



ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE AND DIGITALISATION: A MATTER OF LIFE AND DEATH FOR WORKERS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Automation, artificial intelligence and algorithmic management are presented routinely as a technological force for good, giving workers more flexibility and sparing them the soul-destroying tedium, body-destroying hard labour and deadly conditions that come with dirty, difficult and dangerous jobs. However, the reality for many workers looks far less rosy.

This ITUC report identifies widespread physical and psychosocial harms at work associated with the use of these technologies, from cognitive overload as humans are required to work in tandem with robots — cobots — to strain injuries, stress and depression as a consequence of unachievable quotas determined and policed by algorithms. Excessive surveillance, through cameras or remote digital policing of work rates and performance, can lead to work intensification, strain injuries, stress and health risks associated with relentless, unbroken, high-paced work tasks. Biomonitoring and location monitoring using ‘wearables’ and GPS systems can make information about everything workers do and where they do it available to employers, 24/7, with the potential for negative impacts on health, job security and privacy.

Evidence presented in this report suggests that the health and safety of workers is suffering as new technologies and employment practices, such as platform work, fall outside of the scope of traditional safety regulation and rights systems. It is a dangerous development. From warehouse workers to delivery riders, production and profit are prioritised over people. Workers across the economy can now be recruited by machine, supervised and disciplined by machine, and ultimately fired or replaced by machine. New work-related conditions, including ‘technostress’ and ‘cybersickness’ are emerging. Safety is also suffering, with ergonomic injuries and workplace fatalities linked to the high work rates and job and pay pressures that come with management by algorithm.

A new system is urgently needed — one that sees the economy benefit from a technological dividend but that doesn’t treat the workforce as collateral damage. Critical to this is the informed participation of workers and their trade unions at every stage. This should not just include the design, implementation and review of automation and algorithmic management; it should include full consultation on whether and why it is introduced, and for what purpose.

Any introduction of these technologies in the workplace — be they AI, algorithmic management, automated decision-making, robots or tomorrow’s technofix — must be something that happens with workers and not to workers.

CASE HISTORY 1

PHILIPPINES: DELIVERY RIDERS FIGHT AND WIN AFTER TRAGEDY

Jasper Dalman (pictured below), a Foodpanda delivery rider in the Philippines, was among the first riders to form the Cagayan de Oro City chapter of the union RIDERS-SENTRO, an [affiliate of global food and farming union IUF](#).

IUF said Jasper joined the union's organising efforts and "attended union training. He did so in the hope of improving the livelihoods and wellbeing of delivery riders and their families."



The global union added: "Like millions of delivery riders, Jasper's workplace was his bicycle and motorcycle — making deliveries and returning from deliveries.

"To do this safely means that companies like Foodpanda have to take responsibility and recognise riders' rights to a safe workplace. It also means bringing an end to the abusive, stressful, unsafe systems that put riders at risk."

But that did not happen. On 19 February 2023, Jasper died in a horrific road traffic accident while working. He was 19 years old.

"Jasper's death is a tragic demonstration of the vulnerability of delivery riders. Riders work in extremely hazardous conditions — caught between delivery companies' relentless drive for profits (squeezing everything out of riders using algorithms and unfair fees) and customers' unreasonable demands for speedy delivery," the [IUF](#) said.

The global union added: "We have lost young Jasper to the hazardous conditions imposed by delivery companies. His death was preventable, it was avoidable, it was not an accident. He was killed by unsafe work. And we must stop this."

Safety concerns were a focus for organised activities by RIDERS-SENTRO following the tragedy, with protests centred on an unfair [fare matrix for food](#) delivery work. Grab riders held a one-day '[App Off](#)' protest in October 2023.



At a press conference on 3 November 2023, the union denounced the systematic violation of rights and persecution of delivery riders by both Grab and Foodpanda.

In response to the protests, Grab terminated and suspended riders for speaking out. “At the same time, Foodpanda continued its abusive, unsafe practices, placing food delivery above the safety and wellbeing of riders,” the IUF said.

In January 2025, the regional office of the National Labour Relations Commission (NLRC) confirmed an earlier decision by the labour arbiter, [granting union recognition](#) to the RIDERS-SENTRO Cebu Foodpanda Chapter.

According to IUF Asia-Pacific (IUF-AP): “One of the key issues affirmed by this decision is that an employer-employee relationship does in fact exist between Foodpanda and its riders, passing the court’s two-tiered test of the four-fold test and the economic realities test.”

The union also won a right to accident and health insurance benefits. The NLRC “also found the company guilty of lowering the fare and diminishing benefits without consultations with riders.

IUF-AP commented: “National Union of Food Delivery Riders (RIDERS-SENTRO) calls



Foodpanda to do the right thing — respect the decision, correct the injustice against the riders, and not appeal the decision any more.

“RIDERS-SENTRO also invites the company to sit down with the union and initiate talks for a collective bargaining agreement between the union and Foodpanda.

“This victory is not only for the riders involved in the case, but for all riders. RIDERS-SENTRO calls on Foodpanda riders to make their voices heard as well towards implementing this decision for all.”

The organising campaign has seen a succession of new union chapters created in several cities.

CASE HISTORY 2

TURKEY: TIKTOK MODERATORS FIRED AFTER ORGANISING AGAINST BAD JOBS

Telus Digital fired roughly 30 workers in Turkey — including union supporters — in March 2025. The firings came in the wake of the business process outsourcing (BPO) company [dismissing 15 union backers](#) in previous months, according to the union Çağrı-İş Union, which represents contact centre, postal, telephone, telegraph, telecommunication, internet, and communication workers.

In Turkey, Telus provides content moderation for TikTok among other services. Globally, the company counts social media and tech giants such as Alphabet as its largest clients.

In response to the firings, Cihan Sezer, president of Çağrı-İş Union, said: “Telus workers, who are mostly TikTok moderators, are organising in the face of union busting to fight back against inhumane working conditions, low wages, mobbing and intense workloads.

“Taking advantage of legal loopholes in Türkiye, the company not only prolonged the union’s contract negotiation process, but it has attacked the union’s existence by dismissing workers on unjust grounds. Çağrı-İş Union and Telus workers will not give in to these unlawful practices. We will continue our struggle for decent working conditions and wages.”

[Christy Hoffman, general secretary of the global union UNI](#), the trade union federation

for content moderators and BPO workers worldwide, said: “Telus content moderators endure daily trauma, screening highly disturbing content to protect the public. Their right to organise for better conditions must be respected, not punished.”

A 2025 investigation by [the Bureau of Investigative Journalism \(TBIJ\)](#) included interviews with 13 current and former moderators based in [Turkey](#), where Telus is thought to employ about 1,000 workers reviewing TikTok content, mainly in Turkish, Kurdish, Arabic and Azerbaijani.

