



D5.2

Analysis of trade unions' perspectives on AI's impact

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Forging Successful AI Applications
for European Economy and Society

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Overview

A report providing analysis of trade unions' perspectives on AI's impact

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FORSEE: Forging Successful AI Applications for European Economy and Society

Researching the impact of AI on the economy and society

The capabilities of artificial intelligence (AI) are advancing rapidly, yet understanding what constitutes successful AI for society and the conditions that enable its effective deployment remains limited. While the exact definition of AI is itself evolving and contested, it generally refers to the capacity of computational systems to perform tasks typically associated with human cognition. Following FORSEE's theoretical framework, this report understands AI not as a fixed technological object, but as a shifting socio-technical field that is continuously shaped and contested through its development and deployment (Taylor et al., 2026b). AI may bring economic growth, knowledge creation, and broader societal benefits, but realising this potential depends on developing and integrating applications that are not only technologically and economically successful but also socially and ethically. AI applications are embedded within complex social contexts, reflecting and shaping aspirations, biases, and inequalities; thus, understanding AI success requires attention to these broader dimensions.

The FORSEE project (*Forging Successful AI Applications for European Economy and Society*) adopts a sociological perspective to examine these dynamics, focusing on how different stakeholders define success and how controversies, and unequal distributions of risks and benefits are articulated and potentially resolved.

Work Package 5 (WP5) assesses the impact of AI on the economy. Deliverable 5.1 examines SMEs' perceptions of economic viability, while this report (Deliverable 5.2) focuses on the labour perspective, including trade unions' views of the potential benefits and risks of AI. Across WP5, a key area of focus is the relationship between AI adoption and productivity, profitability, and competitiveness among SMEs. Deliverable 5.3 will integrate these findings to analyse transformations in labour processes. Together, these reports connect firms' assessments of AI adoption with workers' concerns, offering a multidimensional understanding of how its benefits, costs and risks emerge and are distributed.

This report involves FORSEE's engagement with the labour perspective on AI, recognising it as a pivotal aspect that has the potential to reshape the understanding of successful AI applications and unveil potential conflicts and divergences of expectation in the workplace.

Executive Summary

As workplaces throughout Europe consider the adoption of AI, workers are presented with new challenges and opportunities. As part of the FORSEE research project, this report aims to understand how workers are experiencing AI in their workplaces, how AI might affect them going forward, and what unions can do to support their members.

Grounded in Labour Process Theory (LPT) and the Sociology of Expectations (SoE), this report provides insight to trade unions' perspectives on AI and its implications for the world of work. We conducted 32 interviews with representatives from 31 unions across Europe to understand how they perceive AI's effects on workers now and in the future. While perceptions varied across regions and sectors, these interviews revealed a troubled environment in which workers lacked a voice in determining AI adoption in their workplaces.

AI adoption is uneven across workplaces, shaped by resource constraints, previous digitalisation efforts, and sector-specific challenges. Trade unionists describe workers' perspectives as mixed, ranging from anxiety and reservations to optimism and enthusiasm. Concerns were compounded by limited consultation, a lack of training, the opacity of AI systems and - most of all - the broader labour conditions within particular occupations and sectors.

Union representatives (also referred to in this report as "unionists") were optimistic that AI could improve productivity and workplace safety. These potential benefits, however, were largely outweighed by the risks. Key concerns of AI include job loss, intensification, algorithmic management and a loss of control, technical AI issues, intellectual property theft, and global political and environmental challenges. Critically, many of these concerns were hypothetical rather than experienced, demonstrating how expectations drive current anxieties.

The majority of interviewees represented unions that have either developed a clearly defined position on AI or are currently in the process of doing so. There was a consistent demand for workers to be meaningfully consulted on and involved in decisions about workplace AI adoption. European trade unions are seeking greater control over how AI affects workers. Their efforts to obtain control for workers can be grouped into four areas: capacity building, collective bargaining, industrial action, and legal and regulatory work. While only one interviewee reported industrial action related to AI, one reported legal action, and only a few reported the attainment of collective agreements, all interviewees reported engagement in a wide variety of capacity building, regulatory efforts and had plans for collective bargaining in the future. However, they described in detail an array of barriers to collective bargaining, deriving from the opacity which surrounds AI on technical and social levels.

While European trade unions recognise AI as a topic deserving of immediate attention, they tend to lack the resources they perceive as necessary to adequately address it. The relation of European trade unions to AI is thus largely one of reaction—trying to "catch up". This reactionary stance is largely attributed to the opacity or lack of transparency around AI. Opacity is technical, but not only that. Interviewees also described three types of social opacity around AI: a) a lack of understanding AI within the union, b) a lack of understanding combined with a lack of

willingness to bargain on the part of the employer, and c) US Big Tech companies being wholly beyond the reach of European collective bargaining.

We suggest that the situation of European trade unions can be understood as a reconfiguration of the question of control in the labour-management relation. European AI adoption thus presents a three-way interaction between employers, workers and their representatives, and Big Tech vendors of AI.

Economically “successful” AI cannot overlook the workers underpinning economic growth. Ensuring that workers have a meaningful role in shaping AI adoption agendas will be critical in protecting their rights, improving the quality of implementation, protecting worker dignity, and ensuring that the benefits of AI are shared more widely in the years to come.

Section 1: Introduction

In 2023, SAG-AFTRA members brought Hollywood to a halt when they went on strike over issues related to fair pay, streaming, and - for the first time - artificial intelligence (AI) (SAG-AFTRA, 2026). These star-studded protests brought increased attention to the issue of AI in the workplace, as well as the question of what workers and their representatives can do to shape its development and use.

The rapid proliferation of AI has created new challenges in workplaces from surveillance and bias to changing skills, intensification, and job loss. These developments are accompanied by considerable anxiety about how AI will affect the future of work. As such, debates about AI and the economy cannot be fully understood through technological and macroeconomic indicators alone: they must account for the workers powering the economy.

What is artificial intelligence (AI)?

Precisely defining “artificial intelligence” (AI) is challenging. The term encompasses efforts dating back to the 1950s to impart functions which we would deem intelligent were they performed by humans, to machines. Under the EU Artificial Intelligence Act, the European Union defines an AI system as:

A machine-based system that is designed to operate with varying levels of autonomy and that may exhibit adaptiveness after deployment, and that, for explicit or implicit objectives, infers, from the input it receives, how to generate outputs such as predictions, content, recommendations, or decisions that can influence physical or virtual environments (Regulation (EU) 2024/1689, Art. 3).

AI is frequently spoken of in tandem with algorithms and machine learning, though these terms describe different things. An algorithm is a set of computational instructions for completing a task; not all algorithms constitute AI. Machine learning is one approach to developing AI systems, in which algorithms identify patterns in data and use them to produce models capable of making predictions or other outputs. Generative AI (GenAI), which includes models such as

ChatGPT and Claude, is a particularly prominent example of a system trained using machine learning.

In practice, however, the distinction between AI and other algorithmic technologies is blurred. Interviewees referred to AI alongside technologies such as algorithmic management systems used for scheduling, monitoring, and evaluating workers - technologies that may but do not necessarily include AI (e.g. shift scheduling and location tracking). As these technologies can have similar implications for how work is organised and controlled, this report uses the terms according to how they were discussed by interviewees, while distinguishing between them where technically or analytically relevant.

While AI has its origins in the field of computer science, it should not be understood as a computational artifact alone (Johnson and Verdicchio, 2024). This report understands AI not as a fixed technological object, but as a shifting socio-technical field shaped by the social, economic, and organisational contexts in which it is developed and deployed (Taylor et al., 2026a). In this vein, this report aims to better understand the relationship between workers, their representatives, and artificial intelligence.

Why trade unions?

Trade unions provide an important perspective on AI because they occupy a space between workers, employers, and policymakers. They encounter the effects of technological change through workers' experiences while also seeking to influence how technologies are introduced and governed. As such, their perspectives reveal not only how AI is affecting work today, but how different futures of work are being anticipated and negotiated - thus making trading unions particularly important for understanding the role of expectations in AI adoption.

Our theoretical approach

The FORSEE project has consistently argued that the development and deployment of AI systems depend, among other factors, on future-oriented expectations about new technologies and on the perspectives and embedded interests of different stakeholders (Farries et al., 2026; Minotakis et al., 2026). Drawing on the Sociology of Expectations (SoE), FORSEE understands expectations as socio-technical visions of the future that shape actions in the present. Expectations are not just predictions in a crystal ball: they can have performative effects by attracting attention and investment, directing research towards particular technological pathways, legitimising particular forms of development, coordinating the activities of different actors (Brown et al., 2003; van Lente, 2012), and continually adapting to changing contextual conditions (Pollock and Williams, 2026). FORSEE has applied this perspective to expectations held by institutions and SMEs developing and deploying AI (Golpayegani et al., 2026; Lasek-Markey et al., 2026; Minotakis et al., 2026), while also extending SoE beyond its traditional focus on innovators and business leaders.

This broader perspective recognises that different social groups may hold competing positive and negative expectations about AI, and that these expectations can influence how technologies are developed and adopted.

Aims of the report

As part of the FORSEE project's Work Package 5, this report (D5.2) brings the labour perspective into analysis of successful AI applications. It examines trade unions as important stakeholders in the development and governance of AI, focusing on how union representatives understand both the observed and anticipated effects of AI in the workplace, and how these understandings inform their organisational perspectives and strategies. To support this assessment, the report is structured around three guiding research questions:

- What changes are associated with the introduction of AI in the workplace?
- What are the present and expected impacts of AI in the workplace? What are the benefits and risks identified by trade union representatives?
- What positions do trade unions adopt towards AI in the workplace, and what actions are they taking to advance their demands?

More specifically, the report examines trade unions' perspectives on the positive and negative implications of AI, including its potential effects on the quality of work, the organisation and streamlining of work processes, skills and training, and employment. It also considers how unions respond to these developments through their activities and approaches to AI governance. In doing so, the report recognises that unions are not simply responding to technological change after the fact: their expectations about possible futures can themselves become part of the process through which AI is negotiated, contested, and governed.

This labour perspective is particularly important within FORSEE because it can reveal conflicts between stakeholders' expectations about what constitutes successful AI applications. By placing workers and their representatives alongside other stakeholders examined within the project, this report contributes to a broader understanding of how expectations shape the development and deployment of AI in Europe.

This report is structured as follows:

- Section 2 introduces the theoretical framework, drawing on the Sociology of Expectations to examine how expectations shape technological development and adoption. It also provides an overview of union responses to AI.
- Section 3 outlines the paper's research questions and methodological approach and provides an overview of the participating unions.
- Section 4 presents the empirical findings, detailing unionists' perceptions of workers' experiences with AI, the perceived risks and benefits of AI, and their organisations' perspectives and activities. These understandings capture both ongoing experiences as well as their expectations for the future.
- Section 5 presents the limitations of the study.
- Section 6 discusses the findings, identifying how current anxieties are largely rooted in future expectations rather than ongoing disruption.
- Section 7 concludes by synthesising the findings and situates the report within the larger European policy landscape.

Section 2: Literature Review

The scope of this report demands a multi-level approach, drawing both on sociological accounts of how expectations and future-oriented thinking influence present technological development and on a theoretical framework for understanding how the integration of new technologies in the workplace interacts with pre-existing power relations between workers and employers. Regarding the former, the Sociology of Expectations (SoE) paradigm provides a crucial framework, as discussed in Section 2.1. Regarding the latter, Labour Process Theory (LPT) provides key theoretical concepts that can be applied to the algorithmic turn in the workplace, understood as the widespread adoption of algorithmic systems; this is discussed in Sections 2.3 and 2.4. Sections 2.4 and 2.5 trace the development of algorithmic management as it emerged out of specific sectors and is becoming widespread. Furthermore, to engage more concretely with algorithmic management and how unions respond to it, Sections 2.7, 2.8, and 2.9 provide a brief overview of the current literature on the risks and benefits associated with algorithmic management, as well as existing evidence of trade union engagement with it.

2.1 Engaging with stakeholders' expectations - the FORSEE project so far

The FORSEE project has consistently argued that the development and deployment of AI systems depend, among other factors, on future-oriented expectations about new technologies and on the perspectives and embedded interests of different stakeholders (Farries et al., 2026; Minotakis et al., 2026).

Regarding the former, FORSEE has engaged theoretically with the Sociology of Expectations (SoE) paradigm, which highlights the prominent role of expectations in shaping technological processes. Expectations are understood as socio-technical visions of the future that shape action in the present. As Brown et al. (2003, p. 3, emphasis in original) note:

Expectations mobilize the future into the present, they do so with varying success and according to different time frames and forms of organisational relationship...so while expectations can be formulated as (probabilistic) predictions,...there is always a performative aspect to them.

This performative aspect is expressed in the capacity of expectations to generate concrete change in the present by attracting attention and legitimising investment, directing research efforts towards specific pathways while excluding others, and coordinating the activities of scientists, research institutions and companies (van Lente, 2012, pp. 773–774). To address these dynamics, FORSEE has examined institutional expectations around AI (Golpayegani et al., 2026; Lasek-Markey et al., 2026), as well as those of SMEs developing and deploying AI systems (Minotakis et al., 2026).

Furthermore, FORSEE seeks to expand the SoE perspective by moving beyond its traditional emphasis on scientists and innovators, who are often narrowly associated with business leaders, to examine the expectations and perspectives of a more diverse array of stakeholders. To this

end, FORSEE has engaged with Civil Society Organisations (Farries et al., 2026), social media discourse (Papaevangelou et al., 2026a), news organisations' coverage of AI (Papaevangelou et al., 2026b), and European professional associations (Taylor et al., 2026a). These perspectives are often overlooked, yet the positive and negative expectations that these social groups develop around AI are likely to play a crucial role in shaping the adoption and development of new technologies within the EU.

In WP5, we turn our focus to expectations about AI in the workplace and stakeholders therein which have been relatively neglected thus far. Vicsek (2020) rightly pointed out that debates about AI and the future of work tend not to take into account the material influence that expectations have. In the present report, in particular, we turn to the expectations of workers, as expressed and mediated through organised labour institutions, namely trade unions. Our goal is to examine both the observed and expected impact of AI in the workplace as well as trade unions' perspectives and strategies regarding AI governance.

2.2 Expectations for AI in the Workplace

AI expectations are centrally concerned with work. Indeed, a central element of mainstream AI expectations is that AI will serve as a universal automation technology which will drive economic growth by enhancing labour productivity. Big AI companies are explicit about this. Microsoft explains:

"AI automation refers to the use of artificial intelligence to perform tasks, act, or streamline processes that would otherwise require human effort ... AI helps people do more with less by reducing repetitive work, improving accuracy, and creating space for higher-value thinking" (Microsoft nd.)

How exactly this is expected to play out socially varies. Some, such as OpenAI CEO Dario Amodei, predict the imminent replacement by AI of swathes of entire jobs (Adebayo 2026). On the other hand, the Microsoft website asserts that "[i]nstead of replacing human judgment, AI and automation both enhance it" (Microsoft, nd). Thus we have two expectations which may be articulated distinctly or blurred together in myriad ways: automation and job elimination or "technological unemployment" (Moser 2022) versus augmentation and upskilling (Tschang and Almirall 2021).

In either case, it is generally expected that, by boosting labour productivity, AI driven economic growth–augmentation scenarios just typically have less negative impacts than automation scenarios. According to analysts at the big consulting firm Goldman Sachs, AI will drive sweeping economic change, leading to a 7% (nearly \$7 trillion) increase in global GDP, and increasing global productivity by 1.5% over 10 years (Goldman Sachs Research 2023). This expectation is held by transnational organisations like the IMF (Misch et al. 2025) and World Bank, which argues that AI is the cure for the slowest global development progress in decades (The World Bank 2026). Governments, including the EU agree, arguing that resources must be devoted to the creation of Europe as an "AI Continent" (European Commission 2026).

