

DIRECT II – Rome, 5 November 2021

Introduction of the European Round Table

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1. The round table that sees us gathered today – in presence here in Rome, and remotely, via Zoom - is one of the events planned and scheduled within the European project DIRECT II, which has as its object of study and comparison the theme of *direct participation* of workers in the company.

This is the follow up of the DIRECT I project, carried out between 2017 and 2018 and, as then, thanks to the funding that the European Commission allocates to projects aimed at promoting the exchange of experiences and knowledge on social dialogue and industrial relations.

The DIRECT projects have been promoted and coordinated by the Bulgarian Trade Union Confederation CITUB, in partnership with academic and trade union research institutes from six EU countries (Bulgaria, Cyprus, Ireland, Italy, Poland and Spain).

Its purpose essentially consists in investigating the diffusion, impact and good practices of direct participation of workers in the organization of work, taking now into account the scenarios and challenges of the new technological revolution, with the automation and digitization of new production processes.

What are we talking about when we talk about direct participation? For the purposes of our study, we adopted the definition offered by the Dublin Foundation, in its pioneering study on the subject (with “our” Ide Regalia, then leader of that team), in the early 1990s¹..

Direct participation (DP) consists of the *opportunities with which the company management, in the workplace, delegates some of its prerogatives and decision-making authorities to workers, be they individuals and / or groups or teams, with regard to the immediate execution of tasks, production objectives, ways of organizing work.*

Its themes are essentially those of autonomy and control; the quality of work and employee satisfaction.

Direct participation is distinguished from *indirect*, or *representative* participation, in which involvement takes place through collective union-type bodies, elected or designated, with the employees’ rights (and duties) to information, consultation and co-determination. This is indeed the best known and canonical form with which we have dealt with the issues of industrial democracy and at work up to now. And also the one, understandably, preferred by the trade unions.

Kevin O’Kelly, after me, will better explain the different types; on an individual or group basis; according to consultative or delegative schemes. In general, we are in the context of what sociologists of work and HRM experts define as *Individual task discretion* or *Semi-autonomous teamwork*. Fabrizio Pirro and Matteo Gaddi will talk more about it during this day.

The logic should be the win-win one, in which companies gain in productivity / competitiveness and workers in satisfaction with their work. With the trade unions to guarantee, if and when they succeed, that such innovations do not retort into more intensive and concealed forms of intensification of work and a prelude to a disintermediation of representation. Under a narrative and hegemonic aegis of the company and its managerial culture.

¹ *Conceptualising Direct Participation in Organisational Change – The EPOC Project*; European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions, Dublin (1994)

DIRECT research starts from some questions. Among the most significant, there is that relating to the real diffusion of direct participation, to the concrete forms with which it manifests itself today, to the negotiating nature or not with which it is implemented in the workplace; to its complementarity, or rather alternativity, to indirect representation and participation.

Questions that refer more deeply to the meaning of these changes. And that is if a new season is actually springing from them:

a) for the *quality of the work*, widely marked by an ideational enrichment at the discretion of the people who are called to perform it;

b) for *industrial relations*, more marked by authentic collaboration, in which workers can exercise greater influence in the various decision-making levels in which their conditions are decided.

To achieve these cognitive objectives, we have divided our work into three different research phases:

1. The drafting of national reports in which to carry out a survey on the state of the art of direct participation in each of the countries involved in the project, using any useful source for this purpose (sociological and industrial relations literature on the subject, publications by the social partners, collective agreements, empirical investigations; case studies possibly produced);

2. A round of interviews, through semi-structured questionnaires, with representatives of trade union and employer organizations in the sector;

3. The realization of two case studies - chosen between industrial manufacturing and services in the tertiary sector - to be carried out according to the typical methodology of this approach; or using all relevant information and documents, on the subject, but above all, the use of interviews with trade union representatives - company and local sector representatives - and management.

The two Italian cases are Highways for Italy (ASPI) and Electrolux. We deal with the first today in the afternoon. We will speak at length about the Electrolux case in a national workshop, scheduled in Milan with the national FIOM-CGIL, for 13 December.

2. Over the past 20-30 years we have witnessed, in all advanced industrial countries, a proliferation of forms of employee involvement in the organization of work. In post-Fordist economies, this is commonly considered a key factor for the competitiveness of businesses. Most of them are solicited by the management, taking up - in its own design - some historical claims of the workers' movement, as Fulvio Fammoni recalled, and which I believe Andrej Zybalá will talk about, in his excursus on the so-called "Humanization of work".

The development and impetuous transformation of the productive forces - today culminating in the automation and / or digitization of growing areas of production - reverberates on production relations, changing the paradigm in the name of socio-technical innovation, flexibility in work relationships , of participation in industrial relations.

The Japanese model embodied by Toyotism, and its socio-technical corollaries, exercised an enormous influence in determining the paradigm shift. The use of direct participation as a human resource management technique is part of the adoption and dissemination of lean production models, strongly inspired by the principles of continuous improvement (Kaizen), variously declined, in the name of what - with the usual angles - we define workplace innovation (WPI), High Performance Work Practices, and World Class Manufacturing (WCM) models. These are integrated systems for the excellence of the entire logistic-production cycle of the manufacturing company, with a very precise definition of the techniques and working methods, in which - in addition to just in time production flows and the zeroing of defects and conflicts - spontaneous self-activation of workers is pursued.