Almost all told TBIJ they had been affected by their work, which involves removing videos of terrorism, extreme violence, child abuse, genital mutilation, self-harm and animal abuse. Several reported mental health issues, including depression, stress and sleeping problems.

TikTok moderators face harrowing images, with little respite, and with their performance closely policed. The workers told TBIJ that their accuracy, which is assessed by comparing their decisions against those of a separate team, must not dip below 94 per cent.

They work eight to nine-hour shifts, some of them through the night, with one 45-minute lunch break and four 15-minute breaks.

CASE HISTORY 3

CONTENT MODERATORS FACE TRAUMA

It is a job that didn't exist 20 years ago. But today, content moderators, who comb the internet for distressing or illegal photos and videos, are in one of the most stressful jobs around.

Moderators often view several screens simultaneously and at increased speed, and can be exposed all day long, every day to some of the most extreme content imaginable.

"They could be looking at hundreds and hundreds of videos for hours on end, showing various degrees of really harmful, violent and emotionally impactful content," commented [Christy Hoffman, general secretary of the global UNI](#).

Speaking at a January 2025 [World Economic Forum meeting on mental health at work](#), she said: "The psychological toll is immense, with many developing post-traumatic stress disorder. Some report being unable to sleep or relate to their families after viewing such disturbing material day after day."

The union leader said the need for urgent action is clear, with traditional mental health support alone deemed insufficient. "It's not just enough to say, if you need psychological help, we have someone available.

"Instead, systemic changes in how work is structured are needed. Solutions include rotating workers to limit exposure to harmful content, reducing the pace of work, and mandating mental health training and support.

"Importantly, such measures must be integrated into the workday to ensure accessibility for all."

The global union is also investigating models from 'blue light' emergency services used to protect the health of workers facing 'vicarious trauma'.

UNI has established a Digital Work and OHS programme with a Nairobi HQ, where it will host a global content moderators forum on 28-29 April 2025. A content moderators' health and safety protocol has been prepared ahead of the meeting.

While AI will hopefully be able to better augment these workers, their work is not going away soon, Hoffman said. Instead of trying to get rid of these workers, who are essential to a safe, accurate internet, "we need to change the work so that it is less traumatic".

In 2020, Meta — then known as Facebook — agreed to pay a settlement of \$52m (£40m) to moderators who had developed mental health issues because of their jobs.

The impact of these psychosocial risks can be devastating. A report from the European Microworkers Communication and Outreach Initiative (EnCOre), for instance, found "incidents in which workers have fainted, suffered from burnout, experienced psychotic episodes, and, tragically, in at least one instance, committed suicide."

While Alphabet, Meta, Microsoft and the other big names in internet services are headquartered in wealthy countries in the global north, a substantial proportion of the content moderation has gone south, with major centres in countries including Kenya, Colombia and the Philippines.

CASE HISTORY 4

GIG NURSING MAKES SAFETY A CASUALTY

The assumption that gig workers are largely found lugging parcels or pizzas is no longer valid — and workers in care are now among those in the exploitation front line.

In the US, algorithmic management is now a routine part of health care staff recruitment, with on-demand nursing platforms such as CareRev, Clipboard Health, ShiftKey, and ShiftMed promising hospitals more control.

Original interviews with 29 ‘gig’ nurses and nursing assistants by the [Roosevelt Institute](#) found these apps encourage nurses to work for less pay, fail to provide certainty about scheduling and the amount or nature of work, take little to no accountability for worker safety, and can threaten patient wellbeing by placing nurses in unfamiliar clinical environments with no onboarding or facility training.

The institute’s researchers found that on-demand nursing platforms are also using the Uber playbook to lobby state legislatures in an attempt to exempt themselves from existing employment regulations.

The December 2024 Roosevelt Institute study, titled [Uber for Nursing: How an AI-powered Gig Model Is Threatening Health Care](#), notes: “Wall Street’s takeover of US healthcare infrastructure and Silicon Valley’s introduction of gig nursing apps are a dangerous duo that is eroding our health-care system and eviscerating our ability to take care of each other.”



Gig nurses — like Uber drivers and food delivery couriers — also receive a series of ratings. Some of these ratings are given by the medical facilities for attendance, timeliness, and onsite performance.

Other ratings — which have similarly little transparency — are given by the on-demand nursing companies, including ‘reliability scores’.

Nurses compete for shifts, with bids for work driving down wages.

The authors observe that one app, ShiftKey, also requires nurses to pay \$3.67 per shift for a ‘safety fee’, which the company describes as “costs associated with background checks, drug screens [if applicable], verification of credentials, and fraud detection and prevention”, \$2.14 for occupational accident insurance, and \$0.21 for medical malpractice insurance.

It is not explained why these fees are priced per day, given that nurses are not subject to background checks or drug screens each day they work on the app.

CASE HISTORY 5

DATA ANNOTATORS AT THE SHARP END OF AI

On the island of Mindanao in the Philippines, tens of thousands of IT workers 'annotate' the data required to run the algorithms owned by the global leaders in AI, including Microsoft, Meta, Google and Amazon.

A 2024 report in HesaMag, the magazine of the European Trade Union Institute's health and safety unit, reveals the work is "an exploitative industrial system on a global scale".

Working in a grimy cybercafé, two young men describe tedious work over long hours, toiling on the café's computers as they don't have the money to buy their own. They work through the night so there is less competition for the screens.

Their job is to analyse thousands of photos, isolating elements and 'annotating' them. They say that by

repeating this thousands of times, artificial intelligence can start to recognise the objects itself.

It is a process used in smartphones and which also allows accounting to be automated or driverless cars to navigate the streets.

By the end of the decade, the data annotation market is likely to grow ten-fold to approaching \$8bn and employing several million people, most of them in low income countries, according to a 2022 Google Research Report.

But those generating this income are not the ones reaping the benefits, the report says: "Click after click, through billions of microtasks performed on their screens, the AI slaves of the Global South are building the foundations of a technological revolution.

"By contrast, the social welfare aspect of this new world threatens to look like that of the old."

CODE RED

AI, ALGORITHMIC MANAGEMENT, PLATFORM WORK — TECHNOLOGY SHOULDN'T BE THE BOSS OF YOU

There used to be a boss, a manager, a supervisor, a line of command — and a union to keep conditions in check. But for many workers, automation and digitalisation mean working conditions are dictated by a machine or an app. This ITUC report looks at the risks of management by computer code and what unions can do about it.

There's a whole new vocabulary at work: algorithmic management, automated decision-making (ADM), robotics, artificial intelligence (AI), extended reality, exoskeletons.

