



## Speech

by Lodewijk Asscher, Minister of Social Affairs and  
Employment of the Netherlands, at the  
Conference on Promoting Decent Work,  
8 February 2016

**Ladies and gentlemen,  
Good morning,**

**It is a pleasure to see so many of you here. It shows me  
your commitment to a topic that is very important to me.  
Decent Work.**

**I am reminded of the importance of decent work every  
day as I travel through Amsterdam. Often by bike, for  
example when I bring my kids to school. And that's  
when I experience how truly international this city  
really is. We have people working here from all over the  
world. Imagine Polish and Portuguese painters,  
standing on a scaffold in front of a Danish dentist's  
surgery, next to a Hungarian hairdresser. Of course, you  
can substitute them for other nationalities, but these  
ones alliterate nicely!**

It makes Amsterdam the wonderful place it is. Yet  
unfortunately, behind this hustle and bustle, there is also a  
downside to free movement. Shady employers taking  
advantage of the great good of free movement for their  
dubious practices. Exploiting workers and evading the rules as  
they go along.

Because it is quite possible that the Portuguese and Polish  
painters are rewarded differently. And it's quite likely that they  
are earning a lot less than the Dutch painter working further  
up the road. In this respect, a bike ride through Amsterdam  
serves as a wake-up call. If we want to secure free movement  
we need to fight for decent work.

And that's why I am really glad you are attending this  
conference in such great numbers. We have two busy days  
ahead of us. I know that some of you have travelled from afar.  
I hope you are well rested and recharged, because there is a  
lot of work to do!

You know, a good breakfast always helps.

I would like to ask you a question about that breakfast.



How did you eat your eggs this morning?

Or more specifically, did you break your egg at the top or the bottom?



At the little end or the big end?



You might wonder why I am interested in your eating habits. Well, I am asking you this, because breaking eggs and decent work have something in common.



Perhaps you've heard about the famous egg dispute. For those who haven't, I will tell you the story. In the classic satire *Gulliver's travels*, the Lilliputians quarrelled at length over at which end one should break an egg.



Top or bottom.



Big end or little end.



The fact that an egg tasted exactly the same either way was irrelevant. As a result, the worlds of Big-Endians and Little-Endians drifted apart. People died over this, you know!



Like the Lilliputians, we similarly quarrel at length in Europe about the execution of goals, even if we agree on the goals themselves. One of them is decent work.



In Europe, we all agree that decent work is important. And we all agree that labour exploitation is unacceptable. Yet we continue to disagree on how to break the egg; how to guarantee decent work for everyone.



This puts pressure on one of the very notions on which Europe is built. Free movement. And if we are not careful, our worlds may drift apart too.



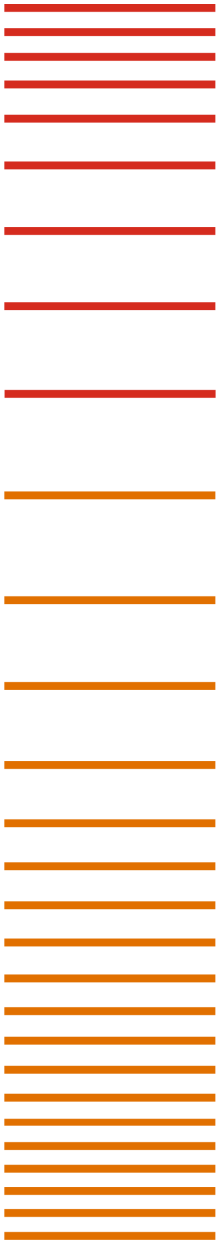
You can't make an omelette without breaking eggs. We cannot offer and guarantee decent work if we fail to agree on how we are going to do this.

During the Dutch presidency, I want to promote decent work, by seeking common ground. I would like to see all noses pointing in the same direction. Only by modernizing rules can we protect free movement and ensure decent work for all.



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It is in the interests of both mobile and domestic workers to make the rules on mobility fairer. Indeed, decent work is of mutual interest to all EU Member States. I firmly believe that it can bring us closer together.



Ladies and gentlemen,

Providing decent work is not just about talking and seeking compromises. It is also about action. Rolling up sleeves and enforcing the rules. You have an important role in this.

A moment ago, I asked you whether you had broken your egg at the top or bottom this morning. I know one thing for sure. You are not the type of people that really cares. Indeed, you are not the type that quarrels over eggs. And that is a compliment!

