industry 4.0" concept (or the Fourth Industrial Revolution) as an opportunity not only to manufacture high-quality products but also to encourage environmentally-friendly and socially sustainable production: another type of growth that is to improve the quality and not the quantity of life and living conditions in Europe. The EU sees itself as a future location for digitised and clean industry. National initiatives addressing digitisation are supported and networked.

Since back in April 2016, the activities to construct a European Digital Single Market have been converging in an initiative on EU level. Industry 4.0 heralds the transition to a new era of development of industrial society. Digitisation will also fundamentally change the structures and conditions of the world of work. New models of work are being created, new mobile places of work will develop, an extension and a transformation of working hours are already advancing now. Whereas work used to have its place, time and condition, now many things indicate that we are living in an upheaval which will alter the requirements for work, the understanding of work, the organisation of work and corporate organisation.

What can be seen at present is a fragmentation of work. On the one hand, this flexibility of working conditions presents new opportunities, especially for women as regards the work/life balance. On the other hand, the market-driven flexibility results in uncertainty and makes life planning difficult. In future, work will be less tied to time and place. The coronavirus pandemic has strongly accelerated this shift in the last year: home office has become the rule rather than the exception, insofar as work demands allow. In the meantime, many companies have cancelled the lease agreements for their office space. The process seems irreversible in many sectors, as the advantages are obvious for companies: good results with concomitant cost reductions. Many employees also see in mobile work an increase in leisure time, owing to the disappearance of travel time in conjunction with flexible time management and the freedom to be able to determine working hours oneself, at least partly. At the same time, though, this does mean that the former (spatial) separation of work and leisure time is increasingly disappearing, and the dividing line between work and private life becomes more and more blurred. A new “work culture” is emerging, one that opens up to the diversity of life situations and lifestyles. This means the work society is in a – currently rapid – process of transformation. It remains to be seen whether this is actually as positive as it seems to many. Many provisions of working time legislation in Europe no longer apply under the conditions of mobile working – break regulations, extra work, the 11-hour rule etc.<sup>1</sup> It also has to be said that the change in the work society is combined with increasing casualisation of working and living conditions, that existing rights are being undermined. The EU

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<sup>1</sup> c.f.: Hartmut Heidenreich: Work-Life-Balance und Homeoffice. Neue Freiheiten im Alltag, aber auch neue Herausforderungen, in: MISEREOR/ZASS-KAB/KEB Deutschland (ed.): ÜberLebensWerk ARBEIT – menschenwürdig und fair, Aachen 2020, pp. 80 - 82.

Commission already reacted some time ago to these developments with its initiative to create a European Pillar of Social Rights.

At the moment, it is not yet possible to foresee the impact of the coronavirus pandemic on the economic development in Europe and the European labour market. One thing that can already be said, though, is that unemployment is rising in certain sectors, e.g. in tourism, hotel and catering. For instance, in South Tyrol many women are currently losing their jobs, often part-time jobs. Throughout Europe, many young people have problems finding an apprenticeship. The situation at present features uncertainty and fear among many workers.

On the other hand, we can see that more and more people are in favour of a different economic system geared to people's needs and to human dignity. In recent months, we have come to realize which jobs are essential. The scale of values has shifted in the pandemic. Questions of climate change, the waste of resources and increasing pollution and destruction of our environment are also gaining in importance. This is associated with the desire for a different type of growth. The term "post-growth society" is also frequently used in this context. Not everything that is produced is also needed. Not everything created by (paid) work is social and serves people's needs. Decent, fair, social and just must be considered the guiding principles for "good work" in Europe.

