



*Democracy at work is key to mapping out an inclusive and sustainable way forward."*

## Conclusion

Launching Next Generation EU, the EU's plan to support recovery and resilience in coming out of the Covid-19 crisis, Commissioner for Economy Paolo Gentiloni, said, 'From the tragedy of the coronavirus pandemic, Europe has chosen to seize a unique opportunity: to restart our economies on a new, more sustainable basis' (European Commission 2020b).

However, the findings presented in this chapter cast a more pessimistic light on our ability to make the most of this unique opportunity. The continuing decline of workers' voice threatens to undermine if not undo many of its positive effects on economic and social renewal and sustainability. Furthermore, it is worrying that although active union membership is seen to contribute to high levels of democratic conviction and willingness to attain knowledge and engage with societal developments, organisational density in Europe is still falling, not rising. We have also looked at some of the economic impacts of workers' voice: that more democracy at work correlates with a more equally shared 'pie' is a point not to be forgotten. Yet recent trends of shareholder extraction of profits not only take us further away from a sustainable stakeholder model of economic growth, but have also more immediately eroded companies' ability to muster the financial resources needed to come out of the current crisis.

The coronavirus has upended our ways of working and living, and has pushed our healthcare and welfare systems to their breaking points. We have seen in this chapter how the knock-on effects in the world of work, from protecting the health of workers to forcing a complete reassessment of whether, when and where we work, are intricately related to the institutions of workers' participation at all levels of companies, from the local workplace to company boards. Building upon strong and competent health and safety representation at the workplace is key to implementing sound policies to overcome this health crisis and relaunch economic activities as we seek ways out of it. Yet astonishingly, the Commission's roadmap towards lifting lockdowns does not include workplace health and safety considerations, and its updated work programme, supposedly revised to take the impact of the pandemic into account, contains no measures to make workplaces safer in the wake of the coronavirus outbreak.

Massive restructuring, both within companies and across sectors, is already underway. In theory, many of the institutions designed to address these challenges at the local and transnational levels of companies are present, but practice paints this in a sombre light. Our large-scale survey of European Works Council and SE-Works Council members shows that the capacity of EWCs and SE-WCs to effectively play their intended role to address transnational restructuring remains woefully inadequate. Lacking a robust and enforceable framework, restructuring is an obstacle course for workplace representatives. And it is hard to legislate attitudes: we have seen that managements' unwillingness to engage constructively and proactively with the

representatives of their international workforces is a persistent impediment. A patchy and non-transparent regime of confidentiality requirements further hampers information and consultation procedures. It is not apparent that EWCs and SE-WCs have been able to rise to the challenge of engaging effectively with the complex range of measures adopted within multinational companies. In light of the deficiencies in both the regulation and the practice of transnational information and consultation rights that we have documented over the years in these pages, this may not be surprising, but it does beg the question: if EWCs and SE-WCs were not involved in the company-wide response to the complex challenges of this singular pandemic, then will they ever be?

Finally, with respect to board-level employee representation, we have seen some isolated examples of progress towards gender parity, but there still remains much to do.

### Workers' participation is a resource, not an obstacle

The Covid-19 pandemic has wreaked havoc on our ways of living and working, and the path out of the crisis is far from straightforward. We must constantly re-evaluate our strategies for dealing with its effects on the world of work, and large-scale restructuring of sectors and companies in the offing further clouds our view of the future.

Democracy at work is key to mapping out an inclusive and sustainable way forward. Considering the overwhelming complexity of the challenges ahead, making space for workers' voice in all its forms serves to address the needs of the workforce as a key stakeholder, and in this way to generate and adapt collectively agreed sustainable measures over the long run. It is of some comfort that social dialogue processes were resumed in the early phases of the pandemic, both at a national and to a certain extent at the supranational level. However, our analysis suggests that this resurgence has been patchy and, in the case of some Member States, qualitatively weak and ineffective. At the European level, there is a noticeable dynamic of strong sectoral reactivity to the economic and social shocks, but it is mainly oriented towards the urgent adaptation of sectoral public policies to make the immediate effects of the lockdowns as bearable as possible for companies and their workers – it is less geared towards long-term exit strategies and future solutions.

The European Commission's recommendations for the Member States in the Annual Sustainable Growth Survey, particularly those which aim to develop more sustainable solutions for future industrial relations beyond the crisis, must be taken seriously if we are to address the immense challenge of the pandemic and its aftermath. The declarations by EU leaders that social dialogue must help pave a sustainable way out of the crisis need to be backed up with



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robust policies, regulations and commitments, and the means to enforce them. Workers, their representatives and their unions should not be reduced to passive recipients of information and only engaged half-heartedly in consultations about measures to be taken. Instead, workers' participation

in all its forms must be recognised as a rich resource for shaping and adapting the workplaces of today and the future, especially – though not exclusively – in times of crisis.