



I focus

michael briguglio

Dr Michael Briguglio
is a Sociologist and
Senior Lecturer at the
University of Malta.

www.michaelbriguglio.com

Precarious workers without a voice

On 12 and 13 June, an important vote on the directive on the rights of platform workers will be taken at EU level. This will be held during an Employment, Social Policy, Health, and Consumer Affairs Council meeting, featuring respective Ministers from the EU Member States.

In this regard, the Brussels Times (9 May) reported that for platform workers – such as those associated with riding and driving services, the approval of this directive can determine the respective status of such workers (self-employer or employed), their relationship with platforms and the transparency of their algorithms.

Such workers, sometimes referred to as ‘digital slaves’, are basically at the mercy of digital orders and end up working very long hours at very low wages, with a lack of rights such as sick leave, and without a collective entity which represents them. Despite the hustle and bustle of this work, such workers are isolated in a brave new world of cutthroat competition and lack of collective action.

Let us hope that Malta’s government supports the proposals being made in this Directive. Unfortunately, these are not workers represented by trade unions, meaning that they have less (if any at all) bargaining power with the State.

The voices who speak up for the rights of such workers include the Church, some NGOs affiliated with it and some other NGOs on the left-wing of the political spectrum.

On workers day, for example, the Archbishop stated that even



though “foreign workers make up over a quarter of our total labour force”, “practically all services and key economic sectors would collapse without their presence among us, feeling welcomed and thanked is not what many experience on a daily basis.”

On a similar note, the Justice and Peace Commission referred to the “more than 40,000 non-EU citizens currently working in Malta – 77% of whom were earning under €20,000 a year in 2021”, adding that they “deserve to be treated with respect and dignity, and not forced to work in an exploitative labour, as marked under conditions often akin to modern-day slavery.”

The Commission expressed its concern that despite paying National Insurance contributions, they do not receive a pension. In its words, “Without any realistic possibility of making Malta their home, non-EU workers do not benefit totally from the fiscal social contract in which people pay tax and, in turn, receive public goods and services, including a pension. Specifically, in the absence of bilateral or

EU-wide agreements with their countries of origin, these workers, once they return to their country of origin, can never expect any pension benefit in return for the National Insurance contributions they would have paid over the years. Moreover, despite contributing with their effort and money to the common good and the social and economic development of the country, they are often treated as a subservient underclass who never really belong.”

The Peace and Justice Commission also referred to figures tabled in Parliament, which show that National Insurance contributions by foreign workers had increased by 570% from 2012 till 2021, so as to reach over €1 billion in total. During the same time-period, these workers also paid over €1.3 billion in income tax, with the yearly total increasing from nearly €48 million in 2012 to €250 million in 2021.

On Workers’ Day, *Zminijietna* – Voice of the Left also referred to the ‘precariousness and low wages’, which are mostly faced by ‘low skilled workers, irregular immigrants and foreign na-

tionals (TCN); and put forward a number of policy proposals in this regard.

Echoing the position of Malta’s largest trade unions and a manifesto proposal by Labour in the last general election, *Zminijietna* called for a mandatory trade union membership for low-income workers. Indeed, both the GWU and UHM are arguing that trade union membership is the best bet for such workers. On the other hand, the Young Christian Workers (*Zghazagh Haddiema Nsara* - ZHN) was recently quoted by Newsbook (May 15) as referring to this as a ‘violation of human dignity and democracy’, even if ‘unionisation is an empowering and liberating act, affirming the dignity of all work and workers’. ZHN also criticised trade unions ‘that have not uttered but a whisper on the death of Jean Paul Sofia, or hundreds of other workers who have lost life or limb on construction sites, protect workers from precarity’.

Despite its different point of departure, namely workers’ rights, ZHN’s position tallies with that of the business lob-

bies, as well as legal experts, who believe that this is a breach of human rights. Though I tend to favour mandatory trade union membership, I do see the perils referred to by ZHN, particularly if unions become too institutionalised within state structures. On the other hand, it is quite clear that unionised workers have a much stronger voice in policymaking.

In the meantime, last 14 November, The Malta Independent had quoted Parliamentary Secretary for Social Dialogue, Andy Ellul, who stated that during this year the government will launch a study as regarding Wage Regulation Orders and related legal anomalies concerning employment. We can even go back to the 2013 general election campaign, when Labour had frequently referred to precarious work. Incidentally, such work seems to have increased in the past decade.

Precarious work is not only the order of the day for platform workers, but also for many workers with fancy titles in high-skilled jobs in other sectors. Again, they are deprived of a voice to represent them.