

Your Digital Union

At an event held by the International Labour Organisation just before the pandemic, a prominent speaker said that trade unions have no future. Their heyday has passed, and workers no longer will need, nor want, to collectivise, he claimed. Let's take this scepticism, jump 10+ years into the future and ask: what is the future of trade unions in the digital age? What services will they be offering? And what will members want and need?

The world of work in 2035 – Much better than anticipated

As many predicted in the early 2020s, the world of work has become even more digitised. This has a profound effect on working conditions, which are increasingly precarious, with digital platforms firmly established as intermediaries in the labour market. Algorithmic management is commonplace, and is directly influencing the daily work of millions of workers around the globe. However, workers and their unions have ensured that the digitisation of work has not undermined labour standards. On the contrary, unions have successfully responded to the call from organised and unorganised workers for protection against relentless commodification, quantification and surveillance. To create a counterforce, workers organised and, thanks to a mix of regulatory interventions and a re-emergence of collective bargaining, work has been re-humanised.

In 2035, unions have successfully gained the following rights for workers:

- a. **Standards for gig workers:** the battle in the early 2020s over the classification of workers on platforms was won through a mix of grass-root organising, legal action, and regulatory pressure. In 2035, if you work for a platform, you have the same strong rights as all other employees.
- b. **Digital rights of workers:** Unions developed a set of demands to ensure workers' digital rights and have successfully included these in collective agreements and legislation throughout the world. Companies cannot introduce new technologies without prior consent from the workers. Employers are thus obliged to be transparent about the digital systems they use, and for what purposes. Workers have a full right to know what data the employer extracts from them and what the employer does with this data. Workers can object to the (mis)use of these data and to port it if they change employer. Workers not only have the right to control their digital identities and to be free from algorithmic manipulation and privacy intrusions - they also have mechanisms and procedures in place to guarantee all of these rights.
- c. **Unions are involved in governing new digital tools and algorithms:** Employers are now obliged by law to negotiate with shop stewards on the use of, and control over, digital systems. The union or a digital representative is part of the decision-making process when it comes to introducing, applying and managing new digital tools and systems, especially those that process workers' data. In other words, our trade union 2035 has a firm seat at the digital negotiating table.
- d. **Right to rest and a safe workplace:** In 2035, workers naturally switch their work cell phone and devices off after work. Collective agreements regulate when employers can contact an employee and when they can't. Breakthrough agreements negotiated by

Global Union Federations have ensured that it is now part of a company's due diligence to have developed policies with the unions, sector and company on mental health, the right to rest as well as the right to mentally and physically safe workplaces.

- e. **Gender-based violence addressed:** ILO Convention C190 and the union campaigns to implement this in national law and company policy have paid off. Workers have been sensitised, established grievance mechanisms at companies and been involved in the professionalisation of the way that cases are handled.
- f. **Social protection expanded:** Policymakers in national and international institutions have understood that a sound social safety net increases the resilience of labour markets and societies to external shocks. Statutory social security schemes have been expanded (and seed-funded wherever necessary), so that informal and gig workers have the same protection as all other types of workers.
- g. **Skills renewed:** Workers in more and more countries and sectors have a right to continuous training, including participation in re-training schemes. Indeed, employers cannot introduce disruptive technologies without investing in their current and future workforce. Workers are part of the governing bodies of vocational systems and skills training programs, to which all companies contribute.

Strategic decisions taken by the unions

This turnaround in fortunes did not happen overnight or by coincidence. Rather, it is based on a range of strategic decisions by unions and the global labour movement. Let us highlight here what some of those key decisions were, and how they impacted union power and performance.

The biggest gamechanger in the early 2020s was the realisation by key unions that they had to confront digitalisation and its negative impacts on workers, including the intensification of work, physical and mental health pressures, deskilling, increasing individualisation of work, surveillance of workers and the attack on fundamental rights, freedom and autonomy. Guided by training programmes offered by the Global Unions, the strategic decision to invest in the digital capacities of the union was crucial in achieving the sustainable labour market of 2035. These changes required money, determination, new structures and new alliances. They also required the following:

1. **Union staff with a capacity to responsibly handle digital communication, tools and databases:** Covid-19 was an eye-opener for many in the labour movement. In order to stay relevant and in touch with workers, and to understand the increasing number of digital and dispersed workers, unions had to "go digital" with regard to internal and external communication, decision-making and dealing with members' needs. So unions not only invested in new digital hardware and software - they did so in alignment with union values and strategic goals. Importantly, all staff, organisers and volunteers have been trained so they are aware of the potentials and pitfalls of these digital technologies, and how to use them in organising, campaigning, member services and policy advocacy.

2. The ability to easily **gather data about work:** in the digital age, unions realised that employers had a huge advantage over workers: namely data. Employers could carry out complex analyses with and on the data, they could monetise it and use it to keep workers divided, precarious and quiet. This changed when some unions developed their own tools capable of gathering data about the modern realities of work and transforming these data into the union's own news, stories and campaigns in a responsible manner while also respecting

privacy. As a result, politicians and the public, employers and markets are now hearing alternative versions of reality: those of the workers: From digitalised messages to electronic billboards to tailor-made news stories all the way to successful collective bargaining on digital issues, unions have broken the ‘monopolisation of truth’ driven previously and exclusively by the companies which held the data. Their glossy, one-sided version of reality has been shattered.