Mingled with this mainstream discourse are the expectations of economists. Mainstream economics has reached a consensus of sorts that so far, the primary macro scale effect of

automation has been polarisation, with jobs in the middling range of skill and remuneration being hardest hit (Gallie 1991; Autor 2015; Brugger and Gehrke 2018). Jobs at the high end of the spectrum (i.e. professionals) and those at the opposite end (i.e. the trades) have been less impacted by automation. Those at the top end because their abstract and complex processes are not easily standardised and automatable and those at the low end because their often-embodied labour is not automatable without advanced robotics (which still do not exist). What the future holds is the subject of lively debate within and beyond academia, although rosy pictures of the future are increasingly rare among economists.

Acemoglu et al (2023) assert that the “currently predominant direction for AI emphasises automation, displacement of skilled labour, and diminished worker voice due to stepped up monitoring and surveillance”. This is because ‘businesses prefer to focus on automation rather than creating new job tasks and enabling workers to build new skills’ (Acemoglu et al. 2023, 3).

A recent report led by prominent MIT economist Erik Brynjolfsson contends that AI is already demonstrating negative impacts on entry-level jobs in AI-exposed sectors (Brynjolfsson et al. 2025a). Brynjolfsson also led the issuing of a public statement dubbed “We Must Act Now”. The ongoing ambivalence of AI expectations is made clear in this statement which asserts that AI “could bring risks, including large-scale job displacement, as well as opportunities such as major gains in living standards” (Brynjolfsson et al. 2026). They call on “[e]conomists, policymakers and technology leaders” to address this uncertainty. But what about workers? What are their expectations about AI?

To adapt SoE to the workplace context, we draw on resources from the sociology of work, namely labour process theory (LPT). LPT provides a rich tradition for understanding work as a labour process which is conducted by two distinct social groups: workers and management. LPT is a conflict theory, which posits that workers and management do not necessarily share interests and thus come into conflict within the labour process, in various dimensions, such as its control and the specificities of its execution. The perspectives of workers and management are not necessarily aligned and nor should we expect their expectations about what successful AI would look like to be.

In the following sections, we examine the LPT literature and highlight its core themes. We then demonstrate how these themes continue to resonate in sociological research on work in the digital economy, amid the “algorithmic turn” which preceded the rise of AI. Finally, we examine the literature on trade union perspectives on AI.

2.3 Key Concepts of Labour Process Theory

Management, control, and intensification

Braverman’s (1974/1998) foundational analysis of the rise of scientific management or Taylorism in the late 1800s provides the theoretical core of LPT. LPT contends that the labour process, or the spatio-temporal process where labour is combined with materials in order to produce a commodity, is a site of conflict between workers and management. This is because productivity tends to require control. Management is interested in control because it is confronted by the

perpetual problem of the “indeterminacy of labour potential” (Littler, 1986: 31). It pays for the capacity of workers to work and it wishes to extract the maximum of effort and output from this capacity in a given period of time – to maximise the productivity of labour. But this can come at the expense of work quality, satisfaction and safety of workers.

Control of the labour process can take many forms, for example Edwards (1979:17-18) argues that the essential elements of control are direction, evaluation, and discipline. However, the key understanding of workplace control is generally premised on what Braverman (1974/1998) dubbed the “separation of conception from execution” (82). He described how Taylorism sought to delegate planning to management and mere execution to workers. This involves surveilling and analysing labour processes, breaking them down into their constituent parts in order that they can be optimised for productivity. This includes what Braverman called The Babbage Principle, after the pioneering industrialist: the idea that once labour processes are broken down into components, they can be reallocated on the basis of skill and wage: the easiest tasks can all be given to the lowest wage workers such that the higher wage ones work only on the more complex tasks. This cheapens the overall cost of labour. Present day discussions of agentic AI, such as the passage from Microsoft quoted above, recapitulate this logic in precisely the same terms. By automating repetitive tasks, we are told, AI frees up workers to do higher value tasks.

Control from management is not necessarily agreeable to workers, who may have their autonomy reduced and work conditions degraded. Management control over the labour process is contested by workers in myriad forms from informal resistance (slacking, soldiering) to organised actions such as strikes (Englert, Woodcock and Cant 2020).

Surveillance

To optimise and control a labour process, management must obtain knowledge of it from the workers who already perform it. Thus, as indicated above, control requires workplace surveillance. This too, goes back to Taylorism and use of time-motion studies, photography and more.

The Covid-19 pandemic and the sharp increase in remote work that ensued drove new interest by management in surveillance technologies, as workers were no longer occupying the same work spaces as bosses. A proliferation of unsettling surveillance technologies, including eye tracking and mouse monitoring software were developed in this time and incorporated AI to process large quantities of data. Today, AI enables widely used surveillance tools by which labour processes can be recorded and measured, in order that their productivity can be assessed—and increased (Hickok and Maslej 2023).

From Management to Machine: Automation

The dissection of labour processes into component parts, à la The Babbage Principle, does more than cheapen the cost of labour. It also has the effect of reducing a worker's work to a small set of routine tasks, rather than a heterogeneous process. The assembly line is a prime example here. Rather than a handful of workers performing dozens of distinct tasks in the process of assembling, for example, an automobile, one has hundreds of workers, each devoted to one particular task. This, LPT has long argued, leads to deskilling or the degradation of labour, as craft

knowledge is no longer passed on to new workers who only know how to complete their particular allocated task.

The economy of scale in labour productivity achieved by this division of labour into tasks is enormous and is thus appealing to management. But it ends up, Braverman and his followers have argued, making the workers behave in machine-like ways, performing a small set of predefined tasks. This prepares the ground for the replacement of the worker by a machine. It is much easier to create a machine that performs one task, such as a drill press, than a machine which performs dozens.

Control over the labour process thus tends towards the automation of the labour process (Ramtin 1991). The ultimate increase in labour productivity is the elimination of labour. The AI startup company Artisan provocatively highlighted this point in a 2025 advertising campaign based on the slogan "Stop Hiring Humans" (Williams 2025). If a given task can be offloaded to a machine which can be procured for a lower cost than paying a worker, it makes sense for management to pursue automation, thereby increasing the overall productivity of their labour force. Since firms are competing against one another, this imperative to increase productivity is relentless. One firm cannot survive for long if it has a lower productivity than its competitors since it will be producing commodities at a higher cost.

New Management

The story told so far is remarkably simple: increasing control culminates in automation and the dismissal of labour. However, the picture is more complicated. Scholars pointed out as early as the late 1970s that direct control is not the only management strategy deployed. Friedman (1977) discussed "responsible autonomy" or the delegation of management functions to the workers themselves in a form of self-management. This sort of practice is widespread today in the many forms of Agile management (such as Scrum) which were deployed first in the software industry (Steinhoff 2021). In the 1990s, other scholars held that conventional control was relegated to a thing of the past as labour processes were dispersed across space and time via the internet. This technological development entailed a new, communicative and cooperative dimension to work which meant that automation became a diminished threat. Machines, including AI, simply could not dissect the complex processes of "autonomous production" enabled by the internet (Hardt and Negri 2000, 276). Workers, according to this perspective, would be empowered, rather than menaced, by the appearance of new digital technologies.

2.4 Digital Taylorism and Algorithmic Management

Epochal proclamations about digital technologies overstated the extent to which direct control was fading away amid the computerisation of work. Instead, the rise of platforms brought Taylorism back into the scholarly limelight in a new digital form, as workers have their tasks precisely described and monitored by apps. Before the proliferation of GenAI in 2022-23, AI was largely encountered by everyday users in the form of recommendation engines which discern patterns across user behaviour in order to anticipate and deliver content that users will enjoy without them searching for it, as was popularised by Netflix. However, a variety of management and partial automation technologies, some of which incorporated AI, were being deployed in some types of work, including the platform-based gig economy and call centres.

These environments allowed employers and management to experiment with new forms of digital surveillance and quantification of the work flow, broadly termed technologies of algorithmic management (Woodcock, 2022). There are certain distinct characteristics within these workplaces that transformed them into pioneers: data rich framework, high degree of digitalisation and interest in emerging technologies. More specifically, platforms like Uber gave rise to an unprecedented level of data extraction as both customers and platform workers generated data that were continuously collected and analysed (Srnicsek, 2017), while also contributing to new forms of live evaluation of performance through customers' ratings and feedback (Rosenblat & Stark, 2016). Coupled with the widespread misclassification of platform workers as "independent contractors" (Woodcock, 2021), this algorithmic shift provided a means of lowering operational costs through reduced wages and the avoidance of pension contributions, sick leave, and other employment benefits, while simultaneously keeping managerial costs low. Algorithmic management on platforms enabled control over workers to be retained in a new form driven by data collection and analysis, establishing three promises for employers:

- a) Lower operational costs by reducing the number of lower- and middle-management positions. As Pasquinelli (2023:250) observes, algorithms "replace management and multiply precarious jobs [...] against Alan Turing's prediction, it was the master, not the worker, that the robot came to replace first."
- b) Increase productivity by automating tasks, facilitating skill development, and transforming business operations (Calvino et al., 2025). While studies have found instances in which AI has made workers more productive (Brynjolfsson et al., 2025b; Choi & Xie, 2025), evidence of productivity gains at the task level has not yet translated into clear AI-driven growth at the macroeconomic level. (Baslandze et al., 2026).
- c) Fulfil the long-standing aspiration of capital by "smoking out all idle time" (Durand, 2024:42), effectively transforming all working time into productive time.

These promises find increasingly wide applicability. Including in the production of AI. The data work that goes into the production of AI (i.e. data annotation) has also been described as Digital Taylorism (Altenried 2022). It has been argued that algorithmic management represents a continuation and modification of the Taylorist organisation of the labour process; a "digital Taylorism". Continuities can be identified in terms of how algorithmic management expands Taylorist's drive to alienate workers from the labour process, while dividing the work flow into distinct tasks that are easily quantifiable and monitored (Yilmaz, 2025). In a similar vein, Minotakis and Faras (2024) argue that digital Taylorism represents a continuation rather than a rupture with classical Taylorism, as AI and algorithmic management deepen the separation between conception and execution, intensify and fragment the labour process, dispossess workers of knowledge and control, and reinforce managerial domination through algorithmic opacity rather than direct supervision. Regarding opacity, Cant (2020:62) notes that platform workers develop an "antagonistic relationship with the black box" of the algorithm, while software engineers themselves are "artificially divided from one another", with only limited oversight of the algorithm's design. In this sense, AI appears to fragment not only manual but also intellectual labour, a tendency that Braverman (1998:234) identified as characteristic of

Taylorism's tendency to extend its principles across all forms of labour. Altenried (2022) also speaks of digital Taylorism as a system whose

"horizon is a system of real-time control, feedback, and correction. In this sense, the growing importance of algorithmic management based on sensors, networked devices, and integrated software architectures can also be interpreted as a form of cybernetic Taylorism striving for real-time management and correction of problems" (159)

AI is directly implicated in debates over how technology is involved in the struggle for control over the labour process. Popular expectations around AI in the workplace do not drastically differ from expectations held by business actors in previous technological eras. The basic shape of the problem as developed by LPT remains relevant in an era of expanding algorithmic management and digital Taylorism.

2.5 Introducing AI in the workplace

The contemporary expansion of AI in the workplace can be broadly understood as taking two distinct forms. The first is a hierarchical, top-down process in which employers introduce algorithmic systems to reorganise and monitor the labour process; this is broadly captured by the concept of algorithmic management. Cant (2020:13) defines algorithmic management as a process that seeks to "partially automate labour process supervision and coordination." Specific sectors, relying heavily on data analysis to predict fluctuations in consumer demand and personnel needs, were well positioned to integrate algorithmic management into their daily operations. Such is the case in sectors such as retail, logistics, and transportation, where management increasingly relies on real-time monitoring of task completion, automated shift scheduling, and predictive analytics to anticipate fluctuations in demand and supply (Cox & Anttila, 2024). Reflecting this broader diffusion, the European Commission (2025) notes that up to a quarter of companies were already using such systems by 2023, primarily for surveillance and evaluation, with annual deployment projected to grow by 3% to 6% (European Commission, 2025:6).

The JRC AIM-WORK survey represents the most comprehensive study to date on how algorithms and AI are reshaping workplaces in the EU, compiling responses from 70,316 individuals across all 27 EU Member States (Gonzalez et al., 2025). According to the survey, algorithmic management is expanding significantly, with approximately one in four EU workers working under some form of algorithmic management, primarily through the automated allocation of working time and tasks, but also through algorithmic evaluation and workflow organisation. Confirming findings from previous studies (Cox & Anttila, 2024; European Commission, 2025; Milanez et al., 2025), the survey demonstrates that algorithmic management is now well established far beyond platform labour, with a particularly strong presence in sectors such as transportation, manufacturing, wholesale and retail, healthcare, ICT, and financial and insurance services, and a moderate presence in energy, construction, education, and public administration (Gonzalez et al., 2025:92–93).

At the same time, the proliferation of Large Language Models (LLMs) since 2023, together with their rapidly expanding capabilities and growing user base, has given rise to a second form of AI

introduction in the workplace. While algorithmic management is implemented through a top-down process driven by employers, this second trend reflects a more complex process of bottom-up AI integration. It encompasses a worker-driven adoption, whereby employees introduce AI tools into the workplace in a more decentralised and less regulated manner. However, it should be noted that this pattern of AI use in the workplace is also shaped by managerial demands, albeit indirectly. Increased workloads and demanding productivity targets may lead workers in creative industries to engage with AI in order to meet quotas and deadlines (Minotakis, 2025).

A recent survey shows that the bottom-up use of AI-powered tools is becoming widespread with almost one-third of EU workers (29.9%) reporting that they had used an AI-powered tool at work at least once during the previous 12 months (Gonzalez et al., 2025:51). This primarily involves the use of AI chatbots powered by Large Language Models (LLMs). However, this trend is unevenly distributed across EU Member States, being most prevalent in Denmark, Belgium, the Netherlands, Finland, and Austria, and less common in Bulgaria, Romania, and Greece. Among workers who use LLMs, these tools are used primarily for writing (65%), translation (59%), and data processing and brainstorming (38%), indicating that their principal role is to support text-based tasks (Gonzalez et al., 2025:56).

The 2025 Stack Overflow Developer Survey, which includes 49,009 responses from 177 countries, similarly indicates widespread but selective adoption among software developers (Stack Overflow, 2025). Almost two-thirds of respondents to Stack Overflow's 2025 Developer Survey reported using AI tools at least weekly, although trust in these systems remained considerably lower and their use for complex tasks was limited as the majority mistrusts AI's ability in that respect.

Taken together, these developments demonstrate that the introduction of AI in the workplace is a fragmented and uneven process, taking different forms across sectors and occupations. While some sectors are driving forward, others lag behind and different factors come into play on how employers and employees engage with AI (indicatively: preexisting digital maturity, data quality in a given sector, availability of technology specifically tailored to sectoral needs, workers' predisposition to new technologies, employers' resources and willingness to invest, etc). AI is introduced both through top-down processes of algorithmic management and through more decentralised, worker-driven forms of adoption, although the latter may themselves be shaped indirectly by managerial demands. While not directly engaging with workers themselves, the present report, based on trade unionists' and workers representatives' perspectives, seeks to contribute to an ongoing debate about algorithmic management and more decentralised forms of AI adoption.

2.6 AI in the Workplace: Risks for Workers

The introduction of AI in the workplace is associated with a significant number of risks for workers. In particular, it presents the possibility of algorithmic management as a new form of control. An underlying factor across many of these risks is the opacity of complex algorithmic systems, particularly those based on machine learning. This reflects the broader problem of the "black box" described by Pasquale (2015), whereby algorithmic systems tasked with

decision-making processes remain opaque to those affected by their operation. A lack of knowledge about how these systems operate and what types of data they collect and process is linked to concerns around surveillance, economic inequality, workload intensification and occupational health and safety, while more broadly exacerbating the structurally unequal power dynamics of the workplace.

Job losses and the economic wellbeing of workers

In the public debate, the most common concern associated with the integration of AI in the workplace is the fear of job losses and mass technological unemployment. This is to be expected as job losses and technological unemployment emerge as major concerns surrounding AI across both mainstream news coverage and social media discourse. News organisations report labour disruption as a prominent AI-related risk, with particularly strong concerns about mass layoffs in countries such as Germany (Papaevangelou et al., 2026b), while social media users similarly frame job displacement as key examples of AI's potential social harms (Papaevangelou et al., 2026a).