And all of it is presented as a technological force for good, a high-tech dividend giving workers more flexibility over when and where they work and who they work for, removing from jobs the soul-destroying tedium and body-destroying hard labour that ruined lives, and letting machines and not workers face deadly risks from disasters, hazardous chemicals and radiation.

With the technology comes a plethora of jobs and ways of working that didn't exist that long ago — app-controlled delivery riders and drivers, data annotators, content moderators, big data analysts, warehouse pickers and machine-learning engineers.

But these aren't necessarily new, clean, fulfilling jobs. They can have all the



hazards of old labour and pile on top a raft of problems that form this latest technology's new indignities.

The rise of the machines is nothing new.

Two hundred years ago, during England's first Industrial Revolution, workers smashed the machines used to replace them with the hammers — known as 'Enochs' after a blacksmith who made them — used to manufacture

them. The rallying cry went: “[Enoch made them. And Enoch shall break them.](#)”

In the early decades of the 20th century, Henry Ford is attributed with the line “a customer can have a car painted any colour he wants as long as it’s black” — [Fordism and Taylorism](#) made the worker just another cog in the machine, as mass production and production lines replaced craft with graft.

It took union organisation, bitterly resisted, to create any semblance of decent work out of the re-engineering of production.

By the end of that century, automotive giant Audi made three words of German — Vorsprung durch Technik, or progress through technology — among the most widely known phrases in the language.

Then, as now, modernisation was presented as a force for good — decreasing costs and increasing leisure time and the standard of living.

However, the first industrial revolution saw the rise of tuberculosis, urban

squalor and [occupational diseases](#), as the courts and [troops were deployed to defend the factories](#) from workers making a stand for better conditions. These ‘Luddites’ weren’t opposed to the machines, but the destitution that was an integral part of new production methods.

The second saw street battles in the 1930s as [private armies, such as the Pinkertons in the US, were deployed in a violent and organised union-busting strategy](#). And the third saw jobs go west or go to the Global South, as the industry improved the bottom line by way of the unemployed line.

Move forward to today, and we have this age of mechanisation on speed. GMB members in the UK proclaimed ‘[we are not robots](#)’ as Amazon used algorithms to set work rates and put under-performers on the road to unemployment as a part of its ‘high churn’ model.

The robots jibe struck a chord, and was taken up by [Amazon unions Europe-wide](#).

It was, in every sense, dehumanising management.

You could be recruited by machine. Supervised by machine. And ultimately disciplined or dismissed by machine.

HOW IS DIGITALISATION TRANSFORMING SAFETY AT WORK?

An April 2025 report from the International Labour Organisation (ILO) says digitalisation and automation are impacting millions of jobs worldwide. [Revolutionizing health and safety: The role of AI and digitalization at work](#) notes that while there is potential for technology to improve safety, this isn’t a given, and “proactive policies are needed to address the potential risks”. The ILO says:

Automation and advanced robotics are streamlining physical and cognitive tasks, reducing exposure to hazardous environments and repetitive strain injuries. Potential associated concerns to address may include mechanical failures, in addition to ergonomic, physical and psychosocial risks.

Algorithmic management of work uses AI-driven or programmed systems to coordinate labour in an organisation, optimising task allocation. However, potential risks such as excessive surveillance and work intensification must be controlled and addressed.

Changing work arrangements through digitalisation, including telework and digital labour platforms, offer flexibility but could pose both physical and psychosocial occupational safety and health challenges.

Smart occupational safety and health tools and monitoring systems, including AI-powered sensors and wearable devices, enable real-time hazard detection, predictive risk assessments and proactive safety management. Ensuring usability, proper fit for diverse workers, privacy protection and the prevention of stress from continuous monitoring are key challenges.

Extended and virtual reality are transforming worker training with immersive simulations for hazard recognition and emergency response. However, potential risks such as blocked visibility, balance issues, 'cybersickness', visual strain and cognitive overload must be managed.

Exoskeletons are body-worn, physically supporting technical assistance systems used to facilitate human movements for comfort purposes. They have the potential to reduce load peaks, such as: when lifting heavy or bulky loads; pushing, pulling or dragging heavy loads; with bending, crouching, stooping, stretching, twisting and reaching; or with sustained or heavy, excessive force. However, safety agencies have raised concerns about potential risks, for example how adaptable they are to individual workers and how they could affect performance in atypical or emergency conditions.

BIG TECH RULES

Few jobs are untouched by algorithmic management and artificial intelligence (AI).

Delivery drivers used to get their work allocated in the loading bay; now the jobs go straight to their phones, with GPS tracking their movements.

In manufacturing, AI-powered collaborative robots — cobots —

work alongside humans in workplaces from engineering shops to warehouses.

In medicine, AI guides a surgeon to suspect tissue or growths, and enhances, accelerates and automates diagnostics.

Whatever your job, AI and algorithmic management can help employers police your every movement at work, from the smile on your face, to the pain in your back. It means it is

a big deal for workers and a big deal for unions.

At a major global summit on artificial intelligence (AI) in February 2025, the ITUC called for stronger worker involvement in how AI is introduced and used in the workplace.

The AI [Action Summit](#) in Paris, hosted by the French government, brought together heads of state, international organisations, multinational companies, trade unions, and academics to address the societal implications of AI.

Speaking at the event, which preceded the digitisation and AI-themed International Workers' Memorial Day on 28 April, [ITUC deputy general secretary Eric Manzi](#) stressed the need to protect and involve workers.

“The future of work, shaped by digitalisation and AI, is inevitable, but the outcomes are not predetermined. The question is not if this change comes, but how it is managed. And for this, workers' trade unions are crucial,” he said.

“By ensuring that trade unions are actively involved in this transformation, we can create a future of work that is both inclusive and equitable.

“This means respecting the fundamental, democratic trade union rights of collective bargaining and social dialogue. This is about democracy in the workplace that delivers technological changes that work for everyone.

“At the same time, we need strong safeguards against the unchecked use of algorithms in employment decisions

and worker surveillance. We need strengthened regulation at national and international level to protect workers in the age of AI.”

[Christy Hoffman, general secretary of the global union UNI](#), joined a high-profile panel on ‘Harnessing AI for the Future of Work’, where she called on governments, employers and tech giants to put people at the centre of AI innovations.

“Workers everywhere have fear about their futures, and for good reason. Our societies are not ready for an AI transformation,” she stressed.

“Workers don't have confidence that employers will include them in decisions about how and where AI will be used, that their jobs are safe or that they will have a chance to learn the skills that will be required to move forward.

