Artificial Intelligence and the threat to Workers' Rights
Tony Burke

The TUCs special task force report on Artificial intelligence and Employment Rights Bill was launched at the TUC Congress House in London on April 18th. Comprising of the TUC, the Minderoo Centre for Technology and Democracy at the University of Cambridge, unions academics and employment rights specialists the task force was set up to try to secure proper regulation of AI and algorithmic management in order to halt the UKs tech sector from becoming the 'wild west' of the economy.

You can [download](#) the full report with the draft bill here.

The report makes a number of key recommendations including a legal requirement on employers to consult unions on the use of 'high risk' and intrusive forms of AI in the workplace; a legal right for job seekers and workers to have a human review of decisions made by AI systems so they can challenge AI decisions that are unfair and discriminatory; amendments to the Equality Act to guard against discriminatory algorithms; protections against unfair dismissal by AI; a prohibition on some uses of emotion recognition technology and a right to a personalised explanation of high-risk risk decisions made by AI Workers in the UKs media, digital and tech sector, accounting for over 2 million jobs will be on the AI frontline.

One of the key problems is that union membership in the tech sector remains stubbornly low in many countries, with a diverse employment base – from large corporations to small start ups – many with precarious and third party employment.

From the 1980s onwards unions tried to recruit new members in tech areas by setting up specialist 'associations' to attract tech workers or using high profile campaigns imported from USA where 'start up unions' such alliance@ibm (which joined the Communication Workers of America) in global companies. What sounded good failed to achieve mass union membership after years of grinding management opposition, and 're-balancing the workforce'.

But maybe things have turned the corner.

In 2023 workers at the Swedish fin-tech company Klarna workers demanded representation and collective bargaining by joining Unionen. The company told the workforce collective bargaining '*did not fit their business model'*. The Unionen union organised immediate strike action and 5000 workers in Stockholm won union recognition and a collective agreement.

In the USA workers in the video gaming company Sega of America followed Raven Software, Blizzard Albany, ZeniMax, and game developer Tender Claws in winning union recognition. AEGIS-CWA (Allied Employees Guild Improving SEGA – Communication Workers Of America) organised across Sega facilities including workers in marketing, product development and sales to build membership and making it now the largest video game union in the USA.

In Romania Sindicatul IT Timișoara (SITT the Romanian IT Union) now represents 3,000 tech and outsourced workers at Alcatel-Lucent, Wipro, Accenture and Alto and were helped in organising by the European union federation Uni Europa.

In the UK the CWU via the United Tech and Allied Workers Union Branch are organising workers in Apple stores; the white collar union Prospect (who's General Secretary Mike

Clancy is the TUC's lead spokesperson on AI) has launched a tech sector and Unite's London Digital and Tech branch has seen a membership boost since 2023.

James Bowen the secretary of Unite London Digital and Tech branch told me: *"The branch had doubled in size over due to organising in 'big tech' firms such as Google. We've also grown at firms where we were well-established, such as Voyix and Atleos thanks to the work of our reps during pay negotiations. We are recruiting members from a diverse range of companies such as Accenture, the BBC, Cap Gemini and Computacenter."*

The branch organised protests at Google at their Kings Cross HQ in London over redundancies which gained a national profile – and increased union membership. 2023 was a pivitol year with over a quarter of a million workers in tech industries globally laid off. So far in 2024 there have been lay offs at Pixar, Google, Microsoft, Mozilla and TikTok among others. Microsoft's 1,900 global layoffs which began in early 2023 has made tech workers *'union conscious'* The fact is they are no different to other workers – they join unions for protection and representation, and to find collective and just solutions to problems." And the good news Bowen says is *"that members are keeping up their membership even when the threat of lay off's recedes."*

He says AI will be a major challenge: *"AI can replace a real person and workers become concerned for their jobs. Service desk, first line roles which are heavily scripted can be replaced by an online chat bot. AI can be used to write code, reducing the number of software developers required so there are fears over job security."* And there are fears over AI discrimination: *"People have biases and this impacts the many choices that are made when building and training an AI whose purpose is to make decisions which impacts people's lives. There's a good argument to be made that AI should not make any management decisions."*

The branch are also running meetings for tech workers on AI with speakers from Equity, the performing arts and entertainment union, on the impact of AI on voice-over artists.

"Clare Vernade an ex-member of ours who now teaches 'machine learning' has done a session and were are happy to share our experiences and the video of Clare's presentation is available on our site. Other Unite reps have been in touch with us wanting to discuss how we are handling AI".

On April 25th Unite National Officer for the print, media, digital and tech sector Louisa Bull along with the NUJ General Secretary Michelle Stannistreet will debate 'AI: Threats And Opportunities For The Media' in partnership with Media North on line at The Festival Of Debate. See festivalofdebate.com to book your place