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Abstract

‘Flexicurity’ – mankind must be at its heart

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In his encyclical *Laborem Exercens*, Pope John Paul II stresses that human work is “the pivotal point of the social issue”. According to a 2006 survey conducted by the University of Linz, 60% of all unemployed people suffer from low self-esteem and are more likely to experience a number of somatic and mental illnesses than those in employment. (To give one example, the suicide rate amongst these people is eight times higher than in the rest of society). *Laborem Exercens* states that capital is the object, but the working man is the *subject*, who must be accorded a greater value. Exploitative working conditions, inhumane pay, the exploiting of poverty in a way which forces people to accept almost any conditions: all of these are unfair practices and must be made illegal. Unfortunately, we have in Europe many forms of hourly-paid, unsecured and uninsured occupations where people earn less than the legal minimum wage.

Flexibility is acceptable in small measures (for example, when it comes to taking children and the family into account). Flexibility should in no way lead people into situations where they can be blackmailed into accepting work under ignoble conditions (i.e. slave labour, ‘1 euro jobs’). How *flexible* must we become in geographical terms? Families should not be ripped apart, people should not be removed from their way of life against their will. Security cannot remain an empty promise. How *secure* is social life, when people today are taking on a growing flexibility in their lives anyway? How can we safeguard lasting relationships, child-friendly conditions and human dignity? If flexicurity means supporting the unemployed on a long-term basis, then that is wonderful. However, we should not think that we can create new jobs just by reducing a period of notice. What that creates is fear and dependency and, for these reasons, flexicurity ought to be enshrined in other guarantees of social security.

The Austrian churches’ *Ökumenische Sozialwort* (ÖSW) (2003) defines the following as quality criteria for ‘good’ work: ‘health, a good work-life balance, reasonable working times, realistic mobility requirements’ (ÖSW, Nr. 170). Of particular importance to the church is the *Sunday off*. Human dignity does not just involve rest and recuperation, but rather *shared* free time for relationships with other people. We are not created to be individuals, but rather to be part of a community. To a certain extent, we are *there to be there for others*. Having Sunday off (only with unavoidable exceptions) brings this human dignity back into our lives every week.

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In Europe, we are witnessing at the same time both high unemployment and – in contradiction to this – the effects of overwork. The need to perform sometimes turns us almost into machines until we collapse, from illness, physical or mental, at 40 or 50, even though we are not yet technically old. Millions of people suffer from serious illnesses caused by stress and burnout. Simultaneously, other people are suffering from the fact that their work skills are not being used.

It is not a matter, therefore, of how we can artificially generate new work so people have something to do. Rather, it comes down to how we can distribute work. Austria's statistics point to approximately 250,000 unemployed. At the same time, people are putting in overtime that calculations demonstrate would amount to 200,000 extra jobs (40 hours per week). True, one job cannot simply be exchanged for another. And yet, flexicurity must mean that overtime is heavily taxed and the creation of new jobs results in tax breaks. The following could be more heavily taxed: the consumption of resources and energy or methods of production that are harmful to the environment, productivity or earning money from gambling. (Cf ÖSW, Nr. 192.206).

In the *Ökumenischer Sozialwort*, churches call upon "... political figures to commit themselves to common EU regulations in order to contain the practice of companies trying to undercut one another, a practice which is damaging for all, when it comes to taxation, social and ecological regulations through cooperation." (ÖSW, Nr. 204). States' competition with one another to see who can offer the lowest social conditions must be halted, and countries with a high level of social security should lead by example.

Misinterpreting flexibility can cause great suffering. Europe needs to stand up more against states that wear out their social security systems and, in so doing, create a new, impoverished proletariat. In order to build a Europe for the future, this task is at least as decisive as efforts to maintain a balanced budget. If economic reforms fail to eradicate poverty but rather force more people into precarious working set-ups, or take away their support networks, the social follow-up costs, the quality of production and public safety will suffer. Flexicurity can work if it encompasses a high level of care for the people concerned as well as generous economic cover, and if it takes fair account of the limits of flexibility.