“People fear losing not only their livelihoods but also their way of life. But we know it does not have to be this way.

“A voice on the job goes a long way towards addressing fear and minimising risks. Unions have successfully negotiated new technology at work for a very long time.”

At the AI Action Summit, the UNI-supported [African Tech Workers Rising](#) championed the rights of data supply chain workers from across the continent. The group's demands focus on a living wage, safe working conditions and union representation.

[Organiser Sonia Kgomo](#), a former Facebook content moderator from Kenya, said: “We are an unseen force behind AI breakthroughs, and we're on the front lines of keeping technology safe for our communities. Our voices are essential to creating a just digital era, and I am here at the summit to make sure they're heard.”

CALL FOR PRECAUTION

There are signs that at least some governments and labour regulators are considering a more measured, safety-focused approach to the process of digitalisation of work.

An 11 February 2025 report from an Australian Inquiry into the Digital Transformation of Work, for example, recommends AI and automated decision-making (ADM) systems used for employment-related purposes should be classified as involving a ‘high risk’ of ‘extreme micromanagement’ and other psychosocial problems.

The standing committee’s formal report adds that ‘high risk’ uses should be subject to mandatory ‘guardrails’ and employers should be guided by a new workplace health and safety code of practice.

The Future of Work report recommends that the government works with the workplace safety regulator on an official code that “identifies and addresses specific work health and safety risks associated with AI and ADM” and includes “limits on the use of AI and ADM in workplaces to mitigate psychosocial risks”.

The report warns: “Realising the benefits of AI and ADM must not displace the paramount responsibility of employers to secure the health and safety of their workers.”

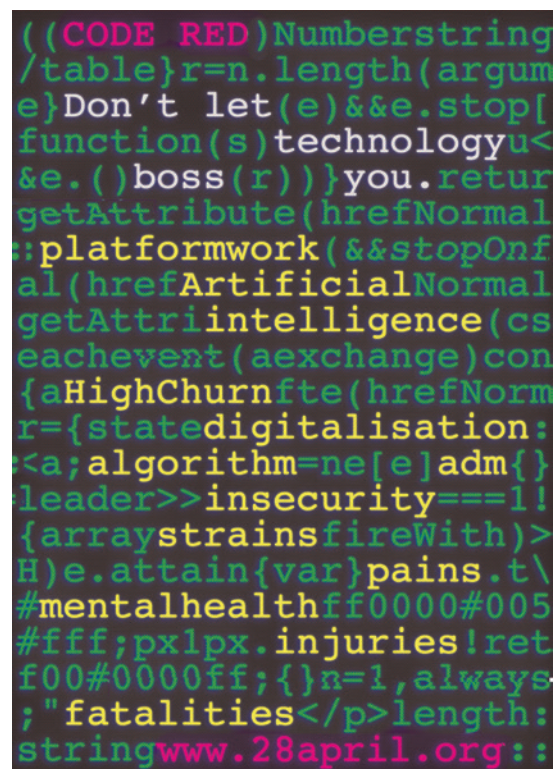
[National union federation the ACTU](#) (Australian Council of Trade Unions) welcomed the report’s recommendation that the government should follow the

occupational health and safety framework of government-union-employer tripartism to bring more oversight to the introduction of AI.

This includes placing a positive duty on employers to identify and mitigate the risks of AI and establish consultation rights for workers so the risks of new AI systems can be better managed.

The concept of protection from ‘high risk’ AI operations is also recognised in the [EU Artificial Intelligence Act](#), which took effect in August 2024.

This requires the “identification and analysis of the known and foreseeable risks associated with each high risk AI system” — which includes the use of AI “for making decisions on promotion and termination of work-related contractual relationships, for task allocation and for monitoring and evaluating performance and behaviour of persons in such relationships.”



Graphic: Ned Jolliffe

The International Labour Organization, the UN body responsible for global occupational health and safety and labour standards, is acutely aware that the potential benefits of digitalisation also come with significant risks.

“Technological advancements can also lead to work intensification, job insecurity and ‘technostress’, as workers face increasing pressure to adapt to rapidly evolving tools and processes,” it notes in its April 2025 report [Revolutionizing health and safety: The role of AI and digitalization at work](#).

The report continues: “The blurring of work-life boundaries due to mobile and online work can contribute to burnout, while intrusive surveillance and constant monitoring may infringe on privacy and reduce job autonomy.”

The nature of these new-generation jobs can add to issues in sectors already known to be high risk, sometimes supplementing them with new and numerous combinations of hazards.

[Digital platform work and occupational safety and health: a review](#), a 2021 report from the European Union safety

agency EU-OSHA, notes that AI-managed jobs “are often active in sectors that are generally considered more dangerous, with higher incidence rates of (severe) occupational accidents, injuries and illnesses.

“Moreover, platform work involves additional tasks and/or a different combination of tasks from those associated with similar jobs in the traditional labour market.”

ILO’s policy and lawmaking annual meeting, the International Labour Conference, will consider proposals in 2025 and 2026 for a new ILO Convention on platform work, supported by a Recommendation.

It would provide a global baseline standard for decent work in the platform economy, instead of what we have now — a proliferation of on-demand jobs that have all the hazards inherent to employer-controlled artificial intelligence and algorithmic management systems, coupled with an app-based model of arms-length employment made insecure by design.

AI and digitalisation have the potential to make work better. But it won’t be technology that delivers more satisfying, less harmful ways of work. It will be agreeing new ways of working with workers that work for workers.

CRITICAL CONSULTATION

The ILO is clear that if the introduction of new technologies including AI is to be safe and successful, worker participation is key.

That doesn’t mean the right to discuss how to make the technology work in a more worker-friendly way. It means being involved in the decision about whether the technology is introduced

at all, and with what purpose and with what safeguards.

The ILO’s 2025 report on digitalisation notes: “Workers and their representatives should be actively involved in all stages of digital technology implementation, including design, operation, and monitoring, ensuring technologies enhance rather than undermine workplace health and safety.”

The ILO adds: “Ensuring that workers are well informed about new technologies and their potential risks, and are actively involved in implementing preventive measures, is crucial for a safe and healthy working environment.”

The UN agency says the globally binding ‘fundamental’ ILO convention on occupational safety and health, Convention 155, requires that workers and their representatives are “meaningfully consulted before the introduction of new technologies impacting occupational safety and health, ensuring they have a voice in decisions that directly affect their work.”

There is similar language in the EU framework directive, the template for safety laws across the European Union.

The directive notes that workers or their representatives should be consulted in “the planning and introduction of new technologies in the workplace”.

According to Aude Cefaliello and Jan Popma, writing in a [2024 HesaMag special report on Navigating the AI Revolution](#), “this implies that workers (or their representatives) should not just be consulted when the system is already purchased and then introduced on the shopfloor.