It doesn't matter whether you are an inspector from Holland or Hungary. From France or Finland. Your hands-on perspective on what needs to be done is quite the same. But Justyna Baranowska can explain this much better.

Let me introduce her to you. Justyna is a Polish inspector who visited the Netherlands in 2013. She joined her Dutch colleagues on an inspection tour, and was very excited about this.

She told us:

"I could feel my *inspectors' blood* rushing through my veins! While I work in another country, our goals are exactly the same. It was a very exciting experience!"

Although Justyna could not make it here, I believe there is still plenty of *inspectors' blood* in this conference room today. Your goal is quite similar to that of Justyna's.

As enforcers of the law you want to secure justice. Together, you are fighting against shady employers who want to bend the law. Employers who take advantage of innocent workers and society at large. That's not a negligible task.

Your noses are already pointing in the same direction. And that's a great way to start this conference! Yet more is needed to secure decent work. It's also important that you point your hands towards each other.

Indeed, we need to reach out and improve our collaboration. This may sound as if I am stating the obvious, but unfortunately, it's rather the opposite.

Collaboration between inspectorates is a major operation, as organizations are used to working independently from each other.



We cherish the free movement of workers. Let's also cherish the free movement of inspectorates and work more closely together.



We need to let go of the borders and burdens that we have put up for ourselves. Between organizations. Between disciplines. Between countries. We need to foster a culture in which it is normal to look at problems from a helicopter perspective. And we need to share knowledge. With inspection officers, policy advisers and social partners from various EU Member States, the conference is the perfect setting in which to do so.



The Platform on Undeclared Work is a great example of the type of collaboration we need. This Platform will significantly boost the cooperation between the various national enforcement bodies involved in the fight against undeclared work.



Undeclared work occurs in all kinds of sectors, both within countries and across borders.



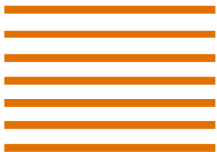
The problem is that it is very difficult to get a grip on 'cash-in-hand' payments.



Undeclared work is a cheating game without winners. Employees lose out on pension rights and other benefits. And, in the event of an accident, they are often uninsured.



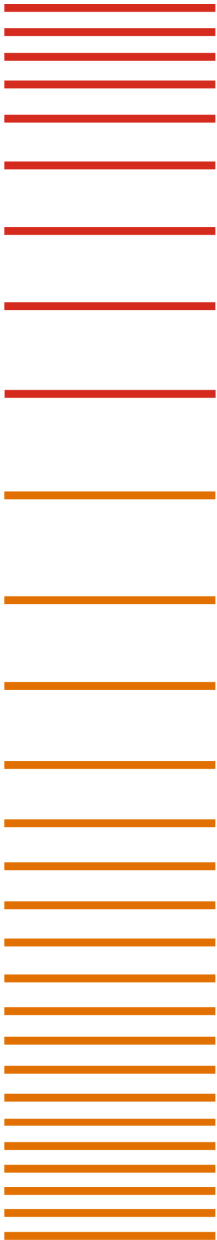
But undeclared work also leads to unfair competition, unpaid taxes and social security deficits. As a consequence, the State has less money to provide quality services, such as childcare and healthcare.



With the Platform on Undeclared Work, we can make a fist against these shady practices. The platform will kick off later this year. Yet we can already give it a head start during this conference, by generating input for its work programme.

Another important topic of this conference involves the shady practices of so-called 'letter-box companies'. Companies that perform no real activities but are only set up to get lower labour costs at the expense of posted and domestic workers.

We need to improve the procedures that establish in which country a worker is insured and should pay social security contributions. Better controls and standardization of the existing forms can help to determine whether a company performs genuine activities in the country where it is established.



Ladies and gentlemen,

You all have an important role in securing decent work. But the scope of your role is much larger. Your collaborative work creates a common basis for discussions and cooperation at EU level. Indeed you are bridge-builders in Europe. Ambassadors for decent work. The omelette makers, if you like. It's a role that should not be underestimated!

Because in Europe, we can't afford to have some more equal than others. Income should be like an incontestable maths expression. Equal work 'equals' equal pay in the same place. Or phrased differently, the Polish and Portuguese painters standing on that scaffolding should be paid the same as the Dutch painter.

Only then can we create a level playing field and prevent a race to the bottom on labour conditions. Together, let's lay the foundation for more decent work in Europe. I wish you a very fruitful conference. And I hope you make one terrific omelette!

Thank you.