

Interview with Igor MERA, representative of the trade union ESK

1. Why is the ESK trade union taking part in an observatory on the fair distribution of wealth?

We are a small trade union collective from Hego Euskal Herria, which has been operating since the end of the 1980s. Our trade union organisation aspires to overcome the capitalist system as a necessary step towards building a society based on principles of equality and justice among all people.

Since our beginnings, we at ESK have been very concerned about those people who are left on the margins of the economic system. The spread of poverty and social exclusion in neoliberal societies is increasingly worrying. The constant attacks on the welfare state that we have been suffering for the last 40 years are aimed at increasing the rates of profit and capitalist accumulation.

In this sense, concern and active work to end poverty cannot fail to reveal a reality that tends to go unnoticed, which is the accumulation of wealth.

2. Why is the accumulation of wealth and the resulting inequality it generates a problem?

It is not an easy answer to give in such a short space, but in short we can say that the accumulation of wealth is not possible without exploitation. To the now classic Marxist concept of the exploitation of the working class by capital to extract the surplus value on which capital anchors its profits, we have to add vectors of exploitation that have been incorporated into our trade union praxis in recent decades.

The functioning of the capitalist system, both in its 'domesticated' phase in the form of welfare states, and in its more savage phases such as current neoliberalism, cannot be explained without the concealment of care work and discrimination against women. Capital can only obtain the tremendous rates of profit and accumulation it achieves by disregarding all the work necessary for the reproduction of life. In its profit and loss accounts, capital does not account for the costs of caring for and developing the lives of people without whom it cannot make a profit. These jobs, which are indispensable for its own survival, are outsourced to women without any remuneration, or at very low cost to the welfare state, which they systematically attack.

Nor is the extraction of profits and the accumulation of capital possible without the exploitation of the natural resources of planet earth. A capitalism affected by ever-decreasing rates of return needs to exploit more and more natural resources and to exploit more and more people to ensure its profits.

A year ago, in the midst of confinement, we drew a parallel between capital and a virus. Both are dead realities that need the colonisation and exploitation of life for their reproduction. Both have no limits, eventually leading those who serve as their host to their own death.

If we say that capital is the virus, the accumulation of wealth is the disease that this virus unleashes in the societies it colonises. The accumulation of wealth generates, first and foremost, poverty and social exclusion, especially among those people that capital designates as 'non-persons', i.e. those who are not functional to its interests and who are therefore not worthy of the slightest consideration.

The strong processes of capital accumulation that we have suffered over the last 40 years, but which have intensified in the previous cycle of financial crisis and even during this time of pandemic, bring us ever closer to societies that are tending towards disintegration.

3. What are the proposed solutions?

First of all, we believe that we need political-administrative structures (states) that protect life in all its dimensions and guarantee in practice that all people can live with autonomy and freedom.

In this sense, it is absolutely necessary to talk about taxation and the role it should play in the distribution of wealth. Living in foral territories with their own fiscal capacity, it is totally shameful that we are at the bottom of the EU in terms of tax pressure and progressiveness. Our institutions, instead of trying to tame capital, have been feeding its base instincts for decades. The result is becoming increasingly clear: if the logic of intergenerational social progress has long since broken down, the financial crisis of the past decade has shown us the devastation wrought by policies of adjustment and wage devaluation.

We do not have the space here to develop a critique of employment or to dismantle concepts such as full employment or guaranteed work; we will simply say, and almost at the level of a headline, that for us the paradigm that employment is the way to access income and social rights must be overcome. Being employed is not a need that we have as people, but an obligation that capital has placed on our shoulders.

We believe that every person, by the fact of being born, has a dignity that no one can take away or condition and that, therefore, the role of the public sector must be to generate, or rather, to guarantee the material conditions so that all people can develop from our individual autonomy and freedom. A proposal such as the Unconditional Basic Income has always been very attractive and suggestive for the women and men who make up ESK.

With our material existence guaranteed, we would have much more freedom to conflict with capital, to re-appropriate the surplus value it extracts from us. We would have more

freedom to live lives worth living, to take care of ourselves and to take care of ourselves on the basis of equality between men and women. With an Unconditional Basic Income we would have a good foundation to build a society based on justice, equality and respect for the limits of the planet that hosts us.