“It calls for an anticipatory approach,” say the researchers from the European Trade Union Institute (ETUI) and Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam.

“The employer should already involve the workers (representatives) in the preparatory stage and be answering such questions as: Why are we considering introducing this technology, what are the technical specifications and, most significantly, how will workers’ rights on such issues as the determination of work pace, autonomy and privacy be taken into consideration.”

They say the directive also “requires risk assessments prior to purchasing the new system” with involvement of workers’ representatives that “strengthens their capacity to co-design data-driven company practice”.

WHAT DO UNIONS WANT?

Worldwide, AI is a reality in the workplace, but exploitation should not be, the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) has said.

The ITUC is demanding:

- Workers and their unions must be informed and meaningfully consulted in deciding how AI is introduced and used in the workplace.
- AI must not be used to undermine fundamental rights, including freedom of association, the right to organise and occupational health and safety.
- Algorithmic decision-making cannot replace human oversight, especially in areas that affect employment, wages and working conditions.

Additionally, the ITUC has stressed that stronger international regulation is needed, including a binding ILO Convention on Decent Work for the Platform Economy — a key demand of the global trade union movement in the lead-up to the upcoming ILO International Labour Conference in June 2025.

The ILO stresses the need for ongoing vigilance to address changing impacts of technology after its introduction.

“As technology evolves, so do workplace risks,” it notes in its 2025 report.

“New software updates, system upgrades or changes in work processes can introduce unforeseen hazards, necessitating continuous review and adaptation of occupational safety and health preventive measures.

“To address these risks proactively, employers should conduct risk assessments regularly and whenever the introduction of new technology is planned.

“This approach enables enterprises to identify and implement appropriate preventive measures promptly, ensuring a safer transition to digitalised work environments.”

The ILO concludes: “Staying informed about technological advancements and regulatory changes, as well as gathering feedback from workers further enhances the ability to detect and address emerging risks effectively.”

The necessity to involve workers is repeated in a November 2024 report from the European Union safety agency EU-OSHA.

It asserts that worker participation can help in identifying, preventing and mitigating psychosocial risks.

[Worker participation and representation: the impact on risk prevention of AI worker management systems](#) states risks such as heightened surveillance,

privacy concerns or time pressure linked to algorithmic and AI-based worker management (AIWM) systems can lead to worker stress, social isolation and blurred work-life boundaries.

It adds that worker participation can help in identifying, preventing and mitigating psychosocial risks.

It concludes: “The characteristics of AIWM technologies, including its opacity and dynamic nature, but also the diversity of applications in the workplace, call for more flexible regulatory approaches with a stronger role of collective bargaining.

“It is critical that current regulations on workers’ involvement and representation evolve to incorporate these issues, as collective bargaining in the context of AIWM remains limited.”

The EU Artificial Intelligence Act also notes that “risk assessments should not be a one-off exercise”, comment ETUI’s Aude Cefaliello and Jan Popma.

They point to the AI Act’s requirement that “the risk management system shall consist of a continuous iterative process planned and run throughout the entire lifecycle of a high-risk AI system, requiring regular systematic review and updating.”

The Act also requires the reporting of any “serious incidents” to the supplier as well as the relevant national regulator.

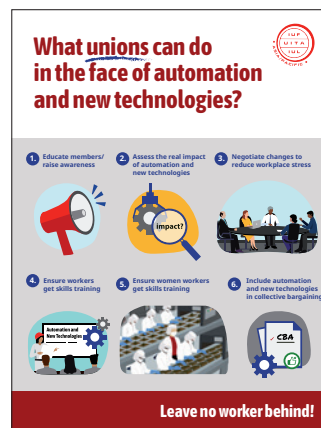
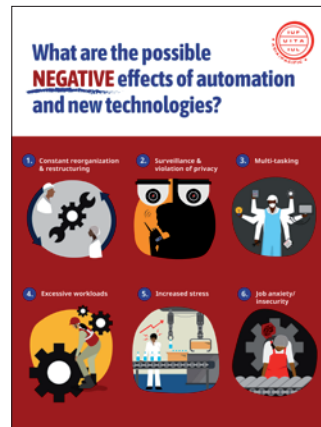
Serious incidents is defined broadly, but includes deaths and serious harm to health, property or the environment, and a serious and irreversible disruption to the management and operation of critical infrastructure.

In reality, laws are only as good as their

enforcement, which often means the oversight and on-the-ground expertise of [organised and trained union reps](#). And it doesn't necessarily require laws to secure improvements.

Unions see the introduction of new technology, including consultation with unions before new technology or apps change the work and the nature of the work, as a critical area of collective bargaining.

The [Asia Pacific region of the food and farming union IUF](#), for example, has produced an education and awareness programme for its members on automation and new technologies, including infographics and guides, highlighting the problems and addressing the actions unions can take.



Spy in the cab - When Amazon rolled out 'AI-enabled vans' including surveillance cameras, it required delivery drivers to download and continually run a 'Mentor' programme — described as 'a digital driver safety app' — on their phones, saying that this would "improve the safety" of the drivers. But the cameras and app combination reported their driving behaviour directly to managers, which could lead to a loss of bonuses and disciplinary action, and generated routine and distracting machine reprimands while driving.

HOW CAN TECH HURT WORKERS?

[Technology may be neutral](#), but its use is anything but. Even apparently well-intentioned applications intended to improve safety might also provide surveillance or performance data to an employer that causes a worker to face pay penalties, disciplinary action or dismissal.

If workers supported by their unions don't decide what, how, why and where technology is introduced in the workplace, then it is far more likely to be serving the company's interests than those of the workforce. And that can be very bad for worker health.

Sometimes, the lure of a technological fix encourages employers to provide the wrong answer to the right question.

For example, companies are using drones to apply highly hazardous pesticides, which in theory could reduce or even eliminate exposure to the human applicator.

However, the automation of such processes is creating other, highly dangerous risks to workers as well as the general population, contravening the principle of [hierarchy of control](#) used by ILO, which prioritises the elimination of the risk.

If poisonous pesticide use continues, [the workers downwind can be exposed to spray drift](#) and someone has to [maintain, clean and refill the drone](#). And the plants we eat have still been doused in toxics.

There's also a direct association between the use of [highly hazardous pesticides and suicides](#), often in farmworkers and their families. Dispense with the chemicals and the risk of both poisoning and suicides is reduced.

In its digitalisation report, the ILO notes: "The hierarchy of controls should guide preventive measures, prioritising hazard elimination and engineering solutions over administrative controls and PPE, ensuring that technology is used for the enhancement of worker safety and health rather than as a substitute for robust occupational safety and health protections."