The socio-organizational corollaries of this new paradigm, on the side of the workforce, lie in the unprecedented value attributed to:

- Competence, informality, autonomy, responsibility
- Greater operational discretion for employees;
- More attention to communication and wellbeing at work.

Each worker is evaluated not only by his bosses, but also by his closest colleagues. In the work team (industry 4.0) or by consumers / users, where rating systems are in place (Gig economy). Feeding a circuit of involvement, mutual accountability, but also of hard individualistic emulation, control and widespread surveillance, made also possible – as never ever in the past – by the new digital technologies.

Unlike in the past, workers are no longer considered a mere constraint to be regimented within a rigid command frame, but a resource with high diagnostic and problem solving skills. And this thanks to a series of HRM techniques, focused on an unprecedented attention to the quality of the organization and the working environment (ergonomics, safety, well-being, company climate), on the one hand, and a relative widening of the margins of discretion. executive, on the other hand, along a chain of command that shortens on its vertical axis, to expand on the horizontal one. "What happens when the employer involves?", Is the promising title of the communication by Tiziana Canal, curator of a vast INAPP survey on this issue.

On the consequences that all this determines on the real quality of working conditions, the readings start to spread again.

The optimistic ones tend to emphasize certain aspects of undoubted and positive innovation, in terms of empowerment and humanization of work, with smart factories and smart spaces - strongly pervaded by new robotic and digital technologies (industry 4.0) - where they are recomposed creative and executive functions, opening new spaces for a re-personalization of "concrete" work, to the detriment of the old alienated and "abstract" work. A new great transformation, therefore, capable of translating into a rediscovery of the individual in labor law, with an expansion of the areas of autonomy to the detriment of the old subordination, identified here (and perhaps too flattened) with the socio-juridical prototype of the fragmented and standardized work of Taylor-Fordism. According to this interpretative approach, an authentic paradigm shift is underway, in clear and fruitful discontinuity with the past, in terms of organizational objectives, managerial and work cultures, industrial relations.

The pessimistic readings, on the other hand, underline the serious pitfalls underlying the new organizational and socio-technical structures, capable of configuring new forms of surveillance and domination at work, taking to extremes - and certainly not repudiating - the well-known logic of the scientific organization of work. Which has always been, ultimately, to achieve the maximum possible value for paid working time, only better disguised - today - by a purely executive and never strategic involvement in the most important decisions of the company. With a rhetoric that, while enhancing the central strategic value of human capital, when this is functional to a quantitative and qualitative increase in work commitment, does not hesitate to mortify it, through increasingly pushed wages and forms of flexibility, which represent that involvement denial. Moreover, with a serious impairment of the solidarity skills and collective power of the workforce. More and more individualized and disintermediated in working relationships. Not therefore a leap from the Taylor-Fordist paradigm, but an extraordinary and refined improvement.

Personally, I believe that both these two visions contain elements of truth, two half-truths, since - generalizing - they do not adequately capture the plurality and new dualisms of work today. Their

coexistence; within the same territory, the same sector; the same company. Among those who actually experience a broad and substantial requalification of their work, in terms of knowledge, autonomy and power, also thanks to new digital technologies; and those who are either not touched by these innovations - for example in the more traditionally Taylorist and poor in autonomy sectors - or they are, but in the sign of a technology of platforms, algorithms and rating, which only apparently widen the margins of self-determination of one's work, instead producing unprecedented forms of control, surveillance and colonization of all life to the objectives of valorisation and profit (“digital Taylorism”).

Perhaps Cinzia Maiolini will talk about it again in her speech. Among the challenges for the social sciences in the coming years, there will increasingly be that of monitoring the quantitative and qualitative balances, between who and how many will ultimately be *the winners*, and who and how many *the losers*, of this new great transition.

3. Objectives of this round table. Today we should discuss these problems, examining them from the theoretical profile of the international literature on these issues, and the relative empirical evidence that emerges from the many investigations that add up; including ours, with DIRECT 2.

To this end, we have called upon Italian and European experts to discuss it, all very committed to the issue and from various perspectives. We would have loved to have been able to do it all here, in the presence, but the known difficulties of this last year have spread to this day, preventing some. In recent weeks, for example, Bulgaria is among the countries most affected by a new wave of infections. By preventing colleagues from that country from being here with us in person, but only in connection.

Professor Kevin O'Kelly, former professor at the University of Dublin and for years a scientific member of Eurofound, is the scientific coordinator of the project. And it will be he who will provide us with a first comparative picture of what has emerged and is still emerging from our investigation. After him various interventions will follow, all very promising and certainly full of stimuli. Bringing disciplinary perspectives, results of empirical investigations and company and trade union experiences into our discussion, able - we hope - to advance our knowledge and awareness of this issue, and of its relevance and relevance.