

A Word with Anil Verma: Employee Participation and Decent Work

A dialogue between A. Guerra and A. Verma, Professor of Industrial Relations and HR Management at the University of Toronto (Canada)

The interview took place during the 13th edition of the international conference by ADAPT, ‘Towards a Workless Society? An Interdisciplinary Reflection on the Changing Concept of Work and its Rules in Contemporary Economies’, held in Bergamo from November 30th to December 2nd, 2023. Anil Verma participated in the event with a presentation titled ‘The Socio-tech Labour Policy Challenge: Decent Work in the Informal Economy in Emerging Economies’ in the context of the plenary session ‘Towards a Workless Society? Perspectives of Labour Relations in a Global Scenario, particularly in the Global South’.

I have read that among your areas of interest there are also participatory forms of work organization. I am doing my internship at CISL, which is proposing a popular initiative law on workers' participation. I am interested to know your opinion on this issue. In particular, what differences do you see in countries or companies where there are forms of worker participation compared to where there are none? What are the advantages and what are the axes of progress for companies and workers?

In a number of European countries, you have worker participation by law. The best example is Germany, where you not only have worker participation at the board level (so the governing boards of the company has worker representatives), but you also have works councils at the company level. There is a committee and workers elected to this committee are required to be consulted and informed consultation.

We learn from research that when you have a crisis like the financial crisis of 2008 or 2009, when you have a recession, when you have restructuring, like in the steel industry, where these consultative systems exist work much better than in countries where they don't.

In Canada you have only 75, so when those enterprises are hit with a crisis, they have to reduce the number of jobs and they have a lot of conflict. They have strikes because there was no forum for workers' consultation. So, when you need to change, to adjust employment, to change benefits, when you have to move people around, you know, from one location to another one, factory to another... In all these situations, if you have a forum for consultation you can arrive at better solutions without disrupting the workplace.

And when you don't have it, then management will do something and usually the workers are unhappy with that. Then they will go on with some kind of job action. So, there's a lot of disruption that takes place.

What role can social partners (both trade unions and employers) play in social innovation in order to shift from informality to decent work?

This was the topic on which I gave my talk at the conference. My basic argument is that if you want to make informal work more formal, you don't have to think in terms of just formality, as we know. You know formality means that you are registered

as a business, you are registered as an employee, you're paying your taxes etc.

Because million of people in the world only earned one or two euros a day, this approach to formality does not work because you do not gain anything from this.

So, we have to think of formality as paths to decent work, giving workers a better way of life, better earnings, more safe work etc. In order to get there, we should think of how to enable these people to improve their lives. The starting point for me is that they should have a collective voice. So, there should be a law that recognizes their right to organize collectively and to have bargaining rates.

When there are no employers, these workers can negotiate with whoever controls the resources and they need to earn a better living. So, I give you the example of workers working with waste because these people pick up garbage all over the city and sort it into recyclables, selling them to wholesalers. Their conditions are very bad. If they organize themselves into a collective, they can then negotiate with the city, the city government. They should have proper access to trash, as is the case in Brazil, where we did a lot of field work.

In Brazil, household waste is taken to appropriate companies. There is a formal collection system, which is carried out with the support of vehicles that transport the waste to appropriate locations. But some workers must informally access the waste in order to resell it and survive. It is dirty and dangerous work. They are often treated as criminals, but in reality, they do valuable work because they contribute to recycling. Traditional systems do not have recycling as their goal, only collection. This is an example of workers who should organize collectively to negotiate with the government and local administrations and demand regulations that allow access to waste in order to improve recycling processes. Some associations seem to be successful in working in this direction, sometimes supported by local governments, although there is still no unified policy. To date, improvements in the conditions of these workers in Brazil stem from environmental protection laws.

Associations can make arrangements with companies to ask for waste and take care of the recycling

process. More and more companies are agreeing to do this, but not on a national scale. This approach could clearly change if there were a law recognizing workers as such.

In my internship, I deal with agency work and every day I interact with employment agencies. Do you think that employment agencies can contribute to decent work (as understood by the ILO) and to tackle informal work?

Agencies are employers. Now, because of their growth in a number of jurisdictions, such as in the province of Ontario, Canada, these agencies are also subject to certain legal obligations, which was not the case, for example, 20 years ago.

I think they have to behave like any other employer, in order to fulfill their obligations to employees. Therefore, in order to adequately pay employees, it may be necessary to increase the cost of services to client companies.

In addition, agencies must ensure safety at work. On this point, the obligation does not end just because you have sent a worker to another company: the responsibility for a safe workplace must also lie with the agency as the employer. In Canada, for example, some court rulings have established joint and several liability of the agency on workplace safety as well, just as for any other employer.

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