A key distinction in assessing AI's effect on employment is between exposure and complementarity. Exposure measures the extent to which tasks within an occupation can potentially be affected by AI, while complementarity captures whether AI is more likely to augment or substitute human labour. High-exposure, high-complementarity occupations may benefit from productivity gains where high-exposure, low-complementarity jobs face greater displacement risks (Pizzinelli et al., 2023). AI's potential to automate cognitive tasks also means that disruption may extend into more highly-educated, white-collar occupations (Pizzinelli et al., 2023) where lower-income and gig workers face different risks, including surveillance and work intensification (Simet & Bacciarelli, 2026).

The scale of actual job displacement remains uncertain. Research reviews find limited evidence of significant AI-driven employment losses at the aggregate level to date (Cox & Anttila, 2024; Gonzalez et al., 2025; Mahoney et al., 2026). While a widely cited layoff tracker shows a significant increase in tech layoff events attributed to AI from 2025 to 2026 (Layoffs.Fyi, 2026), other studies have found that even in prominent cases of AI-driven replacement, many displaced workers have subsequently been rehired (Miarisoa, 2025; Lee, 2026). Emerging evidence does suggest that AI may be contributing to slower employment growth in some countries among young and entry-level workers in highly exposed occupations such as technology (EGFSN, 2026). Therefore, recent evidence tends to confirm earlier scholarly arguments that attention should focus on the qualitative, rather than strictly on the quantitative, changes brought about by AI in the workplace (Aloisi & Gramano, 2019, De Stefano, 2019). As Gonzalez et al. (2025: 77) note:

While so far fears of widespread unemployment driven by the rise of AI prove to be unfounded, the rise of algorithmic management can have a fundamental impact on the organisation of work, including the potential automation of some traditional management functions, from hiring workers and managing day-to-day operations of the enterprise through to the termination of the employment relationship.

Finally, the employment debate should be understood within the larger context of economic equality and the distribution of AI-related economic gains. To date, it is unclear whether any productivity benefits that do materialise will trickle down to the workers themselves. AI tends to operate as a capital-biased innovation, shifting economic returns away from labour and towards technology owners. Analysis from the Centre for Economic Policy Research finds that regions with greater AI patenting activity – particularly those with strong industrial bases – experienced declined labour shares of income, furthering the unequal distribution of AI-driven gains (Minniti et al., 2026).

The present report contributes to this debate by engaging with AI-related risks and concerns, focusing on both aspects of the transformation of work. However, as the research is based on interviews with workers' representatives and trade unionists, it is better suited to identifying emerging qualitative changes in the labour process.

Health and safety risks

Having specific productivity quotas embedded in their design, algorithms tend to intensify the labour process, generating occupational health and safety risk in the process; for that reason, labour law scholar Todolí-Signes (2021) stresses the importance of strong health and safety measures in algorithmic governed workplaces and advocates for workers to have the right “to ask for an OHS [occupational health and safety]-related modification or improvement” of any deployed algorithm in their workplace.

In a similar way, it has been argued that algorithmic tracking and imposition of productivity goals for workers in Amazon warehouses ultimately sets unattainable targets for workers and intensifies the labour process. As Kaoosji (2020: 195) notes, “there is no way to safely make these rates”, and failure results in warnings as “after three write-ups, workers face termination”. This leads to constant stress and anxiety and has led Struna and Reese (2020:92) to conclude that “existing automation, algorithmic control and scale of facilities creates highly stressful and insecure work environments”. Platform workers have similar experiences through a process of “self-imposed work intensification” (Cant, 2020:55) as algorithms increase remuneration during adverse weather conditions to incentivise workers.

Ubiquitous surveillance and limits to collective workers rights

Algorithmic surveillance lies at the core of contemporary debates on AI in the workplace, as it both enables algorithmic management and significantly expands managerial control. As Aloisi and Gramano (2019) argue, surveillance is both a prerequisite for algorithmic decision-making and one of its principal outcomes. Through the continuous collection of data on workers' location, performance, and activity, algorithmic systems generate the information required for productivity assessment, task allocation, and workflow optimisation (De Stefano and Taes, 2021). In practice, this translates into the pervasive monitoring of both blue- and white-collar workers through wearable devices and computer-based software, enabling automated performance evaluations while simultaneously creating new obstacles to collective organisation and trade union activity (Aloisi and Gramano, 2019; De Stefano, 2019; De Stefano, 2020:432–434).

In particular, reflecting on the expansion of algorithmic management into so-called "white-collar" occupations, Bansal (2026) documents growing discontent among technology workers, influenced not only by AI-related layoffs but also by the introduction of AI-powered monitoring systems, including the tracking of keystrokes and mouse movements. Although these practices are often justified as a means of improving AI systems, they also create new opportunities to monitor workplace behaviour and undermine collective organising. Such function creep has also been documented in Amazon warehouses, where algorithms, originally introduced to allocate and evaluate work, have increasingly been used as instruments of discipline (Kaoosji, 2020). Overall, while the relationship between algorithmic management and anti-union strategies remains underexplored, there are certain notable case studies.

Following a closely contested unionisation campaign at an Amazon warehouse, Wiggin (2025) identifies four complementary tactics: weaponised workplace surveillance, partially automated HR systems used to deliver targeted anti-union messaging, algorithmic "slack-cutting", whereby workloads and managerial practices were temporarily adjusted during the organising campaign, and social media surveillance to identify potential "labour organising threats" (see also Gurley & Cox, 2020). Together, these practices illustrate how data-driven management systems can be repurposed as surveillant tools of labour control extending beyond productivity monitoring.

Bias and discrimination in the workplace

The training of machine learning (ML) algorithms has been widely criticised for reproducing historical forms of discrimination based on race, gender, socioeconomic status, income, and other protected characteristics.¹ Moreover, algorithmic decision-making has the capacity to obscure discriminatory outcomes behind a veneer of supposed "algorithmic neutrality" (Xavier, 2025). As a result, biased decisions regarding hiring, firing or promotions may be legitimised through the logic of technochauvinism, the belief that computational systems are inherently superior to human judgement and therefore possess an objective, scientific validity (Broussard, 2023).

Notable examples of bias resulting from the integration of algorithms in the workplace include Amazon's hiring algorithms. Chang (2023), studying Amazon's AI-powered recruitment algorithm as a case study of algorithmic gender bias, argues that hiring systems trained on historical recruitment data can reproduce and legitimise existing patterns of discrimination against women. While Amazon had to abandon the first iteration of its recruiting algorithm (Dastin, 2018), the use of AI in hiring, firing, and other HR-related functions is on the rise (Musrifah & Hasanah, 2025; Naveen, 2025)

2.7 AI in the Workplace: Benefits for Workers

Although AI has been already implemented and utilised in leading companies with some recording productivity gains (Bergamaschi et al., 2021; Calvino and Fontanelli, 2023), the

¹ FORSEE reports have already examined how SMEs developing and deploying AI systems engage with and seek to mitigate AI-related gender bias (Minotakis et al., 2026), as well as how CSOs perceive this issue and seek to counter it (Farries et al., 2026).

commercialisation of GenAI in 2023 stimulated enthusiasm and expectations around the transformational benefits of AI for business operations. The implementation of GenAI into businesses and workflows has been steadily growing since (Bick et al., 2026a), with workers and companies adopting and experimenting with GenAI effects on their productivity, efficiency, and competitiveness (Neil Baily et al., 2023; Brynjolfsson et al., 2025b; OECD, 2025).

AI is presented as a transformative force sparking employee and business productivity by accelerating tasks such as email writing, coding, summarising (Filippucci et al., 2024; Calvino et al., 2025), and enhancing human capabilities (Dell'Acqua et al., 2025). However, reports on AI and productivity growth demonstrate diverse findings and how GenAI translates into enhanced productivity has yet to clarify. Brynjolfsson and colleagues (2025b) report a boost in efficiency and productivity for all workers using GenAI tools, with significant improvements recorded for low-skilled and novice workers, while smaller gains were evident for experienced knowledge workers. Despite only partially demonstrating growth in productivity (Neil Baily et al., 2023; Calvino et al., 2025b), different scholars stress GenAI's steady evolution as well as its significant benefits in spawning innovation as important markers that qualify them to be defined as a general-purpose technology (GPT).

Different reports present that companies across different sectors and occupations have explored GenAI solutions into their workflows with impacts varying considerably depending on the field (Aldasoro et al., 2026; Bick et al., 2026b; Challapally et al., 2025; Sajadieh et al., 2026). At the same time a stark contrast is detected when it comes to profitability. There are a handful of companies reporting considerable increases in economic value and profits, while the vast majority has not recorded profits yet, pointing to a gap between recorded individual productivity and lack of profitability (Challapally et al., 2025). Similar findings are mentioned by Dillon et al. (2025), who report benefits in terms of individual efficiency and fewer overtime for workers who have adopted AI. Bick et al. (2026b) record that although GenAI implementation is wide, it remains shallow: only half of workers have integrated GenAI in their workflows, pointing to different attitudes of workers when it comes to adopting AI, with some being willing adopters, others choosing restricted GenAI use for more peripheral tasks, while other companies choose not to adopt. Finally, Sajadieh et al. (2026) note that AI impacts in productivity and work are beginning to emerge. Individual productivity is centred around structured and language-heavy tasks, and the clearest positive benefits are recorded in customer support, marketing, and software development (Sajadieh et al., 2026, p. 219), with other reports pointing to accounting (Choi and Xie, 2025).

While productivity growth is yet to materialise, considerable optimism remains with an OECD report expecting annual productivity gains due to AI over the next decade (Filippucci et al., 2025). As GenAI adoption deepens, more research will provide measurable findings on the impacts GenAI has on productivity and profits for organisations.

2.8 Collective Bargaining around AI

Collective agreements and AI governance mechanisms in the workplace

The employment relationship is structurally asymmetrical. Workers sell their labour power for fixed periods of time but, operating under a relationship of dependency, have limited capacity to determine the terms under which their labour is organised. The managerial prerogative is founded on this asymmetry, granting employers the authority to unilaterally make decisions concerning the organisation of work within the limits established by labour law. However, in the case of new technologies in the workplace, where legal frameworks often lag behind technological developments, managerial prerogative is effectively reinforced, leaving employers with broad discretion to introduce and deploy new technologies in the name of maintaining competitiveness. (Steinhoff, 2024).

Traditionally, unionisation has been a critical tool for workers to correct for power asymmetries in the workplace by allowing them to build collective power in the place of individual action. In this vein, collective bargaining and agreements can place limits on managerial prerogatives. These collective agreements constitute forms of class compromise, constraining the actions of both parties involved, while establishing the framework regulating wages, working conditions, productivity expectations, and the organisation of the labour process within a given enterprise or sector.

Labour law scholars, arguing that algorithmic management should be understood as an expansion and modification of the managerial prerogative (Aloisi & Gramano, 2019), have stressed the need to reconceptualise collective bargaining and broaden its scope to address the challenges of the algorithmic shift in the workplace. In the same line of thought, scholars have highlighted the need to link collective bargaining with existing regulatory frameworks (Cristofolini, 2024) and with litigation strategies initiated by the unions (Gaudio, 2024) in order to build comprehensive governance mechanisms that protect workers' rights. Furthermore, it could be argued that collective bargaining between unions and employers carries distinct characteristics that make it particularly suitable for regulating AI in the workplace.

- Collective agreements are more adaptable than legislation. While legislative instruments such as the AI Act require lengthy negotiation and revision processes before entering into force (Madiega, 2024), collective agreements are typically renegotiated more frequently and in a relatively more flexible manner. This enables social partners to respond more rapidly to technological change and emerging workplace concerns.
- Collective agreements can strengthen trust and social dialogue around AI. Worker acceptance of new technologies is significantly higher when trade unions are consulted and actively participate in their deployment and oversight (Cox & Anttila, 2024; Calvino et al., 2025).
- EU-level legislation governing AI in the workplace (primarily the AI Act and the Platform Work Directive, and, to a lesser extent, the GDPR) remains relatively high-level, establishing broad parameters for risk classification and the protection of workers'

fundamental rights. Collective agreements are therefore necessary to adjust AI governance to the specific contexts of particular sectors and workplaces. This need is further reinforced by the fact that AI does not constitute a single technology but rather an umbrella term encompassing diverse data-driven and machine-learning applications. As Ponce del Castillo (2018: 8) describes it, AI is a “multi-purpose technology”, making context-sensitive governance mechanisms particularly important (Cristofolini, 2024: 98).

Examples of collective agreements regulating AI in the workplace

Just after GenAI went mainstream in 2022, the first organised labour actions explicitly motivated by concerns around AI occurred in the USA. In 2023, 40,000 casino workers represented by the Culinary Workers Union secured a contract including a severance package of \$2000 for each year of seniority if the worker's position was eliminated due to “technology or AI” (Glass 2024). Soon to follow were the high-profile, star-studded WGA and SAG strikes in which over 11,000 screenwriters and 160,000 actors protested the looming threat of GenAI. More famous, due to the celebrities involved, was the 2023 Writers' Guild of America (WGA) strike, representing over 11,000 screenwriters. They went on strike for 5 months, ultimately achieving specific terms about GenAI in their new collective agreement. This was followed in 2024-2025 by the Screen Actors Guild – American Federation of Television and Radio Artists (SAG-AFTRA) strike of over 160,000 actors, which was motivated, in part, by concerns around GenAI in the form of digital replicas of actors' voices or likenesses. This strike achieved terms pertaining to the authority to deploy AI, the agency to decide on how it is used, disclosure over its use and consent from artists (Salvaggio 2023).

Now, there is an emerging body of case studies of successful collective bargaining that expands existing agreements or establishes new ones, regulating the introduction of AI in the workplace. Nonetheless, certain advances have been made, representing existing best practices that pave the way for new forms of AI governance. Analysis by FES and UNI of 105 AI and AM collective bargaining agreements (CBAs) found the most common topics to be included in agreements to be training on new AI tools, union involvement in new technologies, privacy, working time and the right to disconnect, and union involvement in data protection. Surveillance and recruitment were included in a smaller number of agreements. Across Europe, sectors with high levels of AI exposure also had a higher number of CBAs, including financial services, ICT, manufacturing, and transportation, communication, and logistics. Conversely, sectors with lower exposure levels - such as agriculture and construction - also tend to have fewer CBAs, according to the analysis. Spain accounted for the highest level of CBA activity, followed by Italy (Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, 2025).

- **Spain:** Spain is a prominent example, as regulation of AI favourable to workers (Rider's Law) has paved the way for collective agreements that grant certain degrees of transparency and protection from fully automated decision-making (Rodríguez Fernández, 2024). Pérez del Prado (2026) stresses the importance of the XXV Banking Sector Agreement, which protects workers from exclusively automated decisions, provides safeguards against algorithmic discrimination, while establishing information rights regarding the data and logic underlying algorithmic systems. In a similar vein, the Food Trade Agreement of A Coruña establishes broad transparency and consultation rights, requiring prior notification of digitalisation measures, impact assessments, tailored

training for workers and ongoing evaluation of AI's effects on working conditions (Pérez del Prado, 2026).

- **Ireland:** In Ireland, the collective agreement between the Financial Services Union (FSU) and the Bank of Ireland (BoI) provides an example of AI governance in a highly data-intensive sector. The agreement establishes core principles of transparency, human oversight, data protection, and social dialogue, while ensuring that no automated decisions significantly affecting employees can be made. The agreement also links AI adoption to obligations of reskilling and job protection, framing technological change as a jointly governed process. This agreement was explicitly informed by a survey of union members in Ireland, Northern Ireland, and the United Kingdom, demonstrating an interest in incorporating workers' voices (FSU, 2025; Newell, 2025).
- **Germany:** In Germany, Deutsche Telekom adopted an AI Manifesto through its system of codetermination with the works council representing workers. According to Haipeter et al. (2024:7), the agreement guarantees transparency regarding AI systems, prohibits fully automated decisions affecting employees, grants workers the right to challenge AI-assisted decisions, establishes meaningful early notification rights, and creates a joint employer–works council expert group to regularly oversee AI deployment. More broadly, it introduces a risk-based approach to AI governance, reflecting existing EU regulatory norms, and establishes a permanent codetermination framework for the introduction of future AI applications.