### **Work – decent and fair**

It is important to focus on conditions of decent work in the digital age and to develop criteria for a social and just world of work. The International Labour Organization (ILO) is a specialised agency of the United Nations set up in 1919 and based in Geneva. The ILO's main aims are promoting decent work and social protection. The ILO's self-image and action are based on four basic principles:

- Freedom of association and the right to collective bargaining
- Elimination of forced labour
- Abolition of child labour
- Prohibition of discrimination in respect of employment and occupation

These fed into eight ILO Core Labour Standards confirmed unanimously in 1998 by the ILO General Assembly in a “ILO Declaration on Fundamental Principles and Rights of Work and its Follow-up”. They include these ILO labour and social standards: payment of a living wage, appropriate working hours, safe and healthy working conditions, legally binding labour relations. Increased efforts are still required worldwide to combat violations of human rights and to enable decent work.<sup>2</sup> According to the ILO, 40.3 million people work in modern slavery; 24.9 million of them in forced labour. 152 million 5 to 17-year-olds do child labour; 73 million of them in dangerous working conditions. Although every country in Europe has ratified the ILO standards, they are far from being fully honoured in Europe. Equal and fair pay for equal work, permanent employment contracts with fair social security, paid time off and safety at work are still not a reality for everyone in Europe. In point of fact, work intensification, precarious working conditions, digital monitoring, constant flexibility and availability around the clock are on the rise. Basically, the pressure on workers is rising in every sector, resulting in the alarming increase in physical and mental illnesses. In-work poverty is everyday life for more and more people even in Europe (working poor).<sup>3</sup> Social division is on the advance. Spain, for instance: the recently published official statistical data confirms that Spain is a low-wage country. “The vast majority of wages are 1,100 euros a month, manifestly below the average wage.”<sup>4</sup> In comparison: the average monthly income in Norway is 6,141 euros, in Romania 940 euros,<sup>5</sup> in Germany 3,994 euros.<sup>6</sup> The fact that social division is not only a reality in many European countries, but the split prevails throughout Europe, is also illustrated by the figures below, with the figures not yet taking into account the changes (that might be) caused by the coronavirus pandemic, as there are no current figures.

### **Employment rate – unemployment – youth unemployment – minimum wage**

**Employment rate:** The employment rate of adults aged between 15 and 64 years in Europe varies considerably. On average, the employment rate among women is

<sup>2</sup> See also: INFOR WBCA, February 2021, at: [www.mmtc-infor.com](http://www.mmtc-infor.com).

<sup>3</sup> For further information: [www.ilo.org/berlin](http://www.ilo.org/berlin).

<sup>4</sup> INFOR WBCA, February 2021, p. 6.

<sup>5</sup> The figures are from 2018. <https://www.laenderdaten.info/durchschnittseinkommen.php>; accessed on 16 February 2021.

<sup>6</sup> The figure for Germany is from 2019. <https://de.statista.com/themen/293/durchschnittseinkommen>.

lower and does not yet reflect the scope of activity. As the percentage of women in part-time jobs is higher, this subsequently means that women still do paid work to a lesser extent, and this has an impact on their social security. Some national examples of the employment rate from the third quarter of 2020: Malta 77.3% (men 85.7%, women 68.6%), Sweden 83.7% (men 84.5%, women 80.7%), Hungary 73.1% (men 80.7%, women 65.6%), Austria 77.1% (men 81%, women 74.2%), Czechia 76.3% (men 83%, women 68.9%).<sup>7</sup>

**Unemployment:** There were big differences in the EU unemployment rate in December 2020. The rate varies from Greece with 16.7% and Spain with 16.2% through France with 8.9% to Estonia with 7.9% and Cyprus with 7.3%.<sup>8</sup> This means that in Greece 786,000 people were out of work, in Spain 3,741,000, in France 2,614,000.<sup>9</sup> The latest forecasts estimate a marked increase in the unemployment figures this year. For instance, a rise is expected in Spain to 17.9%.<sup>10</sup>

**Youth unemployment:** This poses a serious problem, and is correspondingly high in the countries with high unemployment, as is to be expected. The figures record young people aged between 15 and 24 years. For December 2020, they are: Spain 4.7%, Greece 35%, Italy 29.7%, Sweden 23.8%, France 23.4%, Portugal 22.5%.<sup>11</sup> Here, too, the fear is that youth unemployment will further increase throughout Europe as a result of the pandemic.