SURVEILLANCE

Surveillance can come as standard with automated work systems and apps.

This can include monitoring of emails and files, webcams on work computers, tracking of when and how much a worker is typing or calls made, and movements made by the worker, using cameras and trackable devices.

It can lead quickly to work intensification, strain injuries, stress and health risks

associated with being tied to your desk, and workers being under scrutiny, under pressure and without rest or toilet breaks.

The ILO's 2025 report notes that "potential risks such as excessive surveillance and work intensification must be controlled and addressed".

It adds: "While intended to improve safety, the systems can sometimes devolve into constant monitoring, with workers' behaviour reported

to managers, potentially leading to automated reprimands or penalties for unmet performance targets.”

The UN labour rights body warns that “ethical concerns also arise regarding how collected data is used, stored and shared”.

The 2024 EU-OSHA report notes that algorithmic management “systems may intensify surveillance and erode workers’ autonomy, which in turn leads to high stress levels,” adding they “can also increase work intensity and the speed of work and lead to unpredictability in work schedules.”

Technologies used “to monitor and evaluate performance can create performance pressure and are also associated with high stress levels among workers, particularly when they perceive the metrics and processes to be unfair,” it warns.

The impact can be devastating. In evidence to the Australian standing committee, the Victorian Trades Hall Council identified a blue-collar worksite subjected to “excessive use of surveillance”. This resulted in a “highly dysfunctional and negative” work environment that saw three workers placed on suicide watch — with one even taking their own life.

A 2022 report cited by the ILO notes that 80 per cent of the largest private employers in the US track individual worker productivity using algorithmic management systems.

In May 2024, more than 20 leaders of major trade unions across Europe,

representing in excess of eight million workers, called on European data protection authorities to ramp up oversight of Amazon’s abusive — potentially illegal — data surveillance practices.

[Global union UNI](#) said this collective initiative “underscores a growing concern about the harms of Amazon’s practices on workers’ rights and workplace safety.”

The union leaders, from 11 European countries where Amazon’s warehouse and delivery operations employ a significant number of workers, raised their concern about “the company’s pervasive use of surveillance and algorithmic management.

“These invasive measures include the extensive use of hand scanners, activity monitoring software, video cameras, GPS devices and other tracking technologies.”

“Recent surveys have shown this surveillance’s serious consequences on workers’ mental and physical health,” the UNI stated.

Highlighting recent regulatory actions, [the union leaders cited the decision by the French data protection authority \(CNIL\)](#) in December 2023, which found Amazon France Logistique in violation of several General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) principles.

CNIL found serial breaches adversely and illegally affecting the welfare of warehouse staff, as a consequence of the use of hand scanners in the management, storage, selection and dispatch of goods. This included policing scan rates and “idle time”, which the authority noted led to excessive monitoring of employees.

Amazon failed to comply with the principle of data minimisation under GDPR, requiring far more detail on work schedules and performance than was required for legitimate

assessment and training purposes, it noted, failing also to respect the legal requirements on information provision and transparency about this and video surveillance.

The CNIL imposed a substantial fine of €32m (\$36.3m) for creating an “excessively intrusive system” for monitoring employee activity

and performance, along with penalties for inadequate video surveillance protocols.

France’s Labour Code includes rules on workplace monitoring, such as surveillance cameras and online activity tracking, while Germany’s Federal Data Protection Act (BDSG) imposes strict regulations on employee data collection, processing and storage.

WEARABLES

Wearables, such as smartwatches, along with mobile phones and purpose-designed ‘work management’ devices, can incorporate GPS systems that can identify a worker’s location all day, every day, inside and outside of work.

This, combined with performance management software, might remove any discretion they have in planning their work or any downtime to recover from intense periods of work or to socialise with colleagues, with workers instead automatically allocated to an unending sequence of alternative tasks.

“In these cases, the use of new technologies will not alleviate workload and work-related stress at all, but instead intensify work,” argue Aude Cefaliello of the European Trade Union Institute (ETUI) and Jan Pompa from Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam in their [2024 HesaMag special report](#).

Commenting on the impact of wearables, they note: “In some cases, by addressing only symptoms rather than root causes, monitoring technologies may inadvertently perpetuate a cycle

of stress and overexertion, ultimately affecting workers’ overall wellbeing.”

The report adds: “Wearable devices, such as smartwatches, can distract workers, impairing their focus and overall performance. Additionally, surveillance features in these devices may induce stress by creating high pressure work environments.

“The constant monitoring of physiological and biometric data may also lead to anxiety, as workers feel pressured to maintain specific performance or health metrics.”

A January 2022 paper in [Global Workplace Law and Policy](#), co-authored by Cefaliello, notes: “The use of algorithmic management software at work has proven to [negatively impact workers’ health and safety](#). Continuous monitoring via wearables, for instance, increases work stress while affecting productivity.”

It adds: “The way the algorithm allocates tasks and tracks workers affects the work organisation and negates workers’ right to appropriate break time, leading to severe physical and psychological stress.”

The wearables may also be a bad fit, the data unreliable or unverifiable and its use an abuse of workers' privacy, with health data downloaded potentially breaching medical confidentiality, disability and discrimination laws.

A November 2024 guide from the [US Equal Employment Opportunity Commission \(EEOC\)](#) notes that employer-mandated wearables, such as watches, rings, glasses, or helmets, which collect information about a worker's health and biometric data, may be conducting a "[medical examination](#)" as defined by the [Americans with Disabilities Act \(ADA\)](#).

[Wearables in the workplace: The use of wearables and other monitoring technology under federal employment discrimination laws](#) advises if the wearables require employees to provide

health information (including in the setting up of the device), the employer may be making "[disability-related inquiries](#)".

The ADA limits the use of medical examinations or disability-related inquiries by employers and also requires employers to safeguard medical records.

"With the increasing availability of wearable technologies, some employers may be considering implementing them in their workplaces. It's important that employers keep in mind that some uses of wearables can violate federal anti-discrimination laws," said EEOC chair Charlotte A Burrows.

"If they do choose to bring this technology into the workplace, employers must be vigilant in following the law to ensure that they do not create a new form of discrimination. There is no high-tech exemption to the nation's civil rights laws."

UNION BUSTING AND DIGITALISATION

When apps are required on home phones or wearables, a union rep consulting privately with members, inside or outside working hours, or undertaking organising activities or planning industrial action can immediately be visible to the boss.

In 2019, the US steelworkers' union USW warned that the computers used by Google employers were "spying on its workers".