Acquiring this capacity required unions to look in new directions: toward young tech workers, data scientists, developers and programmers who worked with unions to revolutionise how they collect, analyse, safeguard and use data. After a few attempts and failures, union-made tools achieved general acceptance and enjoyed wide use. For example, these new tools helped set up complaint and whistleblowing mechanisms, they enabled rapid support for workplace struggles and, as a result, they mobilised members and reached new, unorganised workers. Helping workers effectively fight injustices at the workplace – and raising these issues in the broader public discussion – helped change the perception of what unions can do.

3. New democratising systems that enabled all **workers to get involved** in the union in ways that weren’t possible before. These systems facilitate regular meetings with members regardless of whether they work onsite or remotely. They introduced new ways of democratising the union’s policies and strategies by launching inclusive and transparent polls, surveys or petitions that could inform and support collective bargaining and campaigning. As a result, many more members feel that their voice is heard and that the union is accessible and close to them. Union activities have exploded.

4. Responsible digital infrastructure. Union-busting methods, surveillance and suppression in some countries and the realisation that data held and exchanged via big tech companies wasn’t secure helped facilitate union decisions to invest in secure digital infrastructures that also respect privacy. The union movement moved away from using digital systems in the cloud owned by large multinational corporations, instead building their own systems around the decentralised web. Here, nationally and internationally, unions have built an ecosystem of protected servers that enable secure file storage, email systems and communication tools that ensure no private company has access to their information. This in turn has curbed union-busting by preventing corporations from gaining knowledge of union actions and strategies. Creating this responsible digital infrastructure furthermore meant that members’ trust in their union and the handling of their data skyrocketed.

Membership data is stored securely in tailor-made Membership Relationship Management Systems. These systems are used to ensure that members get the information they want and need. The unions in 2035 have strict data governance policies in place with regard to what data is stored, for how long, who has access to it, and how it is secured. By building these democratically governed worker data collectives, unions can truly benefit from collective insight into shared data of members. Unions have established secure systems for sharing these insights with one another without sharing the individual datasets themselves.

5. Inclusive Union Services: With the capacity to handle new communication tools, it became less difficult to program, introduce and use bots and digital hubs to service members and offer initial services to non-members. Members can instantaneously seek answers to questions about their rights and collective agreements through the union 2035 service bot, which can also connect them swiftly to expert staff. Basic information on legal rights, collective agreements and

how to handle conflicts provided starting points for the growing number of contract and solo self-employed workers. By offering them a digital hub, tailor-made information and a means through which to participate in union democracy remotely, these workers feel like they are heard and seen. They are no longer “ghost workers” hidden from the public eye and policies.

Structural Changes in Unions

All of these new systems, tools and services required organisational changes, too.

6. **DigiReps:** In order to deal with the complex technical aspects of the digitalisation of work and workers, unions introduced a specialised new cohort of shop stewards: Digital Representatives (DigiReps). They are trained and have the mandate to supervise the use of digital technologies at workplaces. They hold management responsible for how technologies are used as well as for what purposes and they safeguard workers’ rights by establishing what digital tools can and cannot be used for. The DigiReps are key resources for negotiating digital clauses into collective agreements. Having people with comprehensive digital skillsets proved decisive in successfully assessing and negotiating on issues such as algorithmic manipulation, privacy rights and workers’ right to control their digital identities.

7. **Flexible organising units:** Equipped with general organising skills as taught by the GUFs and paired with union officials who know the sector and companies well, strategic organising through the use of digital organising tools has become the norm. Combining new tactics with the ability to operate across borders, these new organising units and methods have helped to win collective agreements at multinational companies, thus paving the way for strong national and sectoral bargaining up and down supply and value chains.

Open Unions

8. An open physical union

In 2035, more and more work takes place remotely, whether this be from home or from cooperative workspaces. To address this new reality, unions have created secure online meeting spaces so members can easily connect with and participate in union activities. But they have also built physical workspaces. Scattered across the country, these secure workspaces offer workers the opportunity to meet, to work, to hold meetings and arrange events. Unions 2035 are far from being purely digital - they have become the modern-day local town hall, breaking isolation by offering social spaces.

9. **Larger unions:** A good number of unions have realised that the challenges posed by the digital world of work require resources that relatively small unions have difficulties acquiring. Realising also that global supply and value chains cut across union boundaries, a new wave of union cooperation and mergers was set in motion. By merging, unions can avoid individual and costly transformations and can scale their operations and policies. The systems mentioned above ensure that members receive sector- and occupation-specific services and information. The union is tailor-made to fit members' individual needs. Larger unions have proven capable of organising up and down supply and value chains and holding companies accountable for what are now mandatory due diligence requirements.

The Future of Trade Unions



The trade union movement certainly has a future. But it will take a lot of changes - both in terms of what the trade union movement does - and how it goes about it.

Workers in 2035 have realised that digital technologies are not necessarily emancipatory or equal for all. As they felt the harm, workers' resistance grew. Unions in 2035 have made bold changes and worked together to reshape the digitalisation of work and workers, empower marginalised people and offer workers alternatives that preserve and protect their privacy.

People and Planet before profit! Bridging the present day to this 2035 scenario will require changes as well as innovative and courageous union leaders to lead the way. If not, the opening statement that unions have no future might well become a reality.

Christina Colclough/ Mirko Herberg, October 2022