**Minimum wage:** In-work poverty – a decisive factor in changing this is the introduction of a minimum wage, which nowhere near every country of the European Union has and whose amount not only varies greatly but is often far too low. There is a minimum wage in the following European countries: Luxembourg 12.38 euros, France 10.15 euros, the Netherlands 10.14 euros, Ireland 9.80 euros, Belgium 9.66 euros, Great Britain 9.35 euros, Germany 9.35 euros, Spain 5.76 euros,

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<sup>7</sup> As of March 2020: <https://de.statista.com/statistik/daten/studie/188794/umfrage/erwerbsquote-in-den-eu-laendern/>, accessed on 18 February 2021,

<sup>8</sup> <https://de.statista.com/statistik/daten/studie/160142/umfrage/arbeitslosenquote-in-der-eu/>; accessed on 18 February 2021.

<sup>9</sup> <https://de.statista.com/statistik/daten/studie/250187/umfrage/arbeitslosenzahlen-in-der-eu/>; accessed on 18 February 2021.

<sup>10</sup> <https://de.statista.com/statistik/daten/studie/374857/umfrage/prognose-zu-den-arbeitslosenquoten-in-der-eu/>; accessed on 18 February 2021.

<sup>11</sup> <https://de.statista.com/statistik/daten/studie/74795/umfrage/jugendarbeitslosigkeit-in-europa/>; accessed on 18 February 2021.

Slovenia 5.44 euros, Malta 4.48 euros, Portugal 3.83 euros, Greece 3.76 euros, Lithuania 3.72 euros.<sup>12</sup>

### **Activity society – a concept for the future of Europe?**

In view of these figures, which reveal problems in Europe, we need societal models for the future, such as the “activity society” model favoured for years by the Katholische Arbeitnehmer-Bewegung (KAB) [Catholic Workers’ Movements] in Germany and Austria, and the Katholischer Verband der Werktätigen Südtirols (KVV) [Catholic Association of South Tyrol Workers], and which is presented below.

It is human nature to be active, to do something, to create, to craft. A human being cannot be inactive. Often activity is equated with work, and work with paid gainful employment. However: work is more than gainful employment, and activity more than work. In our society, though, paid work is rated more highly, as it is associated with income and social security. Even small children know this. Judith, an 8-year-old friend of my eldest daughter, said to me with great regret: “My mum doesn’t work.” Her mum “only” looked after her five children, house and garden. Or as another friend said: “My dad works, and so does my mum. But it’s a mini job only.” She was actually referring to a part-time job as the responsible project manager for a large company in Cologne.

You are important and valuable to society if you do full-time paid work. Even better with a lot of overtime – because that increases the importance even more. At the bottom of our society are logically those who have no gainful work – not even a mini job: those out of work, who are quickly accused of not wanting to work at all, of being lazy and having a good time at the expense of the state.<sup>13</sup> Even a precarious job is better than no paid work.

Gainful work creates added value, which flows to capital, thus creating capital – ever higher profits are aimed for. More production means more turnover, more profit, more money – and even more production means even more money... and so on. It is

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<sup>12</sup> As of January 2020: <https://de.statista.com/statistik/daten/studie/37401/umfrage/gesetzliche-mindestloehne-in-der-eu/>; accessed on 18 February 2021.

<sup>13</sup> See also: Anna Mayr: “Die Elenden – Warum unsere Gesellschaft Arbeitslose verachtet und sie dennoch braucht“, Munich 2020.

known that revenues are unequally distributed, and that we live at the expense of other and future generations, because the economy exploits people and our nature. Environmental pollution, climate change... The current global coronavirus pandemic was not the first to show that things must and can be different. We need changes. We need visions for a better European future for all!

The KAB has had such a vision for many years: the activity society! The term “activity society” refers to a societal reform project, which aims to defeat the exclusive concentration on paid work.<sup>14</sup> All forms of female and male human work are recognised in the “activity society” as of equal rank and value to society, because they are human forms of expression on equal terms. The triad of work: private work like care work and nursing, voluntary work and gainful work are of equal value in the activity society. It is certain that nobody would disagree with that. Yet in our social system there is a huge gap between appreciative words and deeds. That can even be confirmed within gainful work. And, unfortunately, once again it is precisely what are termed female jobs that enjoy less (monetary) recognition. And we know that applause for carers in nursing homes is very nice, but it does not change the system. An appreciative one-off payment does not change it either. And the fear is that it is not only the important nursing work that will quickly be overlooked again after the end of the coronavirus pandemic.