The USW said "anytime a Google employee uses an online calendar to schedule a meeting involving more than 100 co-workers, management gets an alert — a great way for the anti-union corporation to sniff out union organising efforts." Google said the system was designed to prevent spam, not unionisation.

Similar accusations by other US unions have resulted in investigations of Alphabet, Google's parent company, by the federal National Labor Relations Board.

An employer's ability to track its workers' activities may be a by-product of technology introduced for another purpose, or part of the original purpose. But some technology is used by employers entirely to target union organising efforts.

A January 2025 report from the [US Economic Policy Institute](#) noted employers are using "increasingly sophisticated tactics, including data analytics, employee data surveys, covert surveillance, and anti-union 'heat maps' in their union avoidance activities."

BIOMETRIC MONITORING

The impact of physiological monitoring apps — checking a worker’s body functions including heart rate, skin temperature and movements, for example — depends on the motives of those doing the monitoring and the relevance and reliability of the data.

A worker showing evidence of excessive exertion or fatigue could be told they need to slow down to a more manageable work pace or take a break. Or they could be fired or docked pay for not keeping up with the rate, or “to protect their health”.

Asking the right questions — why are workers struggling in the heat, or why does productivity drop off after a 12-hour shift — does not necessarily translate to finding the right answers. Some [performance management systems](#) use a ‘bell curve’ or ‘forced distribution’ approach, with the worst performers on the distribution graph facing penalties, capability assessments or dismissal.

This is a process of attrition. Workers who were performing satisfactorily yesterday will be among the worst performers today.

The ILO’s report notes: “These devices are not a substitute for eliminating hazards at their source and may inadvertently encourage risk tolerance, especially when adverse biological monitoring results are not immediately apparent.

“Additionally, a focus on acute risks could divert attention from chronic issues, such as long-term health problems, or repetitive injuries that develop over time.

“While wearable technologies can effectively monitor conditions such as fatigue or heat stress, they do not address underlying factors such as excessive work hours and other psychosocial risk factors.”

Experts warn that biometrics generate selected scientific data that is vulnerable to selective and very unscientific interpretation.

Wearables and biomonitors, for example, only see what they look for, and that could give a partial or entirely misleading picture of both a worker’s health status and their performance.

“Measuring a limited number of easily accessible performance factors may not only fail to be representative of employees’ performance but also create incentives to neglect performance factors that are not actively tracked,” notes [Kateryna Maltseva](#), an associate professor at Oslo New University College and a specialist in algorithm accountability.

In a 2020 paper in the journal [Business Horizons](#), she observed that this ‘quantification mindset’ approach “to track performance might be tantamount to measuring the immeasurable”.

Using the example of heart rate monitoring, she warned, “in the hands of a manager, this information may, even involuntarily, be used as a source of professional and highly consequential judgements.

“Simply knowing that certain employees are, according to their physiological data, ‘better’ than others at tolerating stress or at committing to healthier lifestyles may lead managers to show favouritism.”

What it does not do is address the psychosocial or other problems in the workplace that were affecting the entire workforce to varying degrees.

Nor do acute reactions necessarily identify those at long-term risk of ill-health caused by or related to hazardous working environments.

WORKLOADS AND WORK PACE

Algorithms make the worst aspects of traditional management automatic and effort-free. Workers are constantly compared with workmates on work rates and productivity. The pressure and the stress from performance targets and key performance indicators increases.

The ILO's 2025 digitisation report notes: "Automation often intensifies work by imposing tight schedules and increasing task pace, leading to higher stress, error rates and fatigue."

Workers may have to match the relentless efficiency of robots, the ILO notes, risking fatigue, stress and "cognitive overload".

It adds: "Algorithm-driven penalties, such as automatic deductions for minor delays or mistakes, further heighten anxiety and pressure, impacting workers' mental health.

"To increase productivity, organisations might implement systems that direct workers to work without mini-breaks, minimise the time for certain procedures or force them to work at high speed."

Other approaches, which on the surface seem benign or even fun, can have damaging impacts, it notes.

"Gamification strategies may incentivise excessive work intensity, while algorithms sometimes penalise workers for taking extended breaks. This constant pressure can lead to stress, dissatisfaction and physical symptoms."

The 2024 Australian standing committee report noted: "Organisations can use AI systems to set intensified and unachievable key performance indicators (KPIs). KPIs are imposed on workers who are tracked. This can lead to significant physical and psychosocial harms in the workplace if KPIs are unsustainable or unrealistic."

In the US, a series of states have introduced laws to increase transparency and put limits on app-driven productivity quotas.

In 2023, Minnesota lawmakers passed a bill providing greater protection for warehouse workers from these quotas, a move aimed at helping employees at companies like Amazon.

The law prohibits companies from firing or taking any adverse actions against an employee for failing to meet a quota that has not been disclosed to them.

It also says companies can't implement productivity quotas that prevent workers from taking breaks, and allows the authorities to open an investigation if a company has an injury

rate 30 per cent or higher than its peers.

The Minnesota law also allows current or former employees to bring a civil suit against companies violating the new rules.

Similar laws have been passed in US states including New York and California.

Amazon was fined nearly \$6m (£4.5m) in 2024, after the [California Labor Commissioner Office's](#) said the company failed to notify employees at two warehouses in the state of any productivity quotas they were required to meet, leading workers to be disciplined without knowing why.

The citations against Amazon, the leading employer of warehouse workers and the nation's second largest private employer, are the state's most prominent use of the 2021 law that aimed to curb the pace of work required in warehouses.

California Labor Federation leader Lorena Gonzalez authored the law as an Assemblymember after several news investigations and advocacy reports highlighted how demands for speed and production drove a higher-than-average injury rate at some Amazon warehouses.

The California law doesn't ban the use of quotas in warehouses, but requires employers to notify workers of them in writing when they are hired, and prohibits imposing quotas that are so stringent they don't allow workers enough time to take breaks or use the bathroom.

In December 2024, the US safety

regulator OSHA ordered the e-commerce giant to pay a \$145,000 penalty, submit to oversight at 10 facilities for two years and to adopt "corporate-wide ergonomic measures" to reduce the risk of injuries to workers.

In the UK, a June 2024 report by the [Oxford Internet Institute](#) at the University of Oxford, looking at the deployment of AI and robotics at Amazon, found "pace-based demands have a significant impact on the physical and mental health of Amazon associates. Interviewees described feeling 'demoralised', 'hopeless' and 'very, very stressed'.

"At robotic sites, mental health risks were also raised because of the isolation experienced when working at fixed workstations, described as 'a kind of cage'."

Dr Funda Ustek Spilda, the lead author of the report [Fairwork Amazon Report 2024: Transformation of the warehouse sector through AI](#), said: "Rather than only analysing specific AI technologies being deployed, we should look at the overall infrastructural system that is changing through AI.

