

Opening speech by Commissioner Thyssen at the High-Level Conference on the Future of Work

Ladies and gentlemen,

Welcome to this important conference.

The future of work is one of the defining challenges of our time. How we manage this challenge will define the future of our continent.

It will be your job today, to help shape future policy.

So I'm sorry, there's no free lunch for you, today.

I'm very happy that Professor Maarten Goos is with us. He is the Chair of the High Level Expert Group on the Impact of Digital Transformation of the EU Labour Market.

This expert group published their report yesterday. I am sure it will influence our discussions.

To start, let me say this.

Digital change is not only a European challenge. It's a global challenge.

Digital change is not only about the future of work. It's about the future of our economy, society and democracy.

And

The future of work is not only about digital change. It's also about the greening of our economy, global value chains, demographic change, especially ageing.

We can't and should not stop these changes.

Instead we need to manage these changes. And turn challenges into opportunities.

In doing so we must stick to our values; to our European way of life. Which increasingly contrasts with that of other powers.

First, our values must guide our trade policies. Not just because that's fair. But because they give us a competitive edge.

Take privacy and data protection for example.

Consumers want their robot Hoover to clean their house for them. They don't want it to spy on them

Second, our values decide our digital policies.

We must not allow digital change to control our people.

Instead, we must empower our people, to control digital change

That's why this Commission has taken steps to:

- Invest in ethical, human centred Artificial Intelligence.
- Protect the privacy of our citizens.
- Protect our democracies from hacking and fake news
- Make sure global giants pay their fair share of tax

Third, our values guide our response to the changing world of work.

A lot is at stake: the future of our European social market economy. Based on

the idea that Economic Growth and Social Progress go hand in hand. An idea that's anchored in our Treaty, and at the heart of our Union. With this in mind, we are updating our labour market policies and our social systems for the 21st century and the new world of work. Because it's not enough for us to ask people to change. It's not enough to say:

- Work flexible hours.
- Have many different jobs.
- Learn for the rest of your life.

We, as policy makers, must also adapt our public institutions, our rulebooks and education systems. To support people in transitions and to empower people. So that people can be confident about their future, and the future of their children.

When we started four years ago, we put social back in the heart of Europe. By rebooting social dialogue. By making labour mobility fairer. By strengthening social considerations in our economic governance. By fighting cancer-causing chemicals in the workplace.

And we launched the European Pillar of Social Rights.

The Pillar is built on the philosophy that:

- As Europeans we share social rights.
- Rights that we must put into action.
- Action that we must take together.

The Pillar consists of 20 rights and principles dealing with three main issues:

- access to the labour market,
- fair labour conditions
- social protection and inclusion.

The Pillar acts as a compass. With two goals. First, to steer Europe towards upwards convergence.

And second, a compass to help us navigate economic and social change in the new world of work.

One and a half years ago, in Gothenburg, at the first social summit in twenty years, we all committed to the Pillar. The Commission, the European Parliament, the Council on behalf of all our Member States. Supported by social partners and civil society.

All of us are now turning rights into realities and principles into policies. Everybody, according to their own competence.

The Commission is leading by example. In November 2017, we immediately integrated the Pillar into the European Semester, our annual cycle of economic governance.

We developed the social scoreboard, which allows us to follow social developments at a glance.

And now the Pillar is present in every stage of the Semester. Including in our country reports. And our Country Specific Recommendations.

The Semester is now more social than ever before.

Through the Semester, our proposals and initiatives, we are now updating our 20th century institutions, our labour law and our social security systems. Today, more than 40 per cent of working people in Europe are in self-employment or non-standard employment. The job for life is making way for a lifetime of different jobs.

Flexibility brings jobs and growth. But what's flexibility to some, is uncertainty to others.

Working many different jobs can cause career gaps, which can create holes in social security coverage. If fewer people pay into the system, that puts the social and economic sustainability of our social security systems at risk. On top of this, the platform economy is on the rise. For millions of people, platform work is their main source of income.

We need to embrace the platform revolution. But prevent a platform proletariat from forming.

