

Growth of homework in 21st century

It does not make sense. But it is true. In the 21st century, when you would think that everyone, man or woman, would have the right to work, there is evidence that there are more and more people, in Europe and throughout the world, who cannot find work. It is estimated that there are 25 million unemployed in Europe, and 202 million in the world as a whole. And this is without taking account of the millions more who only have precarious work and who are not classed as workers, nor included in statistics, as if they were not even human.

These are alarming figures when we realise that the majority of these people have no social security benefits to fall back on and have to do anything they can to survive. Today, at home, people do all kinds of work. Not only traditional occupations like embroidery, dress-making and making shoes, but also telework.

Today we can find a great number of jobs carried out in the home that traditionally were done in factories, for example pressing, washing and other finishing work on textile products. Factories authorise certain workers and then give them work to do at home, sometimes to their authorised workers. Since they have no alternative, these people accept whatever they are given because they are struggling to survive. They are afraid ; they don't make any demands or speak about any problems. They work in order to have an income, which more and more often is not paid on time.

Others who are working at home are often women who have tried to find a professional job, without any success and take up another way of earning a living, mainly in creative work, by offering services which can be delivered over the internet. Many companies and other institutions are increasingly taking advantage of this to give orders over the internet, often avoiding tax and paying a very low price, much lower than if a proper job had been created. Most of these women have to be officially registered and obliged to pay social security contributions whether they have an income or not. Work is becoming increasingly precarious.

There is another group of people, mainly women, who work outside their own homes in other people's homes, without any social protection. They do the washing and ironing, make meals, look after children and old people, and for some occasions make cakes, bread - all to earn a small amount of money to make up for the lack of a stable income for their family.

When in Madeira, in the 1970s, we began our struggle for embroidery homeworkers to have the same rights as other workers, we never imagined that we would witness the loss of rights that had been won in our laws, in our lives, with so much sacrifice.

In this period, the embroidery workers and those making wicker work were the only homeworkers that existed in Madeira. There were thousands of homeworkers doing embroidery and their mobilisation for the improvement of their conditions of life and work was exciting, thanks to the work of the trade union of embroidery workers. Workers who had never previously been recognised as workers, won the same rights as other workers, even if they were never well-paid for their work. Their work was regulated and an increase in pay was negotiated every year. They won rights to social security, unemployment pay and even the right to early retirement at 60 years old.

The embroidery homeworkers of Madeira were covered by a different law to other homeworkers. But this came to an end in 2010. Now the law recognises two types of embroidery workers : those who were registered for social security before 31st December

2010 and who still enjoy all the rights they had before this date ; and those who were registered after this date, who are considered the same as other homeworkers in Portugal, and not covered by any special regulations. This means that the younger women do not have the right to retire at 60 years old ; and the contribution they have to pay for social security has gone up, as has the employer's contribution.

This situation has created conflicts, mainly because the companies do want to take on new embroidery workers. The sector as a whole is in danger of having no future. Many of the companies prefer to give work to retired workers, often very old, rather than invest in new workers who will continue doing the work. The public institute which is responsible for the sector and which recently published statistics that show there are still 2,000 women registered , does not pay attention to training younger women.

If it does on like this, it could be fatal. The embroidery of Madeira is part of a long tradition of our culture and a tradition which depended on the skill and care of the hands of the women of Madeira.

Unfortunately, we face difficult times. But there are strong reasons to continue to work and struggle to recognise and give value to all the forms of paid work that exist. Homework, as well as other forms of informal work, should be considered as legitimate, with rights and social protection. The times have changed but our response should still include all those who work, wherever their place of work.

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