"Workers' experiences show that without asking the necessary questions when introducing these technologies into workplaces, workers might end up suffering from important harms."



CLEAN SWEEP Gig work is coming to a workplace near you, and is now operating in every sector from cleaning to construction. *Photo: Rory O'Neill*

PLATFORM WORK

Digital platform jobs, where workers have to log on to apps to book or bid for shifts, have spread from delivery work – mostly people, parcels and fast food – to every corner of the economy, from cleaning to construction to care work.

But it is the much more established delivery jobs where the results of exploitative gig work have been laid bare.

Unsafe delivery times in several countries have been linked to high fatality rates.

In Australia, the [Transport Workers Union](#) said in August 2020 that 18 food delivery riders in the country had died while working in the preceding three years.

The union said the families of gig riders killed at work did not qualify under the official workers' compensation scheme.

This appears to be a global phenomenon. An [ILO survey in 2021](#) of 20,000 digital platform workers in 100 countries found that only 20 per cent had access to employment injury protection.

An April 2020 report from US campaign group Gig Workers Rising published a roll call of 50 workers who had died working as drivers for platform companies including Lyft, Bolt and Uber.

The report, [Death and corporate irresponsibility in the gig economy: An urgent safety crisis](#), noted: "Reports indicate that incidents of carjacking and bike theft, verbal abuse, physical

harassment and assault of drivers are commonplace and, in some cases, growing."

A 2022 study of occupational injuries in gig workers in Japan, published in the journal [Industrial Health](#), found: "Gig workers had a much higher incidence rate of occupational injury (27.8 per cent for any minor injury and 17.1 per cent for activity-limiting injury) than those who did not have gig work experience. (9.2 per cent and 2.0 per cent respectively).

"Multiple regression analysis indicated that gig workers had a three times greater risk of any minor occupational injury and an eight times greater risk of activity-limiting injury, after adjustment for potential confounders."

The same vulnerability saw [three Uber drivers in the Canadian province of British Columbia file a labour complaint](#) in October 2021 after they were fired for refusing unsafe work. The complaint was filed on their behalf by UFCW Local 1518.

The union said the drivers were highly rated on the app, but were unfairly fired after a small number of bad reviews from disgruntled passengers who were refused service for violating Uber's Covid-19 safety measures.

There has been some progress in getting gig workers real rights.

In Spain, a 2022 'riders' law' introduced a presumption that delivery drivers are 'employees'.

In November 2024 in the UK, drivers working for [ride-hailing and food delivery app Bolt won a legal claim to be classed as workers](#) rather than self-employed.

The legal case follows a landmark [UK Supreme Court ruling](#) in 2021 that Uber drivers were not self-employed, but were workers entitled to rights including holiday pay, a guaranteed minimum wage and breaks.

In December 2024, an EU [Platform Workers' Directive](#) became law.

The directive, which should be transposed into law in all the EU's member states, introduced a ban on automated systems putting undue

pressure on workers or creating risks to their safety and physical and mental health.

However, this restriction applies only to those in an employment relationship with the digital work platform rights, a critical loophole [strongly criticised by unions](#).

In June 2025, negotiations will start on a possible new ILO Convention on platform work. Unions expect this standard will be agreed in 2026 and will underpin core employment, safety and trade union rights for all workers in the gig economy.

WHAT UNIONS WANT FROM THE PLATFORM WORK CONVENTION

When the ILO's conference in June 2025 opens on discussions about a possible ILO convention and recommendation on platform work, unions will be ready.

A record number of trade unions contributed their expertise in response to an ILO questionnaire on what the proposed new convention should look like, emphasising strong labour and safety rights, giving platform workers the same employment and social protections unquestioned for other workers.

The proposed convention text sets out minimum protections, and detailed guidance is provided in the text for a proposed supporting recommendation.

The ITUC said workers expect that the future instruments will lay down mandatory principles for the protection of all platform workers while offering practical guidance for the strengthening of national law and policies on the following topics:

Barriers to access to rights

- The future instruments must guarantee that all platform workers can access the rights enshrined in existing international labour standards (ILS), including fundamental principles and rights at work, by addressing the unique challenges they face and taking into account the specificities of platform work.

Scope and coverage

- The scope of the future instruments should cover all platform work and workers on digital platforms, including location-based and online workers, and should apply to all workers, whether they are in an employment relationship, or genuinely self-employed.

Specific protections are required on the following areas:



- measures to combat employment misclassification
- Remuneration and working time with a view to including all time worked and ensuring transparency, predictability of pay, living wages and commensurate rates of pay.
- Access to social protection for all platform workers.
- Application of all relevant occupational health and safety instruments, including protection from violence and harassment, while accounting for the unique features of platform work.
- Training and skills including portable competences.
- Protections of the rights of all workers on an equal basis, regardless of migration status.
- inspection and supervisory systems to regulate platform work across all relevant topics and clear terms and conditions of employment or engagement.

Regulating emerging gaps, such as

- Governance of algorithmic management and data protection.
- Human review of algorithm-generated decisions that affect working conditions.
- Rules governing digital platform surveillance of work performance and monitoring practices to protect the rights, privacy and dignity of all platform workers.
- Protections for data governance and data privacy.

[Campaigning for an ILO Convention and Recommendation on Platform Work – ITUC campaign toolkit](#). This material is available also in [Russian](#), [French](#) and [Spanish](#). [Social media assets](#).

CONTROL

Worker safety implications — intended and unintended — should be factored in at the software design stage.

ETUI's Aude Cefaliello reported in a January 2022 paper in the journal *Global Workplace Law and Policy*, "if the AI system is intended to be used at work, the provider cannot ignore the impact on workers' health and safety.

"Also, the provider should take into consideration that the AI should be designed with a view to mitigating monotonous work and work at a predetermined work-rate and to reducing their effect on health."

Cefaliello, writing in 2025 with Jan Popma, concluded worker representation is the critical component in safeguarding human health and dignity from harm from new technologies.

"Consultation of workers in every stage of the innovation cycle is crucial to helping workers protect themselves against the risks — unforeseen or factored in — of new technologies," they state.

"This goes for all kinds of technologies, but it is particularly significant in the field of robotics and artificial intelligence.

"The stakes are high: We must prevent workers becoming slaves to the machine."

RESOURCES

[Revolutionizing health and safety: The role of AI and digitalization at work](#), ILO, April 2025.

[How can workers protect themselves against the risks of new technologies?](#), Aude Cefaliello and Jan Popma, HesaMag, #29, pages 14-17, ETUI, Winter 2024 [français].

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