This report seeks to expand the literature on trade unionism and collective bargaining in relation to AI by examining how technological expectations are involved in how trade unions think about AI, what they are doing about AI, and what they plan to do about AI.

Section 3: Methodology

To examine how AI is reshaping work from the perspective of employees and their representatives, this report aims to address the following research questions:

- What changes are associated with the introduction of AI in the workplace?
- What are the present and expected impacts of AI in the workplace? What are the benefits and risks identified by trade union representatives?
- What positions do trade unions adopt towards AI in the workplace, and what actions are they taking to advance their demands?

This report (D5.2) takes a qualitative approach to answer these questions. Low-risk ethics approval was obtained from FORSEE Consortium lead, University College Dublin. Semi-structured, in-depth interviews were conducted with trade union representatives between April and August 2026, each lasting approximately 45 minutes. Sampling focused on trade unions across EU Member States representing sectors where AI is already deployed or used to a

significant extent. Participants were recruited by TASC (Think-tank for Action on Social Change), a FORSEE consortium partner.

A semi-structured interview guide provided consistency across interviews while supporting flexibility (provided in Appendix 1). The wording and focus of questions were adapted to the experience of each participant, with more in-depth questions for unionists who demonstrated deeper familiarity and engagement with AI-related issues. All but one interview was conducted virtually, primarily in English, with German, Greek, and Romanian offered where requested by participants. Language availability was determined by the ability of the research team.

The interviews explored unionists' understanding of how AI is currently affecting workers' experience and how they expect these dynamics to change in the future. Ongoing considerations included the impact of AI on job roles, working conditions, power configurations, and productivity. Also of interest was union activity in response to AI, such as collective bargaining, upskilling, research, and information sharing.

The sample covers 31 organisations across 13 countries and European-level bodies, spanning a diverse range of sectors and industrial relations contexts (See Table 1). To support data analysis, interviews were transcribed in accordance with the Data Management Plan, anonymised, and assigned numerical identifiers for use in the findings section. Data were analysed using deductive content analysis approach (Schreier, 2012) using the NVivo 15 analysis tool, drawing on a set of predefined labels derived from the presented conceptual framework.

Table 1: List of Interview Participants

Interview No.	Sector	Region ²
1	Finance	West (Centre-west)
2	Health	West (Centre-west)
3	ICT	South
4	Education	West (Centre-west)
5	Energy	West (Centre-west)
6	ICT	Centre-east
7	Health	North
8	Manufacturing	Europe-wide
9	Education	West (Centre-west)
10	ICT	West (Centre-west)

² To protect the anonymity of participants, we will refer to them by their region rather than country. Regions were determined using Visser et. al.'s industrial relations regimes or arrangements (2009).

11	Finance	Centre-west
12	General	Centre-east
13	General	Centre-west
14	Manufacturing	Centre-west
15	Professional/Technical	North
16	Professional	Centre-west
17	Public Sector	North
18	Manufacturing	West (Centre-west)
19	Public Sector	West (Centre-west)
20	Journalism	Centre-west
21	General	South
22	Journalism	Europe-wide
23	Researchers	Centre-east
24	ICT	North
25	Transportation	Centre-west
26	Musicians	Europe-wide
27	Health	West (Centre-west)
28	Finance	South
29	Journalism	Centre-west
30	Public Sector	West (Centre-west)
31	Retail	Europe-wide
32 ³	Journalism	Centre-west

³ Interviewees 29 and 32 represented the same organisation.

Section 4: Findings

Interviews with European union representatives reveal a complex AI adoption environment across workplaces. Despite the diversity of sectors and national contexts of our sample, there are certain common threads running through our findings that demonstrate a degree of shared understanding among union representatives. However, important differences reflect sectoral concerns, discrepancies in union resources, and varying familiarity with AI.

Common findings

Interviews revealed a common desire amongst unions to achieve meaningful opportunities to shape the adoption of AI in the workplace in order to secure better outcomes for their members.

1. Unions wish to be pragmatic, rather than reject change wholesale.

Union representatives were conscious to avoid the perception that they were opposed to technological progress. As noted by Interviewee 18:

If we fight a technological change in a factory that's going to increase profitability and do away with 100 jobs, we're called luddites.

Across our sample, interviewees tend to accept AI as an inevitable development bringing both risks and opportunities. Rather than reject it outright, they seek to manage it in ways that can deliver the best possible outcomes for workers.

2. Concerns on AI centre on a loss of control.

Despite the pragmatic acceptance of AI's entrance into workplaces, discussions pointed to a more troubled and contentious reality. Perceived risks and concerns far outweigh the potential benefits, with job loss and lack of control emerging as fundamental concerns. Control is multidimensional and extends across the different stages of AI adoption:

- Introduction: The introduction of AI is often a unilateral, top-down process.
- Implementation: Workers and unions frequently lack access to information about the types of data being collected and the processes subject to automation.
- Governance: Unions face challenges regulating AI through collective agreements.

Overall, interviewees emphasise the importance of human oversight, meaningful consultation, and a pace of change that allows workers to understand and influence AI adoption. Such instances of worker control are currently limited and it will be difficult to secure further measures of control, interviewees agreed. This power asymmetry places trade unions and workers in a defensive, reactive position, forcing them to adjust to a rapidly changing environment without full access to information. Efforts to "get a seat at the table" are often undermined by limited resources and expertise, and employers' unwillingness to negotiate. These factors are further exacerbated by the structural asymmetry built into AI development itself: many of the AI systems deployed in European workplaces are developed by USA-based Big Tech companies that have little interest in engaging with trade unions, or even with EU regulatory efforts.

3. Present experiences and future expectations are frequently conflated

The interviews revealed a blurred distinction between observed impacts and expectations about the future. For example, while almost all interviewees reported no AI-related job losses to date, many described unemployment as an immediate or already emerging threat. In their accounts, negative future-oriented expectations and the observed impact of AI frequently overlap, blurring the distinction between present experiences and future developments. This temporal collapse may be linked to concerns about the rapid pace of technological change and unions' need to position themselves "ahead of the curve." Expectations about AI therefore affect how interviewees interpret ongoing developments.

4. Unions are currently focused on capacity building with hopes to engage in collective agreements

The dominant union response to AI in our sample was centred on capacity building. Unions engaged in activities like conducting research or publishing reports and newsletters to inform their members. Most unions described an interest in deepening their understanding of and engagement with the regulatory landscape, though only a few unions mentioned directly engaging in lobbying activities with national or supranational institutions. Going forward, unions broadly agreed on the importance of collective action as a response to the new realities created by AI, but success has been limited so far.

Divergences across the sample

Nonetheless, certain divergences emerge within our sample, relating primarily to organisational size and resources, familiarity with AI, national context, and sector.

1. Union resources and familiarity with AI

First, there was considerable variation in interviewees' familiarity with AI-related issues. While some interviewees - particularly those from large, well-resourced unions or those operating within sectors with high AI exposure - were able to discuss technical issues, regulatory developments, or other concerns with relative sophistication and specificity, other union representatives demonstrated far less familiarity with AI.

This information gap reflected larger disparities in readiness to engage with policymaking processes. Those with greater familiarity and expertise were able to identify specific gaps in existing regulation and propose detailed measures to strengthen workers' protections. Similar differences were evident in unions' engagement with policymakers and lobbying activities, with smaller organisations reporting considerably more limited access to policymaking processes.

2. Approach to collective agreements

A second point of divergence concerns the role of collective agreements and, more fundamentally, whether AI should be treated as a novel development requiring new agreements. Some interviewees emphasised the novel character of AI and the need for new agreements specifically addressing its distinct challenges. On other hand, others viewed AI as a continuation of longer processes of automation and digitalisation and therefore focused on enforcing existing collective agreements.

3. Sectoral differences

Finally, important differences emerged across sectors. Representatives from “white-collar” unions, including professional occupations and the creative industries, reported more extensive integration of AI into everyday work and expressed significantly greater concern about its implications. In contrast, interviewees representing unions in industrial, manufacturing, and transportation sectors generally reported fewer AI use cases and expressed less immediate concern about its effects on the labour process. By contrast, representatives from the creative industries, professional occupations and, broadly speaking, white-collar work reported

In the next subsections, findings will be presented in a detailed manner.

- Section 4.1 outlines workers' experiences with AI. AI adoption varies across sectors, shaped by resources, prior digitalisation, and sector-specific conditions. Workers' perspectives are mixed, with anxiety and reservations common but not amounting to outright rejection; concerns are amplified by limited consultation and lack of transparency.
- Section 4.2 examines the perceived risks and rewards of AI. Unionists identified productivity and, for some workers, improved safety as potential benefits, but these were outweighed by concerns about job loss and increased employer control through algorithmic management. Realising benefits while mitigating risks was seen as dependent on implementation processes and meaningful human oversight.
- Section 4.3 assesses unions' perspectives and activities on AI. Union capacity and familiarity with AI vary significantly, although unions broadly want to shape its development and are struggling to keep pace with change. Engagement is driven by member interest or employer-led changes, with information sharing common but collective agreements and meaningful employer dialogue still rare.

4.1 Workers' experiences

Our research captures both cases of top-down deployment (e.g. finance sector, telecommunications) and bottom-up adoption (software engineering) as well as more decentralised situations (higher education, music industry). AI in the workplace progresses across sectors and national contexts in an uneven manner, dependent upon resource constraints, prior digitalisation efforts (i.e. healthcare in some countries, which was described as having an overall low digitalisation rate impacting a potential introduction of AI applications), and the particular challenges within each sector.

Trade unionists, who have central insights into the workplace describe workers' perspectives as mixed: anxiety and reservations are prevalent. However, this should not be read as an outright refusal of AI and there are also cases of optimism and AI being welcomed by employees. Beyond specific concerns (see below) anxiety seems to be compounded by a lack of prior consultation and the opaque ways AI systems operate (for example, many workers' representatives report a lack of knowledge on the types of data collected and processed).

4.1.1 AI adoption - sectoral differences and GenAI prevalence

Overall, union representatives communicated the lack of certainty surrounding describing the **impact of AI on the workplace**. As Interviewee 1 illustrates:

I think there is a high degree of concern because it isn't yet defined what the impact is exactly going to be and how quickly that's going to reach people. People are experiencing the positive sides of it: putting in a document, looking for a synopsis of that document, and getting the key points back out of it. We have had a number of areas where the employer hasn't said it's directly related to AI, but the level of change has been such that you're saying this has to be AI-related. We had one example of a risk area where they downsized considerably the staffing and they said "it's just the way it is. We don't need that many staff anymore. We can now do this centrally and so forth." But our understanding was that the reason that they were able to do it centrally was AI.

What gets evident in this quote, is that changes for the better and for the worse especially in regard to staff numbers cuts appear to be AI-related, even if they might not openly be declared as such. Administrative functions and application fields such as Human Resources, as well as as marketing, insurance, banking, IT, telecommunications (cf. interviews 8, 10, 13) overall show **higher usage of AI** systems or tools, which indicates LLM or GenAI as particularly suited for tasks such as relating to customer services (cf. 24).

In particular, a large section of our interviewees experienced a top-down adoption of AI, relating to what is known as **algorithmic management**. As Interviewee 16 notes:

So customer service was one example, but in general, we see more and more use of algorithmic management, particularly in monitoring and recruiting tools. I understand that that's an interesting tool. For example, you have a vacancy, and you've got 100 applications, and you have to go through them all hand by hand.

Furthermore, in broad terms, there is a **gap** being observed between office workers and blue collar workers. As Interviewee 12 argues:

There's definitely a wide gap between office workers and so-called blue collar workers. So office workers, more or less, they need to use AI tools, at least the most simple ones like ChatGPT, things like that. And the more professional you get in your office work, the more complex tools you use and the more complex, how to say, exercises you give your AI tools and agents, I guess. But if you're a bus driver, like a general or standard blue collar worker, then you don't have the need to necessarily use those tools. So we see a big gap running there.

Similarly, Interviewee 8 states that **industry** is less affected by AI than other fields, but still depending on the specific tasks:

You now see AI in HR processes everywhere. You also see AI in research, development and innovation. The digital twins are really important for the industry. But on the shop floor, you would see the deployment of AI for predictive maintenance. Maintenance is really important, so an example is predictive maintenance for quality control. So...industry is generating a lot of data about quality, about the environment, quality of the air, dust. So with lots of data and now with AI, this data can be cross-checked, because you can easily combine the algorithm, the data among them for industrial

purposes. But beyond the industrial purposes, you can also use it to monitor workers, and especially monitor workers' performance.

Regarding **barriers to AI adoption**, they seem to depend on the sectoral configuration. The healthcare sector for example is characterised by overall low digitalisation rates. Hospitals still use paper charting and appear to have little interconnectedness, and old systems (27):

A lot of the systems in certain hospitals haven't changed since the 1990s. Really, you're using MS-DOS systems with page up and page down to scroll through blood reports, so we've a long way to go before you can get AI involved in some of that, I think.

In regard to the **public sector**, one Interviewee (30) hints at the usage of Chatbots for out-of-hours responses:

At the moment, AI in the public sector is being used in areas like automated responses. If you take the local government sector, for instance, it's beginning to become more of a feature for out-of-hours responses and queries, and chatbots that take people through a certain amount of their queries before they actually have to talk to a physical person.

One of the most prominent sectors in our sample was the finance sector, where digital assistants are getting more widespread. As Interviewee 28 notes:

During the last year, there is also an effort to train us, and perhaps to reassure us about where [AI] is being used. It could be from a digital assistant that we might have either for internal tasks, meaning we have an application at the bank where I search for a document or where I can learn how I can issue a debit card. What are the terms, conditions, who will approve me, etc. There are corresponding ones in all the banks, they have also created digital assistants in internet banking so that the clients query the digital assistant and ask the question instead of picking up a phone. The truth is that it is not always the correct answer, and experience shows us, as employees, that many times the assistant makes a mistake.

Marketing and retail are seen as an important field of AI adoption as Interviewee 31 reports:

So, to make their marketing activity more personalised. I think everyone is aware that if we try to find some product online, they are able to monitor our interest and they can offer us products.... But now the technology has allowed them to do this in the in-person brick and mortar shops as well. They can use a lot of things, RFID tags, chips, a lot of things... So literally AI can be used in all parts of the operation in retail.

Another important case study was GenAI being integrated in creative industries. For example, in the **music industry** AI generated tracks compete with human creation as Interviewee 26 notes:

If you look at the streaming platforms, some work has to be done to make sure the AI generated tracks that already compete with human creation do not pay, as well as human creation, for instance... what we see now is a dilution of revenues because of the number of AI tracks that are already available on streaming platforms... I mean, the volume taken by AI on the streaming platform is getting enormous.

A similar challenge arises for journalists, especially freelancers (interview 21). Larger news organisations seem to have already integrated AI in the newsroom, as Interviewee 29 reports:

I would say that the big guys, they are really trying to be forerunners in AI. Like you got the biggest newspaper publisher in the [country]. They really started early and they've integrated AI in their back-end system. So when journalists strike pieces, there's an AI that checks the article on readability and bounces it back to the journalist if it doesn't, if the AI doesn't think it's readable enough, before it can go to the editor who eventually publishes it. (...) So in most fields in journalism, AI is being used, but mostly by the bigger companies.

Adoption in **telecommunications** is described as quite widespread and fast. It develops both in a bottom-up fashion (interview 3) but is also implemented through a top-down-approach as Interviewee 24 reports:

So top-level management has really talked to mid-level management, telling them to use [AI], find the benefits, and then tell their employees. That's how I would say that the approach has sort of been, so that you can actually talk about the benefits and experience them. Then it's also obviously been marketed in internal channels.

Asked whether there had been a consultation with **entry-level** employees, they highlighted that there has not been a "grassroots" sort of **inclusion** (24):

There's definitely not been a grassroots sort of inclusion in this. I think that is, especially for the processes where we implement changes in how we work. And when we integrate AI into our daily work, to a large extent, they say "Find these ways. We know it's going to help us. We know it's going to create efficiencies. Everybody says so. Make sure you find them"...it has definitely been a top-down perspective on the development of AI.

