Shaping Industrial Relations in the Digital Economy

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There are no macroeconomic and social issues that consume the trade union movement like the march of digitalisation. Every week brings another report on the issue; it is something which everyone, from members to shop stewards to general secretaries has an opinion on.

At one end of the spectrum are pessimists for whom technology means a dystopian future of mass unemployment as workers are made redundant by machines. At the other, are those optimists who believe that robots and the like will liberate workers to a life of leisure.

The debate as to which is closer to reality remains ongoing. However, it is clear that whatever the outcome, digitalisation will have dramatic implications for the world of work. Importantly, unlike many issues trade unionists deal with, digitalisation has no respect for national borders. Given the liquidity of new technology and the business world’s insatiable drive for growth, the development of technology cannot be regulated by national legislation alone. If a government in one country halts the use of new software or machines owners will seek to move them elsewhere where conditions are more favourable.

It is for this reason that a multifaceted, international solution is necessary. On October 16th I was proud to attend a forum hosted by UNI Global Union, in conjunction with the European Commission, of European trade unionists and academics to discuss “the impact of digitalisation within and across sectors and countries” and develop links across borders.

Perhaps the most striking feature of our discussions was the all-encompassing nature of digitalisation: touching every corner of the economy and fundamentally transforming how we understand the relationship between owner and employee.

Particularly clear was the movement towards atomisation, not only in regards to how we consume i.e. shopping online rather than on the high street, but also how we work. Digitalisation means that the tasks completed in previous years by, for example, an army of draughtsmen and printers can be completed by an individual working remotely from anywhere in the world. Advances in 3D printing mean that they can not only produce digital content, but physical objects in a matter of moments.

These advances are hard not to marvel at, but as trade unionists we have a responsibility to work to ensure that the benefits of change are enjoyed as widely as possible. The obvious concern is that a glut of low-skilled workers will develop, deemed surplus to requirements due to changing trends at work.

Concurrently, the uncertainty caused by the pace of change may well undermine opportunities for training and upskilling, something that has dogged the British economy in recent decades. Compounding these issues is the ease of offshoring as aggressive automation is underwritten by companies becoming virtualised and spreading their workforce across the globe to wherever costs are lowest.

What then can unions do to counteract the overbearing strength of private capital? The most immediate task is for unions to collaborate across borders. Colleagues from Eastern Europe, Scandinavia and Germany noted that harmonised industrial action against Amazon had already taken place: demonstrating that a collective approach could undermine private wealth. As borders become more porous this approach will undoubtedly grow in importance, particularly in industries affected by elongated supply chains across borders.

Second, unions need to take the lead in shaping how new technology is implemented and also how it is owned. The reduction in the working week currently being rolled out in Royal Mail is an early example of unions taking the initiative to ensure that their members share in future productivity gains.
However, in future we will need to go further: putting pressure on employers and government alike to deliver high-quality, life-long learning opportunities for all.

Finally, and in some respects most importantly, unions should begin to embrace the opportunities digitalisation affords them to grow their membership and deepen their influence. The intersection between online and street campaigns demonstrates the internet’s role as a conduit for activism and our movement needs to embrace this.

The TUC’s New Deal for Workers is a starting point, but by no means a conclusion. In future workers are likely to move between jobs move quickly and undertake tasks in a fashion we’d currently consider atypical or unusual. Digitalisation has the potential for unions to guide them through their careers and ensure that their flexibility does not lead to exploitation. Similarly, it can help to maintain a collective voice among workers, regardless of location.

Quite simply: as long as a hierarchy exists at work, trade unions will be essential. The challenge is how we adapt to changing conditions and the speed with which we utilise new technology to our own advantage.