First of all, we are bringing our rulebook up to date, to meet these 21st century realities.

We put forward legislative proposals. Our Directive on Transparent and Predictable Working Conditions will help create minimum standards of predictability and stability for all workers, regardless of the contract type. Standards, that are especially important, in the digital and flexible economy. Such as the right:

- To know your working conditions from the start of your employment relationship
- To know in advance when you can be called to work.
- The right to compensation, if your boss cancels work with late notice.
- The right to work in parallel for other employers.

And all Member States committed to implement our Recommendation on Access to Social Protection. Social security systems, pension systems, health coverage are all different in Europe. But one principle now is the same: Member States have promised to make sure that all working people – also the non-standard workers and the self-employed – will have formal and effective coverage against life risks.

Coverage that can be transferred between jobs, and jobs status. Which is essential, in the flexible economy.

We also put forward our New Skills Agenda. We are doing everything to make sure that our people have the skills they need to get jobs. And our companies have the skilled people they need, to compete.

What we need most in the digital age are: skills, skills, skills. That's why we made "education, training and life long learning" the first principle of the Pillar of Social Rights.

Some jobs will disappear, as a result of digitalisation. Jobs that rely on routine, can be easily automated. And nowadays, also higher skilled jobs. We already see robot journalists, machine translators and artificial investment bankers.

I see many of you are starting to worry.

But I say: don't be afraid. Some jobs will disappear. But many new jobs will appear. And most of all, jobs will change.

That's why we all need to keep learning, our entire working lives.

Ladies and gentlemen

We invited you as experts.

But many of you are also parents and grandparents. And maybe ask: How can my child prosper, in the digital age? What if they are not good at math or ICT? To those parents, I say: It's not just about digital skills. In an age of automation, there's a premium on creativity and humanity.

We should:

- Teach kids how to code. But also to be critical and creative.
- Teach kids technology, and teamwork.
- Teach kids how to build computers, and their confidence.

We also need to teach green skills. An ambitious climate policy is not only about what we need to do less.

- Less airplane travel.
- Less coal.
- Less meat.

It's also about what we need to do more. And that's boosting green skills. We can only get solar panels on our homes, with engineers to design them and technicians to install them.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Beyond legislation and our skills agenda, we have several other tools at our disposal, to make sure the future of work, is also an inclusive future.

We coordinate the efforts of Member States to improve employment and social policies. We do this through the European Semester.

We support national and regional reforms with our budget. Our future European Social Fund Plus, at 101 billion euros, will help people to adjust to change.

We support investment in the new economy. With our Juncker Plan and future regional development fund.

We work with civil society and with social partners. Who also need to reshape themselves. Because the platforms and the platform workers are not yet taking part in social dialogue.

And we have our Trade Agreements. In which we include social provisions. To export not only products and our services, but also our values.

Last but not least: We are working constantly to improve the economy. To foster growth and create jobs in the first place.

Ladies and gentlemen,

The mandate of our Commission is nearly at an end. This does not mean all problems are solved. We now have to reflect on the next steps. The report of the High Level Group on the Impact of Digital Transformation of the EU Labour Market gives a number of ideas.

Real-time social dialogue.

Digital single windows for social security contributions and taxes.

individual lifelong learning accounts.

I call on you, to consider them.

Ladies and gentlemen,

This Commission has put social back on the European agenda. And I am confident it will remain there. The Parliament may change. The Commission may change. But the digital revolution will continue.

In an ageing and digital Europe our businesses will need to tap into an older and more diverse workforce. And if we want to compete in the green and digital economy, we need to train our workforce for new jobs, green jobs.

After our mandate ends some people fear, the social will disappear.

Some, may even hope so.

But I don't think so.

I am very proud of everything we've achieved over the last few years. But, as a great European once said. "This is not the beginning of the end. But it is, perhaps, the end of the beginning". I hope you will come with many new ideas. And that our values will shine through.

Technology may change.

Society may change.

But our values don't change.

I wish you a very successful conference.