Another aspect of adoption is revealed when looking at the **intersection of expectations and competition dynamics**. Apparently, the pressure for AI tools to prove beneficial can become so great that workers pretend to use AI, as Interviewee 12 reports. However, we should not overstate the extent of such an observation within our sample:

We see more of it when companies are in competition with each other. We have seen, for example, some tech companies here, they paint a brighter picture of what they can do with AI than they actually can. So I won't call it lying, but heavily illustrating that to get a better competition point, or more investment or things like that. Within a company, and when talking about workers, I would say that some workers feel the pressure that they should use AI. And they maybe don't see the benefit of AI, so they pretend to use AI. They end up pretending to use AI.

As becomes obvious from this discussion, workers navigate the different affordances of AI adoption mainly depending on their field of work or profession. The sectoral differences, as well as barriers and drivers of adoption are highly significant, as has been shown above. A closer look at workers' attitudes, mediated by trade unionists, paints an even broader picture combining current experiences and expectations for the future.

4.1.2 Worker's attitudes towards AI: between anxiety, pragmatism and optimism

Regarding worker's attitudes towards AI, in general, anxiety outweighs optimism, even though there appears to be quite some pragmatism as well. AI-induced **job loss** is among the strongest concerns, as another quote illustrates for the music industry (26):

There is certainly a good deal of anxiety because it's about jobs and there are certainly threats on jobs. So many musicians may think that they might not be able to continue their career in this new environment because of the competition with AI.

Especially white-collar workers are described by one union member as vulnerable to pressure by AI (8), stressing once again the differential effects within the workforce:

I'm talking in general from the workers side, there is the legitimate concern that they are being replaced by AI. And they probably are. I would draw a line between blue-collar and white-collar workers. I mean, it's clear that among white collar workers, i.e. accounting, marketing, all these support services, I think they are probably under more pressure, although we don't really have clear evidence now that jobs have been cut off because of AI.

This discrepancy between fear of job losses and actual limited impact on this respect is significant and will be discussed in the next section as well. A key point here is that interviewees often blur different temporal dimensions in their accounts, incorporating negative expectations about the future into their assessments of the present. This is particularly evident in Interviewee 29's report of the precarious position of freelancers, where anticipated future layoffs is presented as a realistic extension of current trends:

If you have an AI that's doing the work of three people and you have to choose either get rid of the AI or get rid of two people, then in the long run, you're going to get rid of the people... And the freelancers, they feel more like they're going to be the victim, which is, I think, a realistic point of view.

Another recurring theme inducing anxiety is the **opacity** around AI systems and overall uncertainties concerning the **consequences** for workers. One Interviewee (21) describes workers experiencing depression or feelings such as anger, especially in regard to new forms of potential **surveillance**:

The first reaction in general terms is that you don't understand, because in many cases you ask if you are evaluated or monitored.... But in many cases, they don't give you [information], because it's really difficult to understand how it works. The consequence is that we are watching an increasing number of workers affected, for example, by psychological elements. They experience depression, they experience anger because they don't know what the consequences are for the opacity of these decisions.

Opacity is exacerbated by the rapid introduction of AI systems, as Interviewee 24 notes:

That's one of those things that have sort of snuck up on us... We don't have a good idea of how well it's actually working yet. It's too soon to say. But it's gotten introduced quite quickly. And we weren't

actually prepared for that.

Also, in this regard, the aspect of **rising expectations** towards workers to adapt and face a potential **devaluation** of new skill sets as a bargaining asset due to the fast paced change of AI development is addressed (5):

But this is what employers said when they changed from typewriters to computers, right? They said the same thing: "it will make your work easier". We argued, "well, there's a higher skill set and there was a bargaining trade for that". That bargaining trade isn't recognised so much, I don't think now, because the pace of change is just so fast. There's an expectation from employers that we will keep up with that speed of change and try to...You know, you can't say we want payment for change anymore because employers just don't accept that. So we tried to say that, you know, in developing these systems, if there is a benefit for the organisation, then the employee should get a share of that benefit, right? Kind of means the same thing, but it's kind of a different language.

In general, concerns over AI have **intensified** during the last year, with AI having been brought to the forefront of union members' and employees' concerns as one Interviewee reports (30):

So those concerns are now starting to feed up to ourselves. And that's, in turn, bringing us to a situation where we're now going to the employers to say, "Listen, we need to do something about AI."

In contrast to this list of concerns, **optimism** and hopes for AI are mingled and a bit more cautious, as Interviewee 3, coming from the tech sector, argues when asked if their coworkers would like to return to a pre-AI stage:

If you ask the same question to my coworkers, nobody would prefer to return to a period when AI did not exist. But at the same time, they're sceptical and anxious about it.

Anxiety comes along with unfamiliarity and workers are looking to increase their understanding of AI. Interviewee 15 notes that their organisation conducted a survey where lack of training emerged as a key issue:

The training is the biggest problem. We see in the same survey, we asked our members if they need training to use their AI tools. I think 75% said, "of course", and most of them said "very soon, within a year or two", "I need training, otherwise I can't do this"...There's this project in the IT department in [country]. They're doing something. We don't know what that is. We're told to use Copilot, but no one knows how. And we have all these questions on them, on everything from legal issues to practical issues. (...) There is no training schedule.

Some workers who understood how to use AI expressed a kind of optimism regarding power asymmetries and a potential sense of **empowerment** (10):

What I find really interesting is there's a section of AI optimists, or people using the tools (...) is a particular example where I think there's been an integration of workers' use of AI tools in order to help them resist their employers, to organise, and to express themselves, which I think is really interesting.

The interviewees thus indicated that knowledge and skills are central aspects to be addressed in AI adoption in order to mitigate negative effects for workers, i.e. by providing AI training

opportunities for employees or limits and standards for automation. New technological possibilities for surveillance, control, and algorithmic management offered by AI systems are likely to exacerbate conflicts between management and workers. Furthermore, skepticism and caution towards AI are mostly tied to precarious or worsening labour conditions and rising pressure, which coincide with a top down and rapid introduction of AI systems.

4.2 Perceived Impacts of AI

This section examines how union representatives understand the potential benefits and risks of AI, and the conditions they believe will determine its impact on workers. While AI was seen as offering opportunities to improve efficiency and working conditions, concerns centred on job displacement, work intensification, surveillance, and wider social and technical risks. Across these perspectives, a common theme was the need for meaningful human involvement in how AI is designed, implemented, and governed.

4.2.1 Perceived Benefits of AI

Overall, only a few unionists believed their workers were wholly optimistic about the impact of AI, though various benefits were discussed. Interviewees identified a range of potential benefits from AI, particularly in reducing routine work, saving time, improving efficiency, and enabling workers to focus on more substantive aspects of their jobs. These benefits fall into two overarching categories:

- Augmentation as an enabler of efficiency
- Better working conditions

However, interviewees stressed that these benefits are not guaranteed. Their impact depends on how AI is implemented and who controls the resulting productivity gains. Realising these benefits, however, depends on how AI is deployed and whether productivity gains translate into better jobs and services, rather than simply higher returns for employers. Interviewee 21 emphasised this point:

As a trade union, one idea we have to counteract is the idea of technological determinism, the idea that when you apply AI tools or another kind of technology at the workplace, the effects are already determined. Now, we see that with AI, there can be both positive effects and negative effects. It depends how they are used and how they are implemented.

Augmentation as an enabler of efficiency

Across sectors, AI was often described as an augmentation tool rather than a replacement for human workers. Specifically, interviewees highlight AI's potential to improve the quality and efficiency of existing work, from supporting medical diagnosis to summarising meetings, improving written outputs, and analysing large volumes of information. This sentiment was more common among unionists representing predominantly white-collar workers. Interviewee 15 described how AI was used in their sector to streamline individual administrative tasks:

We have a lot of people who use AI tools the same way I do, to summarise minutes from meetings, for help...So you use them to sort of improve your work, polish your work, and give you inspiration for where to go with your work.

Time savings were one of the clearest perceived benefits. Interviewees described AI substantially reducing the time required for research, information gathering, document analysis, translation, transcription, and other tasks. As noted by Interviewee 12:

The biggest benefit that we have seen, or what people have communicated to us, is that it helps them save time. For example, if they need to conduct research that would take them, like, three days, and then AI does it in 30 minutes.

These time savings can increase individual capacity, but interviewees also cautioned that greater individual productivity does not automatically translate into higher organisational profitability. As noted by Interviewee 3:

Productivity is something that depends on management decisions, and it depends on how the market goes. Right now, if they think that you sell, there are people who would like to buy it. It depends on thousands of other parameters that no one can say safely that if the engineers are more productive, then the company will earn more money. There is a huge distance between my productivity and how it will be sold at the end of the day.

Workers were more likely to directly experience the benefits of AI through a reduction in mundane tasks; a sentiment that was expressed by union representatives across sectors. As Interviewee 3 put it, AI allows them to avoid “boring, repeatable chores” and concentrate on their “core” and more valuable work.

Looking ahead, interviewees saw potential for these productivity gains to create more space for professional and creative work rather than simply reducing headcount. Interviewee 14 described how AI could take over administrative and bureaucratic tasks, giving engineers greater scope to “develop and engineer” rather than becoming “trapped in rigid processes”. Others saw potential to expand professional capabilities, improve services, support rare-disease diagnosis, fraud detection and cybersecurity, manage complex production processes, and address labour shortages.

Improved Working Conditions

In some cases, AI was also seen as having potential benefits for occupational safety and wellbeing. Overall, this sentiment was more common amongst unions representing a larger number of blue-collar workers. For example, physical safety was referenced as a benefit for the transportation sector in Interview 25:

Especially as a human, when I'm driving for a long period at high speed, I don't have a good estimate of how hard the person in front of me is braking. In this, an automatic system is for sure more safe.

Looking forward, manufacturing and transporting unions were most optimistic about AI's potential to improve worker safety. According to Interviewee 18:

AI has the possibility to make work so much safer as well, and I don't think we should lose sight of that.

Who stands to gain?

These benefits were ultimately linked to broader questions of who will capture the gains from expected increases to productivity. A few interviewees saw potential for AI to strengthen competitiveness and create scope for higher wages, shorter working hours, or redistribution of productivity gains. As noted by Interviewee 15:

We do not negotiate outcomes of AI systems. We negotiate bottom-line profits. We see that these companies will profit this much, then we can demand this much percentage wage increase, irrespective of how this productivity increase manifests.

The perceived benefits of AI centred less on automation itself than on what organisations choose to do with the capacity it could create. For unionists, the key question is whether productivity gains translate into better jobs, safer working conditions, and better services, rather than simply higher returns for employers.

4.2.2 Perceived Risks of AI

Unionists were able to provide greater specificity about the expected drawbacks of AI than its benefits, with concerns about future harms shaping current attitudes and anxieties. While some impacts were already observable, particularly in relation to surveillance and work intensification, the scale and timing of employment disruption remained uncertain. In general, concerns included:

- Job loss
- Intensification and degradation of work
- Algorithmic management and changing power dynamics
- Technical challenges
- Intellectual property
- Socio-political concerns

a) Job Loss

Job loss was a common concern raised across sectors, although the temporal dimension of AI-related employment disruption was often blurry. A small number of interviewees reported actual or suspected job losses linked to AI, but most described staff reductions as a looming threat. In this sense, expectations about future displacement are shaping workers' experiences and anxieties in the present. This was particularly notable among white-collar workers, whose occupations were previously less exposed to automation as noted by Interviewee 8:

The main change is that before, automation was mainly threatening blue-collar workers. Now, it's mainly white-collar workers. Although - depending on the degree of automation - it could also eventually threaten blue-collar workers.

In contrast, workers in occupations with lower AI exposure were perceived as less immediately vulnerable to AI-related job loss, per Interviewee 25, representing the transportation sector:

We have health, transport, cleaning, and security. Job losses in these branches are not so high, because security workers cannot easily lose their jobs to AI, for example, or cleaning workers. Office windows or a hospital still have to be cleaned by people.

For some, the more immediate concern was not mass redundancies but the gradual disappearance of entry-level work. According to Interviewee 8:

And already now, although we don't hear about redundancies, what we hear is that some basic administrative jobs, not specific to any industry, are actually disappearing because a lot of the tasks can be done by AI. The side effect is that there are fewer and fewer entry-level jobs. We hear it at many levels, in legal departments, in industry, in accounting. So, a number of low-skilled tasks that traditionally you would probably give to younger people or people in entry-level jobs have now disappeared.

There were reports of actual or suspected AI-related staff reductions, including significant reductions in manufacturing and cuts in media and technology. Interviewee 1, representing the financial services sector, described cases where employers had substantially reduced staffing without explicitly attributing the cuts to AI despite workers' understanding that AI had enabled the restructuring:

We have had a number of areas where the employer hasn't said it's directly related to AI, but the level of change has been such that you're saying this has to be AI-related. We had one example of a risk area where they downsized considerably the staffing and they said "It's just the way it is. We don't need that many staff anymore. We can now do this centrally." But our understanding was that the reason that they were able to do it centrally was AI.

However, some interviewees noted the distance between fears of mass unemployment and actual, observable impacts. According to Interviewee 21:

There is media discussion about this threat of massive unemployment, massive replacement by AI. We must say that so far we have seen no effects.

Interviewees warned that the focus on unemployment may obscure slower-moving consequences, including workforce restructuring, changing career pathways, and the distribution of productivity gains. As Interviewee 17 put it, the key questions is not whether AI will eliminate jobs, but what happens to workers as the nature of work changes:

I think the discussion is, to some extent, two-faceted, because when you measure how afraid workers are in relation to AI, most are afraid of losing their jobs to AI. Very few are afraid of how surveillance and control are affected by AI. And I think we in [public sector union] see this as kind of funny, because we're not afraid of mass unemployment. We're more afraid of the effects on management. So, to us, it's kind of a puzzle that workers have the opposite attitude.

Others focused on the historical precedent for technological disruption, which did not result in large scale unemployment. According to Interviewee 14:

There is a clear concern: AI is being used to systematically eliminate jobs, yes, on the one hand, and on the other hand, to introduce new jobs with the intention of cutting jobs. That's one aspect. We've always seen this in the use of technological changes and developments, in stages of industrial revolutions. Technologies have always triggered something, including job losses.

Any job growth associated with AI does not outweigh costs to headcount and job quality, said Interviewee 12:

10 years ago [...] we saw that, in general, digital transformation took some jobs away, but it also created some jobs, and it tended to create better jobs that it took away [...] But right now, we see that we are losing more jobs than creating and those new jobs are not necessarily as high-value jobs as they were before.

Taken in whole, these interviews suggest that uncertainty is a critical driver in worker anxiety over AI-related job loss, but additional support to improve worker complementarity may help. According to Interviewee 30:

[Workers] need confidence that AI won't become a mechanism for workforce reduction or de-skilling, and also that the technology will be used to support workers' development rather than displace experienced employees.

b) Intensification and degradation of work

Job loss is not the only looming change for workers. For many unionists, the more immediate concern was not whether work would disappear, but whether the work that remained would become worse. Interviewees described AI as potentially increasing workloads, intensifying work pressure, deskilling workers, reducing meaningful tasks, and weakening wages and job quality. In some cases, these new pressures have already arrived, creating new tensions and rearranging the power dynamics in the workplace.

Rather than converting efficiency gains into more free time, AI may allow employers to raise expected output. As noted by Interviewee 15:

AI will empower us or force us, depending on which side of that spectrum you are, to do more work. We will produce more, we will become more productive. And you can say that's a good thing or that's a bad thing, I'm neutrally going to state this is probably going to happen.

Customer service employees are already experiencing this intensification, according to several unionists. Interviewee 15 described how automating reporting and administrative tasks in customer service reduced the time required per case from fifteen to five minutes:

Which sounds cool, but then your boss wants you to call the next person. So instead of doing 4 complaints in one hour, you're now doing 3 times as much.

Intensification is creating a more stressful work environment, according to Interviewee 16:

We are taking away from them, which means that you're only performing on peak emotional pressure continuously, hour after hour after hour. And we've seen the first signs and reports of that it's actually increasing work pressure.