In capitalistic democracy<sup>15</sup>, wage-earning work will be facing alienation: its purpose is not self-defined by the working human being or balanced by social consensus. Instead, it follows the economic “cost/benefit rationale” of the production of added value for the capital side. Many statements in recent months have stressed the relevance and importance of the economy time and again. The economy has to go on. We have to consume. In Germany, value added tax was even reduced for this purpose in the last year.

Alienated paid work is part and parcel of a business and progress ideology which, in view of the current life-threatening crises, requires a fundamental revision. Reforms and transformation processes must focus on every form of expression of human work, because work is the pivotal point of social issues. In future, too, human beings

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<sup>14</sup> cf. Michael Schäfers: Von der Arbeit zur Tätigkeit. Zeitdiagnosen und Wege wider die Resignation, Münster, Hamburg, London 2001.

<sup>15</sup> cf. Rainer Mausfeld: Angst und Macht. Herrschaftstechniken der Angsterzeugung in kapitalistischen Demokratien, Frankfurt a.M. 2019.

as subjects will be substantially defined by what they do. That is why the forms of organising human work remain a key element for a life worth living. Reform projects that are established “beyond” human work come to nothing in light of the significance still attached to work in our life (income, social security, social recognition). However, a mental change in values alone will not make a social and just future a reality for everyone. We need a fundamental structural transformation, a “metamorphosis”<sup>16</sup> to the “activity society”. A new European policy for humankind’s freedom is required.

The debate about a future “activity society” was primarily a reaction to the crisis of the “gainful work society” at the end of the last millennium. Today this crisis has not been overcome by any means, though; instead, it is getting worse in light of the apparently inexorable destruction of our natural resources. Only if and when we find new forms of working and experiment with them will we be able to stop the further commoditisation of the human being and nature. Otherwise, the “age of depletion”<sup>17</sup> will continue, finally bringing humankind and our planet to the limits of overload and excessive use. New possibilities of financial security are necessary for everyone in order to initiate and secure the “metamorphosis”. The fact that the “activity society” is again discussed in the debate on introducing an unconditional basic income as guarantee of freedom, substantiates its necessity and relevance to the current situation as a model of work and society of the future.

In an age in which many envisage the end of the world as the end of capitalism and alienated work, the “activity society” is not least an expression of the hope for an “ecological conversion”<sup>18</sup> to a solidarity-based economy, to regional development and to regenerative and eco-friendly production methods that make a good life possible for everyone. The requisite transformations will have to be fought for. “We are now standing at a crossroads in history. We are failing but we have not yet failed. We can still fix this. It’s up to us.”<sup>19</sup>

Below, I will present the cornerstones of the activity society reform project in condensed form by means of four propositions:

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<sup>16</sup> cf. Ulrich Beck: *Die Metamorphose der Welt*, Berlin 2017.

<sup>17</sup> cf. Wolfgang Martynkewicz: *Das Zeitalter der Erschöpfung. Die Überforderung des Menschen durch die Moderne*, Berlin 2013.

<sup>18</sup> Pope Francis’s encyclical *Laudato si’*: About the concern for the common home, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, Rome 24 May 2015, nos. 216-221.

<sup>19</sup> Greta Thunberg: *Ich will, dass ihr in Panik geratet. Meine Reden zum Klimawandel*, Frankfurt a.M. 2019, p. 64.

Human work is the crux of social issues.

The paid work society constitutes one-sidedness.

The “activity society” wants to create more distributive justice.

The “activity society” wants to initiate and develop new forms of work.

