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The role of trade unions in a rapidly changing world

Reiner Hoffmann, the leading trade unionist in Germany, talks about migration, Brexit and the European Union

Read this interview in German.

Brexit, the gig economy, a looming trade war and migration: Today, trade unions are facing various challenges on the European continent and worldwide. Hannes Alpen spoke to Reiner Hoffmann, Chairman of the German Trade Union Confederation (DGB), to find out how trade unions are adapting to a changing economy and recent developments in the EU.

The European elections are one year away. What challenges do the trade unions see in connection with Europe?

> What was once the European peace project is on the rocks. We need to find a way out of the multiple crises – the financial, economic and job market crises, and, above all, the major crisis of confidence that is causing the noticeable shift to the political right in many countries. We don't have much time to change our course. Fundamental decisions have to be made now.
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> The composition of the next European Parliament is central to the question of how we want to live in Europe in the future. This election will decide whether the EU will revert back to being a conglomerate of small states acting as satellites of the major economic powers, or whether it can play the role of a political and social heavyweight in our globalised world. This will also determine the extent to which the European Union will be democratised. The European Parliament, not the Commission, must become the guardian of the EU Treaties and the law-making body.

Freedom of movement for workers is one of the foundations of European integration. While it benefits a large number of employees, it is also the cause of great concern among many of them. We saw how it contributed to Brexit. How are the trade unions handling this issue?

Freedom of movement for workers is an incredible achievement. But the rules have to be tight so as not to invite criminal employers to exploit workers through wage and social dumping. The reform of the Posted Workers Directive was a first step towards putting a stop to this business model. It ensures that employees receive the same wages for the same work in the same place, and that the conditions regarding working hours and paid annual leave are the same from day one.

Now it is up to the member states to meet the obligations they committed themselves to by proclaiming the European Pillar of Social Rights. These include stringent controls by labour inspectorates, social security institutions and customs authorities. The next logical step is to rapidly establish the coordinating European Labour Authority.

The Brexit referendum was a warning signal, and we are taking it very seriously. In the wake of this citizens' vote, British employees are facing a severe decline in labour and social law standards. This is why we are fighting to ensure that the European social acquis, from co-determination in the workplace and basic trade union rights to social and labour law, is adopted in the future treaty with the United Kingdom. Having the same rules will allow us to protect British and EU citizens from social and wage dumping in the future.

Migration from Africa and the Middle East has become even more of a political issue than internal migration. What is your stance on this?

The right wing, which extends all the way into the CSU (the German political party 'Christian Social Union'), is banking on deterrence: refugees and migrants are to live here under conditions that are as inhospitable as possible, for example in collective accommodation or with coupons instead of cash. The idea is that Germany should under no circumstances show a 'friendly face', as this provides an incentive for refugees and migrants.

I consider this to be a fatal strategy and would like to make the case for a pragmatic, yet humane approach. Asylum law stipulates case-by-case reviews, but we are seeing increasingly bigger deviations from this principle. This is not a positive development. It is time for an Immigration Act that offers the opportunity to develop transparent criteria regarding who can come to Germany to live and work here, and on what conditions.

We need common political solutions on the European level. But we all know how difficult these are to attain. And, of course, we need to organise support in the countries of origin. However, this support must amount to more than 'conventional development aid'. More importantly, we need a fair trade policy that promotes economic

development and is not geared solely towards ensuring advantages for industrial nations is far more important.

Trade unions were strong critics of international trade agreements such as TTIP. Now the situation has been reversed. The race to impose protective tariffs has begun. How do you see that?

We are fundamentally in favour of a rule-based trade system that allows both sides to benefit and brings advantages to the people. This is what we have always campaigned for, including in the debates about the TTIP and CETA free trade agreements. Fair trade has nothing to do with protectionism or export dumping. In these cases, it is ultimately always the employees who suffer. And in the event of a trade conflict, the economy suffers, too, so there are no winners.

The trade unions are facing a major challenge themselves. Digitalisation and economic reorganisation could cause the proportion of unionised employees to sink even further. How are you handling this issue?

While the nature of human labour is changing fundamentally as a result of digitalisation, it is not becoming redundant. And the trade unions have already proven that they can support any type of structural change and shape it in a way that it is fair. However, we definitely need a legal regulatory framework that will restrain digital capitalism. This includes redefining the concepts of employer and employee. It turns out that there is a great deal of bogus self-employment among many click and crowd workers. This means that they do indeed have one or more employers, and these employers need to shoulder the appropriate responsibility. Digital day labour isn't in anybody's interest.

In order to leverage the opportunities that digitalisation offers, we need major investment in education and lifelong learning, as well as a right to further education. This is the only way for us to remain employable and competitive. On the other hand, scaremongers who unsettle millions of people by making undifferentiated prophecies, claiming that professional experience, skills and knowledge won't be worth anything anymore tomorrow, have not understood the challenges we are facing and are driving people into the arms of populists.



Reiner Hoffmann

Berlin

Reiner Hoffmann is Chairman of the German Trade Union Confederation (DGB). His work focuses on policy matters, social policies, co-determination, international and European trade union policy.

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