

Precariousness versus Flexicurity

The bad news on massive dismissals are multiplying: the European bank has dismissed 50,000 people the past years, air lines as a whole 120,000, after the 11th of September 2001, multitude of great companies announced and realised dismissals the last years: Opel (GM) 4000, Chrysler/Mercedes 6000, Ford 30,000, the four greatest German banks 30,000, Fiat, the German Bundesbahn and many other firms, just to mention some examples. Scientific studies foresee beyond that the loss of millions of jobs during the next years, mainly in the service sector (banks, insurance companies, administrations etc.).

In this context, the EU-ministers for Labour and Social Subjects assured at the beginning of 2002 that the main objective of the European Union in labour matter will be the one to advance in the great principles of the Summit of Lisbon, in order that Europe is able to reach full employment till the end of the decade. How is it possible that after almost thirty years of structural unemployment, the politicians in charge continue saying these silly things? It seems that they do not or do not want to understand that labour is no longer the solution to our social, economical, environmental, and other problems, but that the dependency of it as the unique mechanism for the distribution of the rent has become its main reason. This mechanism has expired a long time ago. It is no longer possible to link the necessary income for a worthy life, (housing, consumption, foods etc.), the access to social security (health, unemployment, old-age-pension), the definition of the social status and even the personal identity, to this one and only mechanism. It is simply to charge it too much. Neither with more economical growth, nor with better qualifications of the workers, nor with new products or new markets, not even with social dumping we are going to return to full employment, such as it has been understood until now, and those who keep on proclaiming this or are stupid or they lie.

Every day its getting more obvious that the process of economical expansion which would be necessary to guarantee a job to each citizen - in the traditional conditions - is no longer possible and –taking into account the environmental problem and the relation to the third-world-countries- not even desirable. This fact makes it indispensable to reflect and to debate on alternative –or at least complementary- mechanisms or, if we want to avoid this increasing social process of dualisation and marginalisation of every time more social groups, as we have observed it during the past three decades. Our political representatives have avoided this necessary debate until today, clinging to economical growth as the exclusive remedy to solve this problem. Specially for the left it seems to be difficult to come off of this model and their answer to the crisis of the labour has been during long time (and in some cases it continues being) the attempt to extend it to still not commercialised, regulated and professionalised fields to increase this way the supply of jobs (for example, housewives).

Nowadays “labour” is no longer oriented to the production of products of first necessity but it has become an objective by itself. We don’t work anymore to produce but we produce to create or maintain work. Everything is taken for granted and all possible risks are taken if it guarantees jobs. This is an erroneous and fatal process without precedents. Work, throughout history, has changed from a natural impulse to a social obligation, and while in

the past many dealt to avoid it, in the present time, it has become the most appreciated good for almost 20 million unemployed in the UE.

We claim the right to work, but what we claim in reality is a worthy existence, a dignified life. Throughout the process of industrialization (in which the protestant ethics dominated with its motto "those who do not work shall not eat"), the fact to eat has become the equivalent to exist, to live and to work; that is to say, it has treated as equivalent the objective (worthy existence) and the mean to reach it (work).

The industrial society has separated for the first time work from the other vital relations, turning it into a specific activity to be carried out in a certain time and a certain place especially destined to it. In the past and still today in other cultures work in the modern sense of the word did not exist. The term unemployment appears for the first time in 1889 to designate people without fixed salary. The possibilities of the automatization and diminution of the amount of work appear as a threat, and the workers are themselves forced to fight for the remaining jobs. Even the most stupid, boring and dangerous jobs are defended with teeth and claws. The English author Eaton speaks of "latter day flagellants singing the praises of the industrialist work"¹, and Ivan Illich considers the system of the industrial society like a species of substitute for religion².

In the future we don't only have to work less, but also to experience the work as a sensefull activity, that means, we have to work otherwise. The fact to work, without sense nor purpose, cannot be described as work. To continue investing to give jobs to more people when the limit of products and services has been reached (and even exceeded) is absurd and represents an attack against the human dignity. Not even the good intentions to offer to the people the opportunity to gain their bread honestly change a bit of this affirmation. The objective of this work continues being as useless as to push wheelbarrow from left to right and then return it back to the place it was before. Dahrendorf describes the phenomenon of the fictitious work carried out, mainly, in administrative and bureaucratic departments³. The work must be oriented again towards the development of the personality and must offer the possibility of self-realization. With other words, to allow to a greater capacity of expression and spontaneity, autonomy and personal effort.