### 1. *Human work is the crux of social issues*

In light of climate disasters, the overexploitation of natural resources and the growing casualisation of work in Europe and worldwide, a reform project for the “paid work society” is more urgent now than ever. The requisite socio-ecological transformation will only succeed if and when work develops with the aim of achieving an “activity-oriented society”. It is crucial to enable greater autonomy. “Anyone who attributes lack of freedom unavoidably to any aspect of life, can and will immediately find himself in a world in which this lack of freedom dominates everything. The demand of freedom is always absolute (...). This means the demand has to be to transform all work into activity, all heteronomous human action into autonomous action. Even the last residue of work is subject to the demand of transformation into activity”<sup>20</sup>, said the sociologist and publicist Ralf Dahrendorf three decades ago now. In view of the casualisation of work, these demands are more relevant than ever: it is a matter of abolishing alienated work and a transformation towards greater freedom, human dignity and fairness. Anything that creates good work is social.

All work must be humane and fair everywhere in the world. And there is inhumane work not just in the textile factories of India, in gold-mining in Peru or in coltan extraction in the Congo. We also find it in Europe, for instance in the meat-processing industry on our doorstep, where the workers are exploited and have to live crammed together in disgraceful accommodation. On-call work is just as unfair as the video surveillance of workers. The fact that people have to take on several jobs to be able to live on their income is a scandal.

### 2. *The paid work society constitutes one-sidedness*

Our society focused on gainful work grants “productive” work precedence over “reproductive” work, the majority of which has to be done worldwide by women.

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<sup>20</sup> Quoted after: Horst Kern / Michael Schumann: Das Ende der Arbeitsteilung. Rationalisierung in der industriellen Produktion, Munich 1984, p. 326.

Productive work increases prosperity and wealth, whereas reproductive work at best forms the precondition for this, thus becoming degraded to the “appendage” to gainful work. Women are men’s back-up, as it were. With a few exceptions, the social security system still concentrates solely on paid work as access requirement. Entitlements acquired beyond gainful work, perhaps through bringing up children and care, are regarded at best as “supplementary benefits”. By contrast, the “activity society” aims at a clear societal and social valorisation of human activities “beyond” gainful work. This includes domestic work, community or voluntary work and unpaid care work (domestic care, bringing up children etc.). *Work is more than paid employment! All forms of human work are of equal value!* In the activity society model, the precondition is introducing an unconditional basic living income and also taking into account unpaid work relevant to society in the social security systems.

### 3. *The “activity society” wants to create greater distributive justice*

As a result of the current collapse in economic growth in Europe, the scope for redistribution is becoming more and more limited. In addition, the current economic growth is having a divisive effect. It is precisely the rampant growth of financial capitalism that has brought gains to only a few and is leaving the majority empty-handed. Improving the existing wealth, organising it more intelligently and thereby creating or maintaining long-term values for us and future generations means sustainable qualitative growth. As a consequence, the existing wealth needs redistributing in order to approach the ever-increasing social divisions at home and globally. The distribution issue is the prime task of sustainable governance!

### 4. *The “activity society” wants to initiate and develop new forms of work*

In his encyclical “Laudato si”, Pope Francis recalled the basic functions of all forms of human work, which have a long tradition in the social doctrine of the Church. It is a matter of cultivating and preserving the contribution human work has to make to building the “common home”. Working means helping preserve creation.<sup>21</sup> The permanent acceleration of life and the rhythms of work “contrasts with the naturally slow pace of biological evolution. Moreover, the goals of this rapid and constant change are not necessarily geared to the common good or to integral and

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<sup>21</sup> cf. Pope Francis’ encyclical ‘Laudato si’, op. cit., nos. 13-15.

sustainable human development.”<sup>22</sup> We work too quickly, too little “in tune with nature”, keeping too little an eye on the big picture and on the situation of humankind as a whole. We work until we drop.<sup>23</sup> That is why we need new forms of work. Key questions here are: what role can and must human work have in this in future? What is “superfluous” work we could discontinue immediately to create room for manoeuvring?<sup>24</sup> Where is work “part” of a system that excessively consumes non-renewable resources which we therefore have to discontinue in order to survive? For what jobs is conversion in the pipeline for transforming them into useful and autonomous activities for society? What jobs are harmful to the common good and make no contribution to a sustainable circular economy? These questions are on the agenda. It is time for us to open up the new forms of work to a broad social debate! It is time to start taking steps which, as described in the “activity society” model, strike out in a different direction – towards a just and social European society.

