

The 4th Industrial Revolution, Changes in the World of Work and Trade Union Strategies

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The defining phenomenon for the economy and labour markets of our era seems to be what is commonly called the 4th industrial revolution or the 2nd machine age. This denotes digitalization, the use of artificial intelligence and more advanced robotics. The fundamental driver of this kind of technological change is the fact that computer power is doubled every 18 to 24 months, what is often called Moores Law, and the possibilities that this brings in terms of new methods of production and value creation.

The new technologies come with a potential of automating or replacing a lot of tasks that are currently taken up by human labour. Hence, various academic studies project that between one third and half of all jobs being performed in advanced economies can be substituted by technology within the next 20 years. This does not mean that that many jobs will indeed cease to exist or that those who lose their current job due to automation etc. will be unable to find new jobs. However, it does mean that there will be severe dislocations to employment.

It seems pretty clear already that the 4th industrial revolution is happening in conjunction with a rise in so-called platform work, where businesses buy tasks not time through web-based platforms or apps, and there hence is no employment relationship, with a rise in global freelancers that can be sourced from all parts of the world, and an increase in atypical or non-standard work such as temporary contracts, agency work etc.

At the same time, the new technologies allow for what is often called a 'winner takes it all'-economy. This means that we are already seeing new divisions between owners of capital (particularly the new technologies) and labour, the highly skilled and most others as well as between so-called super stars and everyone else. Thus we should also expect higher economic inequality unless counter-measures are taken.

The paper will explore and explain these trends and dynamics. It will use this as a background for suggesting trade union strategies to meet the changes. Such suggestions will include both fundamental organising strategies, considerations around ownership as well as broader political responses in relation to social safety nets, active labour market policies and education.

It will be argued that trade unions will have to think differently in relation to how and who they organise, that co-ownership of work places, e.g. in the form of cooperatives, must be back on the agenda, and that state policies should undergo substantial changes too.

Methodologically, the paper will draw on academic literature on the changes mentioned above, concrete analysis and investigations made by researches and think tanks as well as consideration around strategies developed through dialogue and concrete projects with trade unions and other institutions of the labour movement.