On the other hand, the work of engaging with AI systems may result in the creation of more mundane tasks. According to Interviewee 29, a representative from a journalism union:

A lot of journalists are afraid that most of their job is going to be checking what the AI is doing, which isn't the reason you got into this field.

As workers engage with AI more frequently their skills may suffer over time. Interviewee 14 even expressed concern that AI was making people “dumber” over time. Interviewee 3 expressed a similar sentiment:

The everyday fear is that I'm becoming worse, day by day, as I use AI to do the majority of my work. The majority of the lines of code I write are AI-generated. And I worry that, day by day, this is decreasing my engineering competence.

Others feared that AI could transfer workers' skills and expertise into automated systems, leaving employees in less-skilled roles and potentially putting downward pressure on wages. According to Interviewee 8:

The moment [a worker's] skills are transferred to an AI system and the worker is only a click worker...then the impact on wages will be big. So this is why it's absolutely important that workers are involved. Because we have to make sure that, at the end of the day, the process will lead to quality jobs.

Critically, a small number of unionists questioned the validity of the assumption that AI will improve productivity, including Interviewee 16:

It could be that AI has the same productivity gains as the computer, where economists have continued to say that we see no visible impact on productivity, which is interesting in itself. Computers are everywhere, but where are they in the productivity numbers? Productivity numbers are based on what one does per hour. You do more per hour since you have a computer; before the computer, you did less. But in the productivity numbers, it's invisible, and I think AI might have that effect as well.

c) Algorithmic management and changing power dynamics

The use of AI to monitor, evaluate, and control workers emerged as another major concern. Interviewees described systems analysing calls, tracking productivity, monitoring, and collecting employee data that could be used for performance management or discipline. As noted by Interviewee 13:

With the introduction of AI [there are] more opportunities for the employer... to control and supervise the workforce. And... we need to protect the data of the employees under these conditions.

Interviewees also discussed the rise of AI-enabled employee surveillance technologies. Interviewee 16 mentioned legal concerns related to keystroke tracking, and Interviewee 19 went so far as to describe AI enabled surveillance or monitoring of workers as a “red line”. Surveillance and tracking were particularly concerning to unionists from the transportation sector, such as Interviewee 30:

It's done under the pretext of, "We want to monitor driver usage, reduce bad driving habits, and so on,"...But with that comes concerns from our members to say, "These systems are tracking me, reporting it back to base, and it's now being used as a management tool". So people see it as an over-supervision piece.

The use of AI for recruitment presents additional challenges, particularly related to bias. According to Interviewee 16:

There's a giant risk of all kinds of discrimination, biases, loss of humanity in this stuff...What I find problematic is that the decision-making of these recruiting tools is actually pretty much a black-box.

The problem is compounded by workers' limited knowledge of when AI is being used. Interviewee 18 reported discovering automated decision-making in areas such as annual leave and HR without prior disclosure:

But in terms of AI coming in, whether that be on the production floor or in some of the decision-making processes...nobody tells us about it even though it will impact workers. Annual leave applications are automated in some instances now, and people find that bizarre... That transparency just isn't there. And I think the people we're dealing with, in terms of HR managers and operations managers in the factories, don't really know about it either. They're just told, "Here, this is the new toy, get it up and running. It's going to save us loads of money and we'll make more profits."

This opacity can have consequences beyond privacy. Workers may be unable to understand or challenge decisions affecting them, contributing to psychological distress, according to Interviewee 21:

The consequence is that we are watching an increasing number of workers affected by psychological elements. They experience depression; they experience anger because they don't know what the consequences are for the opacity of these decisions.

This lack of transparency is reinforced by workers', unionists', and managers' lack of technical expertise, complicating efforts for meaningful oversight. As a result, Interviewee 16 was skeptical that companies will willingly improve transparency measures:

I've seen enough from companies providing these technologies to know that transparency is a very, very hard thing for them, because it's partly their business model not to be transparent. So I'm not holding my breath that employers and employees at a decentralised level will have enough transparency to make decisions very much in advance. I think they'll have to make decisions based on the goal, and the question is how many problems have arisen by then.

d) Technical AI concerns

Technical concerns centred on the reliability and opacity of AI systems. Interviewees raised particular concerns about biased or inaccurate outputs, including the use of AI in decisions affecting workers. While these concerns were common across unionists, they were largely described as features of larger challenges related to algorithmic management.

Bias: Several unionists were concerned that biases embedded in training data or system design could reproduce or amplify discrimination, particularly in the realm of recruitment. According to Interviewee 5:

This thing that people do where AI screens the application forms and the CVs, I think that's a terrible idea. And I don't think it should ever happen because the AI programs are only as good as whoever wrote the program. And those biases will carry forward into the program. And everybody has some level of bias, either conscious or unconscious...And they say you can get gender bias with this kind of thing as well. All sorts of biases can be knit into it.

Regular human oversight was also identified by Interviewee 30 as a way to prevent discriminatory outcomes:

And also a concern that our members would have is that AI systems, in whatever way they're introduced to the workforce, need to be reviewed regularly to make sure that they don't reinforce discrimination or disadvantage workers.

Inaccuracies and hallucinations: The reliability of AI-generated content was another concern for unionists. Interviewees questioned whether workers could trust AI outputs without the knowledge required to assess their accuracy. According to Interviewee 24:

The concerns are how do we actually trust the information that AI is interpreting? Because we believe that we need knowledge and understanding in order to actually make the judgment, is this information that AI creates for me, is it actually viable?

This creates the additional burden of "bot-sitting," where workers must check and correct AI outputs, a problem noted by unionists in a variety of sectors, including Interviewee 27:

The problem is you're relying on the AI to prioritise what's going to be transcribed and not hallucinate something that isn't there, so everything does require, you know, manual checking afterwards. Because that's probably a basic but high-value thing, I suppose people are kind of focusing on it at the moment (27).

These inaccuracies can undermine customer experiences, creating additional stress for employees. According to Interviewee 28:

Therefore, many times an employee might use this tool that gives you irrelevant pieces of information. And then what is the employee supposed to do, what should we do with all the drudgery that the AI creates? And for us who also have contact with clients on-site, we must apologise to them because the AI assistant made the client book an appointment and come to our branch, and he lost time while he could do the job online (28).

Transparency: These risks are compounded by a broader lack of transparency around how AI systems operate and where they are deployed. The technical basis of biases or inaccurate outputs can be difficult to scrutinise when their decision-making rationales are hidden inside a "black box". To address this problem, Interviewee 3, who has a high-level of familiarity with AI systems, called for the use of open-source models:

Nobody knows how closed models were fitted, how they were trained, what's inside those models, and what laws have been, have not been respected in terms of privacy. And there are some other models which are open source. You know how they were trained. You know what's inside them, you can run it by yourself and see what their problems are.

e) Intellectual property

Unionists in the creative and knowledge generation sectors cited concerns over copyright and the theft of intellectual property. They argued that copyrighted works are being used to train AI systems without adequate consent or remuneration. As noted by Interviewee 22:

In the advent of AI, there's a whole lot of other struggle there whereby journalists aren't being properly enumerated for the works that are being used to train the AI.

These concerns extend beyond individual remuneration to the sustainability and status of creative professionals. Interviewees argued that AI companies should bear responsibility for the IP they use, making fair payment a key lobbying priority for Interviewee 29:

[Our major lobbying priority for the next year is] trying to make sure that the companies who are dumping AI on the world, that they pay their fair share, that they pay their way, like the oil companies should do with the impact they have on the environment...AI companies should pay for the stuff they use.

f) Socio-political concerns

This was the least prominent category and captures concerns regarding AI's impact on climate change, the power asymmetries underlying Europe's lack of digital sovereignty, and risks to democratic resilience. This type of concern was expressed by trade unionists that demonstrated a high familiarity with AI.

Environmental concerns focused on whether the benefits of AI justify its resource consumption. According to Interviewee 19:

Just because we can do this, is it actually worth it? Should we be using all the water in Utah to read a document 5 minutes faster than we would if we had to do it ourselves?

Concerns about digital sovereignty centred on concentration of technological power. According to Interviewee 20:

I think that European companies should embrace the use of these technologies, but in a different way. I mean, taking into account European and democratic values, as well as the capacity, skills, and potential of workers, in a way that ensures the company always performs better while respecting the law, regulations, and so on.

Finally, Interviewee 22 raised the concern that AI could undermine trust in information, thereby weakening democracy:

I think [AI] has a real impact on trustworthiness and news, especially. I think if you look from a citizen perspective, there's a real risk that people start depending more on information they get individually

in their own individual AI chat made for them compared to going to a public news outlet and getting news from there. This could result in a lack of trust in news companies and just a reduction, further reduction on information integrity.

4.3 Union perspectives and activity

Union engagement with AI tends to be driven either by growing interest among their members and leadership or by technological and organisational changes initiated by employers without prior consultation with unions. Union activity is shaped both by present observations on AI's impact in the workplace and by positive and negative expectations, essentially future-oriented evaluations of AI's potential. Familiarity with AI is highly uneven and appears dependent on access to resources, union size, national context, and more. Such analytic distinction goes beyond the scope of this study. Despite their many differences, most interviewees stressed that they do not outright refuse the introduction of AI in the workplace. Therefore, even when formulating demands or discussing restrictions upon AI deployment, they emphasise that this should not be read as resistance to technological change. As Interviewee 15 notes "we've always been in the technology-positive lane to begin with". The understanding of AI as "inevitable" is sometimes inscribed into official unions positions. Interviewee 29 goes as far as to echo the popular narrative of an AI arms race. This determinist understanding of AI does not negate the acknowledgement of risks. As Interviewee 17 mentions:

Our position is that AI is unavoidable and we see potential in AI. So to us, the question is not to AI or not to AI. The question is "how to AI". We have seen examples of how AI can also improve the working environment, for example, it can reduce stress with workers and so on and so forth. But we also see the risk that unregulated AI is posing.

This quote encapsulates a shared feeling by a large part of our sample. While AI was seen as something necessarily here to stay, the way in which it is to be deployed in the workplace was not regarded as predetermined.

4.3.1 Union position and perspectives on AI

The majority of interviewees belong to unions that have either developed a clearly defined position on AI or are currently in the process of doing so. Only three interviewees represent organisations with neither an established position nor an ongoing process to develop one. Unsurprisingly, interviewees, reflecting different sectoral and national contexts, had different priorities around engaging with AI and employed different strategies for influencing it. Nonetheless, an overarching demand expressed by all of our interviewees was that workers need to be consulted and engaged with meaningfully when it comes to introducing AI in the workplace. In that sense, the question of lack of control was raised. Interviewee 14 expresses this shared concern in the following manner:

It's important to ... bring employees directly to the table and in such a way that they are truly involved, not just passengers in the back of the bus, in the last row. They belong at the front. They know their work... we need clear structures for participation in the implementation and planning of AI.

However, exactly how to achieve some degree of control was the subject of ongoing consideration. Nearly all the trade unions interviewed described themselves as trying to “catch up” with developments in AI. The following quote by Interviewee 30 is indicative of the pressure they are feeling:

We're still in the learning phase of this, we're still playing catch up ... to get our own understanding of AI in terms of where things are at and in terms of how we represent our members in the workplace. We're a lot better than we were a year ago ... there's still a bit of catching up to do in terms of understanding the direction that the technology is going to go and how we square that off with making sure that we have collective agreements in place that protect our members, future proofing them for the developments that are likely coming down.

Union positions, both evolving and defined, encompass a wide range of topics. Across the interviews, several themes were prevalent, including ensuring that AI is used for augmentation, transparency, sharing the benefits of AI with workers, protecting jobs, and ensuring human oversight of AI.

a) AI to be used for workers augmentation

This position is evidently linked with the previous one. Unions that have developed positions on AI, often argue that AI should be included as a tool supporting workers instead of replacing them. As Interviewee 29 mentions:

We as a union are looking at AI as a practical thing. AI can be used in journalism as a means of support, to support the journalists in their work, but not as a replacement of people, so to have a tool that's going to help you

In a similar vein, Interviewee 21 notes that this is the positive potential that the union sees on AI:

It is important to stress for us as a trade union we are not against the use of AI. In fact, we think that AI tools can be very useful tools complementary to the work of the workers.

Interviewee 24 makes the distinction more sharp in the following manner:

At the end of the day, if we start using AIs to make decisions on things, that's a red line. As a supporting tool, sharing information, making sure we find the information more easily, helping us to some extent do interpretations, that's valuable.

This leads to the next point of how unions define the need for human oversight often in conjunction with transparency and information rights.

b) Transparency-information rights

Due to the opaque nature of AI systems and the limited information offered by employers, trade unions develop demands around transparency and broad information rights. This includes information on what types of data are stored, how they are processed, what functions are taken over by AI, and many more aspects that relate to the daily operations of the workplace.

There are certain barriers to transparency and Interviewee 18 is critical of how management is simultaneously unwilling and perhaps unable to disclose meaningful information on the new systems that are being implemented:

The transparency just isn't there, and I think the people that we're dealing with in terms of HR managers, operations managers in the factories they don't really know about either. Like they're just told here, this is the new toy, get it up and running. And it's going to save us loads of money and we'll make more profits. That's it. So I think it has to be something that is an obligation on them to disclose these things.

Furthermore, transparency has numerous specific meanings, linked with different issues within each sector. For example, for Interviewee 27, part of a union that represents healthcare professionals, transparency is related to issues of liability:

There needs to be very much transparency around how it works. Clinicians need to be able to understand how the technology works. And then there very much needs to be a clear liability arrangement in place, I think, that if it ends up with widespread adoption as a clinical tool, then this presents a certain amount of risk for doctors in the workplace, because if they decide not to use it and use their own judgment, or if they use it and something happens, then, either way they are gonna face issues with liability.

Interviewee 21 links information rights with consultation while also stressing the collective dimension of said rights:

For us, the first idea is that we need to ensure collective rights, not only individual rights, collective rights of information on how the technologies are implemented at the workplaces. This is a key point.. So our first idea is to ensure this participation at the level of information.

Furthermore, the same Interviewee argues that transparency is substantive when it is complemented by the relevant technical expertise:

We should be entitled to receive information, but also should be entitled to have the support of a technical, external technical person, for example, an expert, just in order to be able to have a fully comprehensive understanding of the deployment of the AI system at the workplaces and their impact.

Interviewee 5 also expands on the notion that meaningful participation starts with information rights:

There'll be a set of principles that we have to operate by...what information the company gives us, what data they're collecting and how they're using it, what analytics are in the system, what's the next generation of these AI systems. So that there's a pool of information they'll bring at the beginning of the discussion, so that we can all get our heads around it. And that should make for more informative engagement.

c) Ensuring human oversight of AI

Transparency was often seen as a component of safeguarding human oversight over AI-driven decision making. Interviewee 31 makes this link clear:

What makes AI ethical is transparency. So you should be able to find out why that decision was made, because now the problem is that you don't know why that decision was made, and no one can let you know. And managers like to say that this decision was not made by me, it was the program that made this decision... It's very important that humans lead this whole process. It's not okay to let algorithms decide alone.

Overall, there is a consensus among our sample on the need to ensure human oversight over AI systems, particularly where systems affect workers or make decisions about them. According to Interviewee 15:

We push for a human-in-control approach. No matter when and where, you always need to have a person with the responsibility and mandate to look at things, change things, and override things. Especially when it comes to algorithmic management, it becomes even more important that a human is in control at some point.

This was especially important in areas such as recruitment and worker evaluation. Interviewee 5 argued that AI should never make decisions about hiring. More broadly, Interviewee 30 stressed that responsibility could not be delegated to an AI system:

The human factor has to stay central in this. They can't divest the responsibility to AI. The human part has to have the final say on that.

However, some unionists argued that human oversight alone is insufficient, particularly where humans technically retain control but lack meaningful capacity to influence decisions. Instead, Interviewee 19 called for workers and other affected groups to be involved in the design and implementation of AI systems:

There is a huge interest in ensuring that at all stages there is still human, not oversight, involvement. Human oversight is, in my view, private sector talk. ...There's so much happening around you that you're not able to input into all areas. So I think human involvement and co-design rather than this concept of oversight, it's much better.