### **Acting for “good” work that is social and just**

The European workers’ movements and trade unions in particular have a key role to play in humanising the world of work and putting this into practice. It is about securing decent working conditions in a socially just Europe. As we have observed, the social issue is coming to a head. Workers’ rights are being undermined. Pressure, competition and the priority of maximising profit over the interests and needs of working people are resulting in a decrease in the quality of life and intensifying social divisions. That is why it is important, in addition to countries exchanging experience and promoting mutual understanding, to develop political courses of action beyond national borders and jointly draw up concrete areas for action and steps, with the aim of securing decent working conditions in Europe and boosting the social dimension of the EU in the digital age. This is also to give new impetus to designing a “European social model” and further developing the networks of Christian workers’ organisations and trade unions in Europe, and to further strengthen them as stakeholders in the digital transformation process and in social dialogue. This has not been possible in an attendance seminar owing to the current situation. Nevertheless, measures finally

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<sup>22</sup> *ibid*, no. 18.

<sup>23</sup> cf. Hans Joachim Rieseberg: *Arbeit bis zum Untergang. Die Geschichte der Naturzerstörung durch Arbeit*, Munich 1992.

<sup>24</sup> cf. David Graeber: *Bullshitjobs. Vom wahren Sinn der Arbeit*, Stuttgart 2018.

have to be designated that point in the direction described and can give impetus to the common European networking work.

- The pay for work done must be enough for a decent life. To ensure this, a minimum wage must be 60% of the gross monthly income of full-time workers. That is why KAB Germany calls for a statutory hourly minimum wage of at least 13.69 euros. The assessment basis described above for stipulating a minimum wage is also transferable to other European countries. Although the establishment of minimum standards on a European level is frequently discussed, it is difficult as the EU is not an economically homogeneous group of states.<sup>25</sup>
- The level of collective bargaining coverage must be increased. For instance, public contracts or business promotion grants should be awarded only to companies subject to a collective bargaining agreement. National increases in collective bargaining coverage also help strengthen the rights of workers in Europe. Trade unions have an important part to play in this.
- To guarantee social security for everyone, we champion an unconditional basic income and an old-age pension based on solidarity. Hence KAB Germany supports the current “European Citizens’ Initiative for Unconditional Basic Income”.<sup>26</sup>
- To make sure that work is humane and fair for everyone, we need effective European supply chain legislation that obliges companies to pay fair wages along the entire value chain and to comply with mandatory environmental standards. This is essential because the production of goods and the provision of services is less and less tied to specific places owing to globalisation. This is evident in Europe not just from the example of logistics workers and nurses or care workers from other European countries (“live-ins”). The rights of working people and social standards are undermined in what are termed “value chains” – right through to slavery-like conditions. It is therefore an

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<sup>25</sup> See also the European corridor model: <https://library.fes.de>; accessed on 24 February 2021.

<sup>26</sup> [www.ebi-grundeinkommen.de](http://www.ebi-grundeinkommen.de)

important step that the European Parliament's Legal Affairs Committee voted for European supply chain legislation in January 2021.<sup>27</sup>

- European standards are required for remote work. This is all the more urgent as, at present, more and more people (have to) work from home. In January 2021, a parliamentary majority called on the Commission to present a directive for a "Right to Disconnect". The motion drafted by Maltese politician Alex Agius Saliba states that the right to disconnect is a fundamental right which "is an inseparable part of the new working patterns in the new digital era."<sup>28</sup>

New forms of work require new forms of regulation to make them social and just. This is where the European labour movements and trade unions are called on to campaign for fair and decent working conditions – in Europe and worldwide.

*Cologne, February 2021*

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<sup>27</sup> [www.lieferkettengesetz.de](http://www.lieferkettengesetz.de)

<sup>28</sup> [www.netzpolitik.org](http://www.netzpolitik.org); accessed on 24 February 2021.