

# Digital transformation of public services

## HOW CAN TRADE UNIONS USE COLLECTIVE BARGAINING TO UPHOLD AND IMPROVE WORKING CONDITIONS?

International seminar  
in Berlin in June 2018  
A seminar on digitalisation:  
what for?

**Considering that digitalisation is having a major impact on jobs and job content across the public services, the European Federation of Public Service Unions (EPSU), the Friedrich Ebert Foundation and VerDi organised in June 2018 an international seminar to debate the challenges, both positive and negative, that are facing workers and citizens.**

### Digitalisation: changes at work

One of the first observations amongst the participants at the seminar, 55 representatives of 35 public service unions from 15 countries and the European level, was that the process is already well underway. Whether in the form of job cuts or transformation of job content, public services are facing significant disruption. In the Netherlands, 1 500 mainly lower-skilled jobs out of a total of 15 000 were cut as a result of the digitalisation of legal services. In France between 3% and 8% of staff (40 000 to 110 000 workers) may be affected in the near future, particularly in administrative and technical occupations. A UK trade unionist mentioned more than 230 000 of its 1.4 million members who could lose their jobs to automation by 2035, with workers most at risk in health and local government.

These changes come at a time, when governments are trying to reduce costs. In France, for example, civil service numbers are to be reduced by 120 000 by 2022 while in the UK, hundreds of thousands of jobs have already been cut in central but particularly in local government.

However, digitalisation does not necessarily have a negative impact: some jobs with repetitive tasks can be taken on by machines, and digitalisation will lead to the creation of new jobs. The role of trade unions is thus not to go against this inevitable move, but to push for regulations

on jobs destruction and creation and influence the content of new jobs and the provision of training necessary to carry them out effectively.

### Which actions for trade unions?

#### *Negotiating collective agreements*

The primary way trade unions can act is in negotiating collective agreements that can help regulate many of the issues that arise as a result of digital change and to get the best out of digitalisation while protecting their members. Such initiatives were presented by trade unions from Norway, the UK and Italy public services unions, which have negotiated or are negotiating agreements with government or/and with local authorities and/or employers to tackle key issues like training, health and safety, working time, monitoring and surveillance and the development of new working methods.

#### *Influencing change process*

Another possible action for trade unions is to use their rights to information and consultation to influence the process of change, including at strategic level, before key decisions about digitalisation are implemented or even made. Initiatives also took place in this field and a survey revealed a need for forward-looking work and sharing of information, as well as the importance of lifelong learning to ensure no worker is left behind because of lack of digital skills, and the necessity to foster workers' career development potential.

#### *Focus on health and safety risks*

Digitalisation can bring with it high levels of stress if employees feel uncertain about job security or major changes to job content, including work intensification, monitoring of work and workers, performance-oriented management, loss or standardisation of social relationships and mental health outcomes. Trade unions should act, including jointly with other unions or with local employers, to ensure health and safety risks due to digitalisation-related restructuring are properly addressed. They should accompany workers experiencing these changes, and also push for employees to have their say over the introduction

and development of computer systems, as it has been proven that changes are better absorbed when workers can influence them.

A major threat trade unions should consider is hyperconnection, which is due to online pressure and which blurs boundaries between working time and private life. This problem has already been recognised by some employers. The French government has introduced the legal right to disconnect.

### **Collective agreements related to surveillance**

The use of digital tools to monitor workers' movements has to be regulated. If it is justified to monitor, e.g. criminal activities or disposal of dangerous substances, monitoring has to be questioned when it is used to track workers' whereabouts and their performance. There is indeed a need for collective agreements that address surveillance-related issues.

### **Fighting for equality**

Trade unions are aware that digitalisation can pose a threat to gender equality and should fight for equality. Particularly as IT occupations are dominated by men, digitalisation can reinforce the gender gap. Trade unions should also fight to avoid the discrimination experienced by ethnic minorities, elderly, migrants and other vulnerable people.

### **Awareness-raising on underinvestment and outsourcing**

Underinvestment and outsourcing are used respectively in order to make savings and in order to find in the private sector newly developed expertise. Trade unions could raise-awareness to their potential to harm working conditions and job quality, but also service to users and citizens.

### **Whistleblowing on loss of personal touch**

Trade unions could be whistleblowers to warn about the loss of personal touch digitalising public services can mean, when, for example access to certain services is made through an automated system that relies on algorithms to make decisions. It reduces human input, for example face-to-face contact when dealing with sensitive issues. A major threat is that technical solutions could be

favoured to policy decisions.

### **What does EPSU recommend?**

In view of the result of the discussions, the main recommendations EPSU made were to use collective bargaining and social dialogue to develop frameworks for the digitalisation of public services that address the protection of health, safety and working conditions. Trade unions should ensure that digitalisation is clearly recognised as a form of restructuring which can have significant impacts. They should develop models of collective bargaining and training schemes to support trade unions' capacity at all levels to regulate digitalisation and anticipate possible adverse effects. At a time of digital change, the issue of social dialogue should be raised in the context of the European social dialogue.



**Shaping digitalisation through collective bargaining' - International Seminar, Berlin June 2018**

<https://www.epsu.org/article/shaping-digitalisation-through-collective-bargaining>



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