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PEOPLE

From the May 2025

# A new model for workplace democracy—the 'bicameral corporation'

*Isabelle Ferreras has spent her career developing a political theory of work. Now she's trying to test it out*

By Olly Haynes

April 2, 2025

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**I**sabelle Ferreras knows a lot about work. We meet at a restaurant in Oxford, near Jesus College, where she's currently examining the potentially devastating consequences of AI for workers.

As well as her work at Oxford's Institute for Ethics in AI, she's also head of a commission into activating the right to workplace democracy enshrined in the Spanish constitution—testing out a political theory of work that she's spent her career developing.

Ferreras, who is Belgian and Spanish, began looking at labour in the early 2000s while doing her PhD at the University of Louvain. She studied supermarket cashiers, because “they looked to me as a very good example of women (they were mostly women) going to work for obvious instrumental reasons”—meaning, for pay. But these women taught Ferreras that “the instrumental dimension of work was one of many others—and certainly not the dominant one”. The cashiers, often single mothers, could have reasonably lived off state aid and worked less or not at all. However, they wanted to set an example to their children, to participate in the public, to have a social network.



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She concluded that work was “the central political experience of people’s lives, not going to vote every four years”. Employees, she tells me, form their democratic conceptions at work through their “understanding of justice vis à vis their workplace arrangements. But their conceptions have no standing, they just execute the orders and they don’t really see why. They have been raised as citizens, they have been told they are equal in dignity and rights, but once they set foot in a capitalist environment, that sense of citizenship has no meaning anymore.”

While studying political science at MIT, Ferreras developed an idea of the “bicameral corporation”—drawing on the “bicameral moments” from Ancient Greece and 18th-century Britain. when democratic demands were conceded and a second chamber representing the

plebs or the commons was introduced. Ferreras argues that this shift “from despotism to democracy” must be replicated at the level of the firm, with the creation of one chamber for workers or “labour investors” and another for owners or “capital -investors”, each with elected representatives and the right to veto the decisions of the other chamber.

Article 129 of Spain’s Constitution says governments ought to “establish means to facilitate access by workers to ownership of the means of production”. But little has been done to make this a reality.

This is Ferreras’s goal as chair of the International Commission of High-Level Experts on Workplace Democracy. She will make the case to Spanish business that in order to avoid a Donald Trump/Javier Milei-style outcome and all the uncertainty that would generate, democracy will have to be extended into the Spanish economy. As European policymakers scramble for how to deal with the fallout of globalisation and the rise of the far right, they could do worse than listen to Ferreras.

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## People

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