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Shaping the new world of work – The impacts of digitalisation and robotisation

Panel 24: Workers' participation and the introduction of new technology

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In Europe, for decades employees have had the influence over how the personal data has been used. For instance, in the EWC directive since 1994 new technology has been on the list of EWC competences, which is confirmed by EWC agreements as a topic where employees have a say. In some countries, like Germany, employees have rights that are determined and guaranteed in legally binding collective agreements (such as data protection, working time, personal accounts, holiday rules, overtime, health and safety).

This reality is, however, changing right now with the arrival of new technologies into many new areas of professional life.

With intensified digitalisation trade unions and workers need to face many uncertainties. In Germany the general main fear is that of losing employment and thus the main purpose of collective agreements on this topic is securing future workplaces. There are also some specific challenges and issues in individual sectors:

- 1) Manufacturing – digital assistant systems and work support by robots (e.g. gloves guiding workers which screw to take into hand and where to place it);
- 2) Service and office jobs - 24/7 mail checking and availability as well as online consultations with customers via chat or Skype.
- 3) Manufacturing and logistics (e.g. storage services) - Google glass and extended reality which changes work massively.

There are also cross-sectoral phenomena like reorganisation of work from central control to self-organised/managing) units or the internet of things implying machines 'talking' to each other with some or without intervention of humans (machines 2 machines), crowd-working. It is worth noting, however, that the perception of challenges differs across the EU countries and unions apply different importance to specific questions (also due to varying resources).

They all bring new physical and psycho-social challenges workers need to face. Moreover, a lot of data is being collected and exchanged in these processes, but it's unclear how it may be used by management, even if not now but in future.

Trade unions are overwhelmed by the challenge to secure workers' rights since it's not clear at which points the data is collected, what entities are responsible, what happens with employee data when a company is taken over by another firm, and what national protection laws apply in such cases, but also when the company uses software storing personal data on foreign servers abroad (e.g. out of the EU).

It is crucial to realise that the change is much bigger than technology alone: technology is 'only' the impulse that alters the work organisation, business models, cooperation across organisational borders (often beyond company limits), usage of big data. The changes occur also in the way individuals work and their work-life balance (e.g. activity in social media and its implications for current and future job evaluation) as well as have wider cultural implications (how we interact at and out of work).

Trade unions and works councils have already elaborated some good practices on company level including areas such as protection of data privacy (Deutsche Bahn), mobile work (BMW AG) (work on mobile devices counted as normal work), professional training and further education (collective agreement by IG Metal), job security and productivity improvements in logistic sector (Ver.di). Reportedly, one of the decisive factors for efficient handling of digitalisation is company's corporate culture. With such involvement employers are increasingly recognising and appreciating the input of labour into handling the challenge of digitalisation.

There are, however, many further open questions on the horizon that are becoming more and more pressing. Firstly, does introduction of big data tools make (and should make!) everything measurable? Secondly, how does one ensure that protection systems are applicable to workers where there is no employee representation? Third, what should the unions keep on their radar as far as future developments in workers' behaviour monitoring and data collection (health data, behavioural patterns, etc.) are concerned?