

Digitisation and the future of work: what it means for unions

Will robots take all the jobs? This dystopian question, prompted by the so-called ‘fourth industrial revolution’ – an umbrella term encompassing Artificial Intelligence, Big Data and the ‘Internet of Things’ – has prompted a lively debate in recent years.

Digitisation is seen by some as simply the next wave of technological progress, but there is a nagging fear that things could be different this time. New technology has always been accompanied by concerns of jobs being lost, but whilst jobs have indeed been lost, more new ones have been created. The big policy challenge – which was sometimes met successfully, other times not – was to ensure that those losing the ‘old’ jobs had the skills and the possibilities to undertake the ‘new’ ones. What sets the fourth industrial revolution apart is that by machines interacting remotely, the middle man or woman, usually a skilled worker, could find themselves replaced. As my colleague Helen noted in a [blog post](#) a couple of weeks ago, two economists, Frey and Osborne, argued in 2013 that a colossal 47% of US jobs could be at risk due to computerisation. Frey and Osborne’s work has been strongly challenged, but the policy risk is still a big one.

Needless to say, digitisation is a key challenge for trade unions. Last week I joined colleagues from the Trade Union Advisory Committee (TUAC) to the OECD at an event in Paris entitled ‘Digitisation and the Future of Work’. Much food for thought was provided – below I set out some of the big issues...

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