**The three big challenges for workers in the future of work**

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The report from the International Labour Organization’s (ILO) Global Commission on the Future of Work contains interlinked recommendations to tackle the many challenges posed to working people by new technologies. The report is one of the most coherent and holistic responses to the issue that has yet been released, and the authors should be commended for their efforts.

Among a series of novel recommendations, the report argues for tripartite negotiation to be strengthened and suggests various inter-connected mechanisms to help reinvigorate the social contract and protect working people. Among these mechanisms the Commission calls for the harnessing of technology in support of decent work in the framework of a more comprehensive social security system and lifelong education and learning.

The focus is on the positive potential of technology, before identifying the main technological challenges facing workers. The Commission then propose solutions that would help ensure that technology serves the purpose of improving working conditions. For example, it argues for human beings to be made central to the design process, for regulation to protect workers exposed to technological change, and for artificial intelligence to be squarely under human control.

**Digital protection**

There is a lot to commend these proposals – regulations on algorithmic accountability, on data collection and use (including surveillance and monitoring technology), and on digital labour platforms. They would help ensure algorithms were written with their impact on workers in mind, and controls on surveillance and monitoring technology would reduce the impact of practices designed to make workers labour harder. Controls on digital labour platforms would protect workers dealing with digital forms of work as well as people working for platforms like Uber and Deliveroo. And of course, technology could play a role in protecting good working conditions – it could monitor working hours and ensure guaranteed minimum hours as proposed in the recommendation on ‘time sovereignty’, for example.

At first it might seem surprising that in a report dedicated to the ‘future of work’ there is so little space given over to a discussion of individual technologies and their transformative potential, which has become normal for similar reports in recent years. But for me this is a positive indication since it means the authors have acknowledged that technology is a social issue – what it does is determined by society and a society’s decision-making bodies.

So the response needs to be social – in fact, not a million miles from what was done to channel previous waves of technological transformation. And it requires strong state intervention. It is also tremendously positive that the report does not focus on the potential job losses due to technology. This is a sign of a maturing analysis among labour leaders, a shift away from panicked predictions of doom towards a more sober assessment of the challenges working people face. Both these conclusions are supported by my own work in this area.

**Three basic challenges**

But there are areas that I think need to be the subject of a more rigorous analysis, in this report and elsewhere. For me, working people around the world face three interconnected basic challenges in the next 15 years:

**1. The shift from a unipolar to a multipolar world**

The US dominated the international economy after 1991 but in recent years this hegemony has been challenged by the relative economic weakening of the US in parallel with the growth of the BRICS countries, in particular China. Donald Trump’s foreign policy emphasises unilateralism, withdrawing from UN bodies and the INF missile treaty. At the same time he is pursuing trade wars with China and Russia and pressuring allies like Germany to do the same. The impact of this is to weaken existing international mechanisms of trade and greatly increase the potential for unintended conflict, of which ordinary working people will be the main victims.

This dangerous situation demands that trade unions help build a civil society coalition for peace, and for the peaceful negotiation of problems between great powers. It also demands an international approach to trade and labour issues.

**2. The challenge to working conditions posed by the deployment of technology under a neoliberal paradigm**

Technology poses several challenges to workers – digitalisation allows more and more aspects of the work process to be measured, creating data. This data, along with the systems to use it, allows more aspects of the work process to be automated or remote-controlled. And in combination the data and the machines allow work processes to be reorganised in new ways.

*How* all of this happens, and what impacts it has is conditioned by other factors like laws, regulations, social customs, professional ethics and so on. Under a neoliberal paradigm in which the reach of the state is minimised and labour is made so flexible as to be prostrate, all of this is essentially left in the realm of self-regulation. And we know how well that works. This is where the ILO report is strong, and is proposing useful remedies.

Perhaps most important among the potential negative impacts of new technology is data itself. Or rather, the capacity to gather data on ever more aspects of life. Data describes people as individuals when it is created via social media and an analysis of online activity. This data describes a person as a social being and as a personality. In the workplace the data collected describes the person as a worker, and allows them to be compared to other workers. Aggregated, this data can create a multifaceted image of society, of what it likes, dislikes, how it behaves, how it perceives its reality and what it considers broadly right and wrong. Not a perfect image, but a much better one than people have ever had before.

**Digital colonialism**

In the economy, data can create similar multifaceted images of a company, or a sector, or of many companies, perhaps even the economy as a whole. But we are also creating data relating to our biology, and to that of the world around us. And to a greater or lesser extent we are beginning to take measure of the natural world around us too. Again, none of this is exact or perfect, and it is limited by our choice of what we measure, and our ability to understand it, but again, we have far more of it now than ever before, and in ten years there will be vastly more than now.

Data informs knowledge, knowledge is power. And power corrupts. At the moment the collection and use of data are largely unregulated, and it is dominated by a handful of tech companies. And these are mainly based in one or two developed countries. The danger of data being used to benefit a handful of wealthy companies, or in turn a handful of wealthy countries is clear. Workers across the world need to be vigilant against the dangers posed by digital colonialism and the unregulated collection and use of data. For this we need international regulations and agreements on data and its uses.

**3. The rise of the far right**

Following the 2008 crisis, the far right has grown vigorously in many countries, and has even come to power in some. The violence, xenophobia, virulent nationalism and racism of these groups polarises society and focuses legitimate discontent on the most marginalised and vulnerable sectors of our communities. In power these governments actively intervene abroad, and enjoy militaristic posturing, which also contributes to international tensions. These movements use the language of injustice to perpetuate it, cracking down on trade unions and progressive civil society, which pushes down working conditions and increases inequality.

These three inter-related challenges have been posed in international forums like the Decode conference in Barcelona in October 2018, but they are not yet part of the mainstream discussion around the future. But they should be, because they are not separate. Digitalisation and data is no respecter of sectoral boundaries in an economy as the development of Amazon shows. Futhermore, data will also be no respecter of the polite boundaries we conceive between politics, economics and society. Workers will face a tough struggle to overcome these challenges, but we will prevail.