These concerns point to a conception of human oversight that goes beyond having a person nominally "in the loop". For unionists, meaningful human control requires the authority to intervene, transparency about how systems operate and make decisions, the knowledge to act as an effective watchdog, and meaningful involvement in their design and implementation.

d) AI's benefits need to be shared with workers

While interviewees had no clear identifiers of AI's positive impact on companies' profitability, they clearly expressed the need for part of these profits to be shared with workers themselves. As Interviewee 14 notes:

Regarding AI solutions, I think the union statement is clear that this has added value for employees. Ultimately, even if we generate income or revenue through AI solutions, then that must flow back to the company in a way that benefits the people...the money generated, the earnings, must flow back, not only into new technological developments but also into the workforce for the employees

For Interview 24, sharing the benefits is part of a “responsible implementation” of AI, while also echoing the narrative of inevitability:

Responsible implementation is one of the big things. Labour unions have been through generations concerned with technical development and what that means for jobs. And we have never been successful in stopping technical development. So there's no point to be made here in sort of just standing on the brakes. We need to figure out how do we implement this responsibly and how do we make sure that we as workers actually share the benefits of it.

For Interviewee 8, sharing the benefits is an essential part of workers and unions being included in deliberation processes:

At the end of the day, this is meant to bring efficiency. And when we say efficiency, then we're talking about benefits and those benefits have to be shared. So, this is actually the main thrust of our position. We must ensure workers' involvement so that they can also ensure that it benefits the workers.

Sharing the benefits generated by AI can take various forms. For example, Interviewee 19 stresses the importance of reducing working time:

There are AI time dividends. So where AI generates genuine productivity gains, those gains must be shared with workers through reduced working time. So something like the four-day week, for example.

e) Safeguarding job security

As already mentioned, technological unemployment was a prevalent concern among trade unions and their membership. Justifiably, union positions on AI stress the importance of appropriate measures to ensure the smooth transition of workers displaced by technological change into new employment. As Interviewee 15 notes, this is a long-standing union position regarding technological changes:

Our challenge is to make sure that people can transition into those next positions. And then skills, training, lifelong learning becomes core of AI politics for us. This is not something that we have invented because of AI. We always had these positions, we have always demanded for on-the-job training, lifelong learning. It just becomes even more important now.

Interviewee 11 describes how union members' concerns are shaping the unions' evolving AI position on reskilling and their bargaining efforts:

They are a little bit scared about that because the finance sector has a big turnover, which means that people are there today, but they don't know what is going to be in the future. So they ask us to assist them, to try to introduce some text and articles with regards to training and how to maintain their role. This is what we are trying to do.

In a similar vein, Interviewee 8 argues that companies should bear the responsibility for “training and education” about AI:

the whole AI literacy chapter, which goes beyond the mere fact of workers being involved and trained on the technology, but that AI is really part of the catalogue of training courses which is offered by companies ... you have to get into the AI culture, including developing a critical view on the outcome of AI.

Interviewees developed a wide range of tactics in order to advance the position and demands of their organisations. The next subsection will examine them focusing specifically on their experiences around collective bargaining (4.3.3), and their engagement with national and supranational regulation (4.3.4).

4.3.2 Union Tactics

Unions deploy a wide array of tactics, reflecting the pressure to “catch up” with AI developments both more broadly and within their respective sectors. These activities primarily focus on building internal capacity and familiarising members with unions’ positions on AI. Furthermore, some organisations in our sample are involved in upskilling and reskilling initiatives, seeking to support their members in developing AI-related skills. On the other hand, more confrontational tactics, such as litigation and industrial action, are also present, albeit to a considerably lesser degree.

a) Building capacity and expertise

Most unions in our sample are engaged in some kind of capacity-building initiatives. These initiatives take diverse forms, ranging from allocating resources for future AI-related issues, to conducting research, educating members, and developing access to external expertise. In some cases, unions are acting pre-emptively, recognising that the scale and nature of AI-related challenges remain uncertain... As Interviewee 10 notes:

We passed an emergency motion at our conference ... to commit more resources and support to workers resisting substantial labour market displacement from AI, and significant changes in their working conditions related to AI ... that's intentionally vague to leave the door open for what it could be.

Producing knowledge through research

One of the most common ways to build capacity is the conduct of research and the publishing of reports aimed at both members of the union and the broader civil society. While a minority of unions had already produced research, most described it as a work in progress. Research typically takes the form of the establishment of a working group within the union, but various forms of collaborative efforts across unions and in relation with various consortia, foundations (Interviewee 13), and academic researchers (Interviewee 20) are also underway. This type of research typically aims to discover the sectoral implications of AI.

One common form of research was a survey of workers. As Interviewee 11 noted, these seek to “calculate and have statistics about the numbers of dismissal in every specific sector” but also to

gather qualitative data on how AI is impacting members' "health and ... Well-being." In a similar vein, Interviewee 22 described a survey on how "AI is being used by workers in [particular] sectors ... to see how our members see the way AI is used and their perceptions of it."

Research also extends to the existing policy environment. Interviewee 17 referred to the development of a "policy paper on algorithmic management." In this sense, unions are not only seeking to understand how AI is affecting workplaces, but also how existing regulatory frameworks apply to emerging technologies and where policy gaps may exist.

Educating members and representatives

Knowledge production is closely connected to a second capacity-building strategy: educating union members. This reflects a widely recognised lack of knowledge about AI among both workers and union representatives. As Interviewee 20 puts it, "I think first of all, we have to educate people".

A key part of this process is informing members of their rights. Interviewee 21 described a union report, called "a creative guide" as providing:

guidelines ... [about] how to face the introduction of AI technologies in the workplace. It's published publicly, so that the workers and the legal representatives can identify how a company is using this kind of technology and the main potential impacts and how to exercise these rights.

Other unions use more frequent methods of communication. Interviewee 12 speaks of a "weekly newsletter where we explain about the developments, but also about the ethical side, and about ... the threats, but also the possibilities".

While informing union members is significant, unions are particularly focused on educating shop floor workers' representatives on AI and see this as a crucial aspect of building capacity for future negotiations on AI with management. One union had produced a set "guidelines on AI and union work" (Interviewee 16) while another had "written a pretty substantial handbook in negotiating AI and digital integrity. It's like a 50-page training handbook" (Interviewee 15). Interviewee 14, part of a federation of unions, reports that they have already "trained over four hundred works council members to first raise awareness about the transfer of AI".

In one case, the union actually managed to arrange a meeting between union representatives and a Big Tech company's representatives: "organise at Microsoft a meeting for all my union representatives on AI and union work. And Microsoft showed, from the technology side, what they are seeing, doing, and what's coming" (Interviewee 16).

Mobilising external expertise

However, the lack of knowledge about AI within a union can render education difficult or impossible. In some cases, unions were able to avail of external expertise. One representative described how they held "a panel discussion about [AI], and we brought in some experts just to really kind of discuss the pros and the cons around AI, what the potential risks are, so that we could really kind of thrash it out a bit" (Interviewee 27).

In countries with a tradition of works councils, there is a legal-institutionalised right for unions to external expertise. Interviewees, drawing on recent adjustments to labour law, were able to pursue technical expertise on the shop floor level. As Interviewee 13 recounts how a legislation from 2021 applies to this:

If there will be a certain AI introduced and if a works council exists and needs assistance to assess, they can ask them. And this right to find external expertise on the question of AI is new. The law...was reformed in 2021. And...they established a legal requirement to consult experts when deploying AI. Because usually the Works Councils do not have the technical expertise and so they need support from outside

In a similar vein, Interviewee 16, coming from a different country, prioritises engaging with hired experts:

I have to deal with people who do not have the technological know-how, but do need to have the conversation about implementation. So how do you organise that? What are your rights? Well, for example, workers' councils in the Netherlands have a right to get an expert opinion. So one of the things I put in my guidelines is that you can request external experts to advise you on these matters. That's possible.

b) Upskilling initiatives

While interviewees largely consider upskilling to be a responsibility of employers and/or the state, many also report that unions themselves had developed such initiatives to support their members in acquiring AI-related skills. In some cases, this progresses as a collaboration between unions and existing programmes. As Interviewee 12 notes:

We have participated in different training ourselves and we have passed on this training and we have had in bigger and smaller formats, different kinds of one-day training, or just a couple of hours online...We probably need to put even more emphasis on that, even more training, go even more in depth with those trainings. We have also started to have some national programmes for upskilling in that area. And we encourage our members, the member unions, and their members to participate in those.

In some cases, union training may be focused on specific tools and types of AI systems. Interviewee 22 mentions that they are:

ensuring that our members are able to use the technology to be aware of the limitations, be aware of the opportunities, how to use AI agents, for example.... We also do training. We've done one for freelance journalists on how to use different AI agents, how to use [Big Tech LLM] and other AI tools that they could find useful. And we also give support to our members to create their own training. So for example, our members in [country] recently did a training on how their own journalists can use AI.

In this case as well, unions particularly target shop floor representatives. As Interviewee 17 notes this initiative has been a success:

We, as a union, also try to upskill the shop stewards as they play a key role both in collecting the local agreements and they play a key role in company policies and cooperation agreements... To my understanding at least, people are thrilled because shop stewards in general are not young. Their

relationship with technology is difficult. So they are aware that this is coming and they as shop stewards feel some kind of responsibility yet they don't use it themselves. And I think that's one of the main reasons why they seek education in the matter.

Unsurprisingly, training and upskillings depend on resources and unions find themselves lacking the necessary funding to continue upskilling sessions or to engage with them on a larger scale. Interviewee 20 expresses some frustration on the matter:

We've been organising trainings for two years... Unfortunately, the public funding we got stopped like a year ago. We cannot offer those trainings any longer, which is especially difficult for freelancers that have no access to training by big companies. We have been asked a couple of times, "those were good trainings, will there be any trainings in the near future", etc. But at the moment, we don't have that much perspective.

Interviewee 15 treats this as an issue of competing organisational priorities that cannot be easily resolved:

We also have done a couple of online training courses that've been saved, so it's easily accessible for anyone who logs in. And so we do what we can, but it's again, it's like it's a lot of work to capacitate 34,000 people when they have other issues to care about as well. I mean, I'm not the only one trying to push for my issues to be incorporated into our internal learning structure. A lot of people do what I do with their issues.

Nonetheless, upskilling should not be treated as a straightforward or fast process. Beyond the issue of resources, it is also about people's availability and willingness to engage with new skills and knowledge on new technologies. Discussing the company's responsibilities, Interviewee 5 notes that "the company will have to in some way incentivise people as well, because you can't just use a big stick to force people to upskill themselves". In a similar vein, Interviewee 14 sees a larger issue with lifelong learning:

Everyone's always talking about lifelong learning. I find that completely difficult, because try telling a 55-year-old they should be learning for life. Some people might just laugh at you.

c) Industrial action and litigation

As demonstrated above, unions have so far tended to favour non-confrontational tactics, prioritising efforts to familiarise themselves with AI and build expertise across different levels of their organisations. However, in some cases, interviewees described situations in which tensions had escalated and unions had resorted to more confrontational approaches.

Strikes

Instances of **industrial action** were limited within our sample. Interviewee 10 pointed to the rise of AI-related layoffs in their sector and growing frustration among rank-and-file members, which they believed could potentially lead to industrial action. They also made clear that their organisation was prepared to support workers: "We will support them in industrial struggle, industrial action, if they're willing and able to take it".

Interviewee 19 reported that their union had engaged in strikes that were at least partially related to AI and Interviewee 30, member of a union representing workers in the public sector and community services, notes that drivers' strikes were organised due to AI-powered surveillance and workers' monitoring:

And that has contrasted with our members saying, "These things have gone beyond simple tools to know where your vehicle is". You're now over managing me to the point where we've had trade disputes in a number of areas in the local authorities, in particular about the usage of them, where they have the fleets and so on. And we've had strikes in one or two areas over that. So that's the one I'd say that that's been the most contentious sort of ours up to this point, anyway.

It remains to be seen whether this kind of dispute can be resolved or if the proliferation of algorithmic management in the workplace will generate more tension and drive workers and unions to engage in strikes.

Litigation

On the other hand, **litigation** seems to be slightly more common across our sample. Interviewee 17 reports a case of litigation against local companies regarding AI surveillance tools:

We also, on behalf of our member unions, take a lot of cases to (the) Labour Court. And there is a hope and an expectation that we strategically choose this and find cases which can be used to, for example, to prove that using AI in surveillance is also covered by the control measurement agreement, if that makes sense. To use the court system to make sure that these new technologies are regulated through the existing legislation.

Interviewee 32, representing workers in the creative industries, reports preparing a lawsuit against a Big Tech company:

We are on the edge of starting a legal case against [Big Tech company] about the illegal use of the material of journalists and writers....and when it comes to this lawsuit, it's an interesting one. We team up together with the Writers Association here in [country], and the collective copyright organisation... We already addressed us to [Big Tech company] because of their illegal use of books and news articles feeding their [prominent LLM], feeding their large language program. And, and at the same time, we are organising a sort of campaign, together with the journalists and writers, to make them really aware that this is happening, and that they should collectively defend their rights.

In this case, organising workers and engaging in litigation are conceptualised in unison, as combined tactics to inform workers and also safeguard their rights. The question of litigation is indirectly linked to unions' familiarity with regulation, national and supranational legislation as well as lobbying. This is a distinct part of union activity around AI.

4.3.3 Collective bargaining and agreements

The importance of collective bargaining was stressed by all interviewees and while differences exist on the scope and reach of collective agreements, all interviewees consider collective agreements as a crucial governance mechanism. Some of them argued that collective bargaining around AI is not only important but should act as a prerequisite for AI deployment. As Interviewee 19 argues:

[There should be] No AI deployment without meaningful worker consultation, co-design, and collective bargaining. There's a difference between our view of consultation and the view of consultation that is to inform you that something is happening and possibly issue a press release before the meeting has even occurred. It's a joke a lot of the time. And so we have deliberately used specific examples like co-design so that we're involved at every stage of the process.

This is a more radical view that is at the same time highly critical of the tokenist manner of consultation with unions and also adds a more advanced idea of co-design, meaning active engagement of workers prior to AI deployment. In a similar vein, Interviewee 8 argues that:

We have to ensure that workers are involved not only in the deployment, but also in the design of AI, which is actually a challenge in Europe because in some countries you have very strong workers involvement, but it's not the case in other countries. But it's really important and the argument we are trying to use with employers is that if they don't do so, they face a massive backlash from workers.

For Interviewee 21, who is also in favour of conditional AI implementation, the goal is for unions to eventually be involved in a form of democratic-public control of AI:

We are very pretty much in favour of a public audit of AI systems. In [Country], we are participating in a committee for the supervision of artificial intelligence. We have an advisory body there. We think that, in many cases we should not be talking about individual human control, but collective human control and public human control.

In practical terms, only 5 interviewees reported the existence of collective agreements covering AI either on a sectoral or at an enterprise level; 2 out of 5 are unions representing workers in the finance sector, but our data do not allow further generalisations on this part. Regarding an existing collective agreement, Interviewee 1 describes it in the following way:

We have a collective agreement between the ... employers, the EU and ourselves through social dialogue on a set of principles around AI. And they would encompass things that we would like to have in our policy as well, fair usage, protection for people, good training, reskilling if people have a significant impact in terms of their roles...I think the challenge is to get the employers then to adhere to the agreement, or live up to the agreement. Because the people that sit across the table from us, they may not have visibility on a call centre manager who's been given this new tool AI and told "I want you to apply it now". So the people that we are negotiating with may not have that visibility, so there's an onus on us when we identify something as AI, for bringing that forward and saying, our agreement says that you're going to share the information with us, we need to understand what's the job implications of this, what's the skills retraining implications and so forth in relation to this.

For the Interviewee, the agreement itself represents an important step but it is an open challenge whether it will be implemented and whether the agreement will adapt to future technological changes. Interviewee 13 was more optimistic about their union's efforts so far and the precedents they are setting. As they note:

As a union, we can make agreements and these ideas were taken up to a certain degree. So there are at [Big Tech company], for instance, there's an agreement on how to use AI. There's a manifesto at the [prominent communication company] on AI from the company and the works council. So the manifesto, for instance, stipulates that the use of AI systems in the [communication company] must not have any negative impact on the safety, health, and fundamental rights of employees. For

example, while AI can make suggestions for personal decisions, it never makes the decision itself. This is an important thing in this manifesto.