To fulfil this demand, the work of the future will have to satisfy the following necessities, demanded mainly by the younger generations:

- More solidararian structures of the social relations
- Elimination of social and economic inequalities, as well as of the hierarchic structures.
- Work with sense and disappearance of the alienation .
- Rejection of the consumptionism

¹ Eaton, Jack, *Co-operatives and new technology*, in: industrial relations journal, Vol 16/4, 1985, pgs. 47-52

² Illich, Ivan, *Schattenarbeit oder vernakuläre Tätigkeiten – Zur Kolonisierung des informellen Sektors*, in: Technologie und Politik 15, February 1980, pgs. 48-63

³ Dahrendorf, Ralf, *Wenn der Arbeitsgesellschaft die Arbeit ausgeht*, in: Matthes, Joachim, ed., *Krise der Arbeitsgesellschaft – Verhandlungen des 21. Deutschen Soziologentages in Bamberg 1982*, Frankfurt, New York 1983, pgs. 25-37

- Total determination of the forms of the work in the sense of reduction of the division of the work
- Suppression of the distribution of proper rolls for both sexes .
- Overcome the isolation of the familiar cell
- Reintegration of life and work .
- Subjective emancipation and development of the personality.

We still do not know if the society of the future will be called leisure-, communication-, or knowledge-society, or in any other form. What seems definitely to be clear is that it will no longer be the labour society as we have known it until now. And the sooner we accept this fact, the sooner we will be able to reflect and to experience on alternatives and/or complementary mechanisms, since work or labour will not disappear, but it will no longer have the same form and importance than until now. On the one hand, because it will no longer be the exclusive spine of our existence, defining our social roll and even our personal identity, and on the other hand, because of its structure. That is to say, the ideal of our predecessors to get an employment with 15 or 20 years in a company or, even better, as an official in the administration and to retire with 65, is absolutely obsolete today, and not only because the processes of production, and with it the –span of the companies are today much shorter, but also because this former dream has become an authentic nightmare for the great majority of us.

But how to avoid that this exigency for more flexibility, which is also a consequence of the combination of the effects of globalisation and technical progress, becomes a synonym of precariousness? In other words, how to obtain this necessity of greater flexibility, as much in the interest of the companies as for the workers and employees, offers at the same time the necessary security that allows everybody to develop his life project, with all what this entails: to create a family, to buy a house or an apartment etc.? These conditions do not occur at the moment for the majority of the young active population – especially in Spain- as it can be deduced by the fact that the great majority of them still lives with their parents (more than 80% of 30 years) and that Spain has the lowest birth-rate of the world. The key-question is, how to compensate this greater flexibility with more security, in sum, how to create this "flexicurity", term with which in the title of this article? The only valid answer to this question is called 'basic income', understood as a salary paid by the State to each member of the society of plenary right, even if he/she does not want to work in remunerated job, without taking in consideration if he is rich or poor or, to say it in another form, independently of he/she has other possible sources of rent, and without concerning with whom he/she lives. To make it short: it is a payment for the mere fact to have the condition of citizen, and not, as it is understood, for example, by the Basque administration, as a social payment for needed people and in precarious situations. If we are able to create the same or even more wealth working less, thanks – above all - to the new technologies it turns out to be counter-productive to insist in labour as the unique mechanism to distribute this wealth. To ignore this fact causes the situation we have now: we are creating every time more poverty, misery and marginalisation in the middle of abundance. 'Basic Income' seems to me a more logical idea, understood as a territorial dividend, for each citizen by virtue of the equal co-property of the territory of the nation, as it has been formulated by the Belgian author Joseph Charlier already more than a century and half ago, in 1848. The

concept of the basic income might sound today to many very utopian. But it is it probably as much as in due time the idea of public education or the general suffrage. Time will show.

Albert Einstein affirmed that the survival of the humanity requires new forms of thinking and that we cannot solve problems using the same type of approaches that we used when we caused them⁴. After more than three decades of growing structural unemployment in the EU-Countries it should be allowed to reflect on alternative –or at least complementary- approaches to solve the problem to the conventional approach “economical growth”.

Dr. Hans Harms
San Sebastián, July 2004

⁴ Seeling, C. Ed., *Ideas and Opinions by Albert Einstein*, Laurel Edition, Dell Publishing Co., New York, 1973