Among interviewees that are just starting to formulate their union's plan for collective bargaining on AI, different strategies and approaches emerged. Interviewee 4, representing university professors, treated this as entirely new ground and expressed some uncertainty about the union's capacity to navigate it effectively:

If there's a collective agreement ... we'd be looking for it to be sort of academic-led, the protections for academics when they challenge people, students about abusing AI. I imagine that's what would be contained in it. I don't see it being along the lines of your typical collective agreement, where we'll do this. And you'll give us this in return for it. I don't know that use of AI is ever going to be some sort of bargaining tool for increasing wages for academics, I don't really see how yet. But we would consider some fairly robust procedures and protections within our own legislation and within our own agreements, protecting our members as it stands.

Nonetheless, many interviewees had already started to draft a plan and to prioritise certain aspects of their organisation's position on AI to be introduced in a collective agreement with employers. As Interviewee 11 mentions:

So our main work for this collective bargaining agreement is to improve training and to secure the professional process because we are in a phase when there is a lot of layoffs, dismissal and social plans etc. ... we can't include in this collective bargaining everything we want and it's a negotiation... our main focus for now is to improve the work condition through securitisation of employment and to improve the package and the budget for training because a lot of people when they are dismissed at 50 to be employed elsewhere.

A divergence among our sample can be noted here. While a lot of our interviewees are seeking ways to introduce AI into new collective agreements, other interviewees tend to see it as a topic that is potentially covered by pre-existing agreements that contain clauses on new technology. As Interviewee 17 argues:

I think it was 1991, an agreement. [union] and the employers called the control measurement agreement, and it covers all of the private sector covered by collective agreements. And this agreement is technology neutral. So it says when new technology is implemented to control or survey or any of the likes, the workers should be heard and it should be transparent and it should be appropriate. And so we are right now discussing whether to update this agreement to include AI.

In a similar vein, Interviewee 15 is confident that no new agreements specifically targeted at AI are necessary. For them, the challenge is to apply past agreements on the profits to be generated by AI:

We haven't invented many new things because AI has entered ... we have this general idea of how we want to regulate the labour market...AI seems to fit into that bill. We don't have to invent a lot of new wheels here. We don't write new collective bargaining agreements. On the contrary, our regulation is technology-neutral and technology-agnostic, because what we negotiate are outcomes ... it falls back to the technology neutrality of everything. We do not negotiate outcomes of AI systems. We negotiate bottom-line profits. We see that these companies will profit this much, then we can

demand this much percentage wage increase, irrespective of how this productivity increase manifests.

On the same topic, Interviewee 18 is unsure about past agreements capability to engage with AI:

The challenge for us is that a lot of the collective agreements we have date back to the 1970s, the 1980s, and there's a lot of clauses in those collective agreements that means we adopt technology unreservedly, essentially. Now, at the time, obviously, that was brought in for a purpose and there was an understanding of what that technology would mean for people. And that's completely changed now...And equally, again, there's a great reluctance to go back on a collective agreement, because there'll be loads of things in there we like.

Essentially, the question is whether AI should be treated as a novel technology that presents unions with a distinct set of challenges, or whether existing agreements governing the introduction of new technologies in the workplace can also be applied to AI. The latter position should not be readily dismissed. Past agreements may reflect a more favourable balance of power for trade unions and, consequently, contain stronger protections for workers. It is therefore understandable that trade unionists may be reluctant to relinquish past, hard won gains and rights.

For Interviewee 22, who represents a federation of trade unions across the EU, both approaches are valid and are currently being pursued by its member unions:

We also try to look at how AI is being introduced in collective bargaining by our members. There are those who have agreements that touch on digital tools and how they should be used. So some of our members just use that same philosophy to AI, but some others are trying to get new collective agreements that touch upon how AI is being used.

Nonetheless, despite some isolated successes, most of our interviewees report frustrated efforts and limited success in bringing AI to the bargaining table. Interviewee's 24 reply when asked if they have negotiated AI-related clauses in recent agreements is indicative:

No, I would say not with that particular focus. And I would say not for the lack of trying. It's been that discussion. It's not here yet. Now, [country] has quite strict laws in implementation and processes in this regard, but beyond that, no, nothing in collective bargaining has been successful..

This leads to the question of barriers to collective bargaining around AI.

Barriers to collective bargaining

Barriers to collective bargaining identified by interviewees can be summarised into three broad categories:

- A) Lack of willingness and/or capacity from employers to negotiate
- B) Lack of resources within the union
- C) Broader structural limitations

Regarding the employers' stance, the underlying issue essentially concerns control over the labour process. Employers tend to regard the introduction of new technologies in the workplace as a managerial prerogative, as it relates to matters of productivity and profitability. This creates a fundamental tension, as there is no clear consensus between employers and trade unions regarding the scope of collective bargaining, and whether AI should be subject to it at all. Interviewee 21 describes the unions' challenges in this manner:

The employers' organisations, I remember very well because it was very illustrative. They say any company has the right to use algorithms and AI tools without the interference of governments or the interference of trade unions. That's the key challenge we have.

In a similar vein, Interviewee 24 mentions that they are prepared to meet resistance from employers when it comes to negotiating about sharing the benefits created by AI. They anticipate that management and workers will have different priorities:

We are also prepared that this will meet quite staunch resistance from the employer because they probably believe that to stay competitive, they will have to reap all the benefits for the shareholders. And so that's going to be a major task for us going forward.

Interviewee 5 was slightly more optimistic, suggesting that the employer will make the major decisions about which systems to adopt and how they will be used, but that they would involve the union in discussions after adoption:

I suppose there's going to be a bit of a tussle about where the interaction point should start with the company. I mean, they will want to reserve the right to kind of decide themselves what AI functions they want, when they buy it, and how they develop it. And they very much see that our role then would be in discussing the rollout of it and the impact it might have on jobs and the training requirements that there may be.

Even Interviewee 1, belonging to an organisation that has successfully negotiated a collective agreement on AI, still considered the employer's reluctance to discuss AI to be a continuous challenge. They suggested that employers are unwilling to agree to clauses that will place limitations on future technologies and potential changes in the workplace:

I think the fact that it's such a new technology builds in a reluctance on employers to agree to something that in six months' time they might have an "oh my god moment" and say "we should never have agreed to that". So there is an overarching fear of "we don't want to limit ourselves here", "we want to make sure that we get the most out of it".

There were some notable exceptions to this trend coming from specific countries, with interviewees reporting that employers are keen to regulate AI and seek mutually satisfactory solutions. Interviewee 14 reports on this and considers that employers' stance is also dependent upon unions' expertise:

There's a strong willingness among companies to regulate this, to clarify it, to create good, reliable framework conditions...Where management is more reserved and we have active, competent workers'

representatives, so it also has something to do with the works councils' level of knowledge, they act as drivers and, through the workforce, manage to get management to take action.

Beyond the question of willingness, interviewees sometimes identified a lack of capacity from employers to meaningfully negotiate AI. This was based on the same issue of opacity/lack of transparency identified as a barrier to unions themselves. For Interviewee 1, both sides of the labour-management relation were considered to have significant gaps in knowledge: "the people across the table from us wouldn't be subject matter experts no more than we are". Interviewee 16 is even more critical of employers that want to introduce AI systems without having adequate understanding of them:

The question is what kind of discussion should you have at these tables? Which is very important everywhere, because we've noticed over and over again that employers themselves have no idea.

Lack of knowledge about AI was also highlighted as a problem within unions. Interviewee 5 described the the challenge of a lack of knowledge about AI:

realistically, we'll have to learn it ourselves or we will have to buy it in, right? And I'm not keen to do that. There aren't a whole lot of trade union collective bargaining experts on AI... This is the curse of the longtime trade union official: you think you have to know everything about everything so that you can understand it if you're in negotiations about it. If you don't fully understand it, you just can't be effective.

On the other hand, Interviewee 15 considers the problem to lie at the shop floor level and the limited realisation of workers' representatives that AI needs to be addressed.

I think the barrier is mainly workplace-level knowledge of how these issues should be tackled, but also that they are issues that should be tackled. I think our main issue is that neither our local reps or their employers have an understanding that they need to put this on the table.

Interviewee 18 is demonstrating the interplay between lack of expertise and insufficient resources for obtaining said expertise:

in terms of the shop floor representatives [and] the full-time union officials, and I include myself in that, are not really tooled up to understand [AI] properly... there is definitely the lack of resources available to us in terms of the collective bargaining process for training people and so on. We are doing what we can...but for it to happen on a scale... Like, in any given year, we will do anywhere between 100 and 150 pay agreements in the division. We're talking about 20 odd staff, maybe. So, there really needs to be a kind of institutional strengthening of the collective bargaining process, which would ultimately mean tooling us up.

For Interviewee 31, it is both a question of priorities and resources for the unions and, more importantly, of a fundamental reorientation of trade union activity to engage with AI:

It's also a question for the trade union resources. So most of the trade unions don't have enough financial and human resources to deal with this topic. So that's why I think, and it's not a marketing thing, but that's why our work is very important, at least to dive into this topic and try to raise awareness and try to speak about it as much as possible. Because what we see is that there are not

so many examples right now of commerce trade unions negotiating on AI. But it should be, because the risk is huge.

This quote is also indicative of the somewhat contradictory position in which our interviewees find themselves. They are union officials who actively represent the positions of their respective organisations, but in most cases they are also responsible for leading their organisations' engagement with AI. In this capacity, their responses also reflect their own perspectives on how their organisations should adapt and devote greater attention and resources to AI.

Regarding broader structural limitations to collective bargaining, interviewees identified issues within national contexts that facilitate employers' refusal to negotiate. As Interviewee 18 notes:

We have a purely voluntary system ... so you have a factory where there's no union and they decide we want one and they approach us. And we'll organise everybody. If we write to the employer, they'll ignore us. We then take a case to the labour court... The company either won't show up or they might send a letter saying that we don't want to deal with these people. So the only way we can enforce it is by going on strike... But often workers aren't prepared to take that action to get it.

In a similar way, Interviewee 10 considers the voluntary system as potentially leading to conflict as a way to force employers into negotiations:

We don't have that leverage or pathway in the private sector in [country]. In the voluntary system, there's no way for private sector workers to have a seat at the table when it comes to these transitions...I guess our approach is based on "well, where there are points of struggle and contention, where workers are willing to resist how these tools are used, or management decisions related to them, be it headcount or job profiles?" We will support them in industrial struggle, industrial action, if they're willing and able to take it.

It should be noted that interviewees do not consider these limitations as absolute but contingent on workers' willingness to engage in industrial action.

A more challenging obstacle relates to the way European companies introduce AI in the first place. In many cases, European enterprises purchase ready-made AI solutions developed by US Big Tech companies, deepening technological dependency while having limited understanding of how these systems operate. Interviewee 16 paints a bleak image of this issue:

We could talk about transparency, but there is no transparency. So, the employer doesn't know it, just as the employee doesn't know it. So it's a giant black box for both sides, so it's not a debate, it's more like how can we get it more transparent, that we actually understand what we're talking about. And then everybody is dependent on the companies who are providing the tools. So, in that sense, the AI Act hopefully will help at some point, but I'm not holding my breath.

Interviewee 5 shares a similar understanding of how employers operate and is pessimistic about unions' prospects:

Another barrier relates to the lack of transparency. It derives from the fact that employers mostly use AI or want to use AI that is not developed in-house; thus employers are not even in a position to

know about how their AI works, or bargain about how it should work. European unions cannot necessarily get US Big Tech to the table.

On the same topic, Interviewee 18 is highly critical of the power imbalance that shapes the introduction of new technologies:

Currently in terms of this stuff, it's a complete mismatch, particularly where the employers that are bringing [AI] in on a scale. Like, you're talking about [US Big Tech company] and [US Medical company] and like these companies are wealthier than nation states. And we're trying to fight our corner there. It's difficult... multinationals can be difficult because you often don't have the decision maker in the room sitting across the table from you, which always is a problem in a negotiation. And of course, the resources they have, to take us on if they wish, particularly in those that don't want to be unionised.

Overall, these limitations need to be interpreted as part of a broader weakening and displacement of unions as civil society actors. The longstanding tendency for unions to be marginalised in decision making processes is reflected on many of the challenges that our interviewees report. Interviewees 13 and 4 best encapsulate how this has an effect regarding AI. For Interviewee 13:

The biggest challenge is honestly, that we as unions are not really in the driver's seat on how AI is used. I'm just in another research project sponsored by [research institute], which focuses on the discourse on AI and analyses in the international media, what is discussed. And one first finding is that the unions are actors which are not focused on. What are unions, what are we talking about? What do I as a unionist think about AI is not a topic that you find in the big media. So it's really a problem that we are not in the driver's seat in the whole development.

Interviewee 4 recounts a frustrating experience with the exclusion of unions from policy discussions:

Now the people developing that policy, and I just looked through their names when I saw it first, I recognised a few of them, they're members of my own union [academics]. Which is great, I see that as a huge compliment. But we were never invited. The trade union representing the employees, the academics in the sector, were never invited for a contribution into the process at all. Now, we elbowed our way into it. And we got into one of the meetings and when I looked through the document, it listed all the stakeholders but education unions are not recognised as stakeholders.

4.3.4 Regulation-Legislation

For most trade unionists, it is crucial to ensure that employers are complying with both EU and national legislation when implementing new AI systems in the workplace. Interviewee 21, having significant knowledge on both contexts, clearly rejects deregulation of AI:

A very hot idea now at the European level, is the idea of regulation as an obstacle for innovation and competitiveness. For us as a trade union, it is quite the contrary. Regulation, allows you a more appropriate use of AI and AI technologies, ensuring the more democratic governance of these technologies.

A similar concern is expressed by Interviewee 8, who feels that the AI Act as enacted was weakened, when compared to its early formulations. They nonetheless see its EU-level regulations, alongside that of the GDPR, as essential, if limited in the impact:

There is also a very strong ethical dimension in AI. Hence the AI Act, or now what is left of the AI Act, also the importance of the GDPR, the question of consent, the use of personal data...So there again, we need to make sure that there is some collective protection

Nonetheless, the topic of regulation is one on which our sample is highly divided. A large part of interviewees were either unfamiliar with supranational developments in AI legislation or had only recently begun to develop knowledge of the regulatory landscape. A pattern emerges where familiarity with regulation is closely related to unions' size and available resources. Larger organisations and trade union federations often demonstrated considerable familiarity with regulatory developments, while smaller organisations struggle to keep pace with a rapidly evolving environment. This disparity extends to lobbying and policy advocacy, which are resource-intensive activities and, for some unions, remained beyond their immediate priorities and organisational capacity.

a) Supranational regulation and lobbying

The supranational regulation was the point of focus for most interviewees, with references to the AI Act, the Platform Work Directive, and the GDPR. For some interviewees, the supranational level of regulation is considered the most important. As Interviewee 12 argues:

I think it's a European Union-level thing to regulate. It's very difficult to regulate it on a national level ... we're definitely too small of a country to regulate something inside of us

For Interviewee 15, the issue with national politics is that policymakers are mostly focused on adopting AI and not regulating it:

We engage as much as we can on the nation level. But interestingly, on the national level, there isn't that much legislation to be done. I mean, national politics are like "we really want AI to happen, like this is a good thing", but they do not control workplace lifelong learning. They do not control the AI Act. And at the same time, AI is an issue, just like gender equality, like it fits everywhere, nowhere"

Union activity also includes lobbying and efforts to apply pressure upon EU institutions. Unionists are trying to embed aspects of their position into concrete regulation. As Interviewee 21 notes:

We are trying to push for a specific regulation at the European level, but also at the national level

For this purpose, the leadership of larger organisations is particularly active, while unions with sufficient resources seek to engage with a range of actors. This includes coordination with other unions within the same sectors, national trade union confederations, and the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC), as well as engagement and negotiation with larger employer organisations. Such a multi-level approach is considered critical for achieving actual impact. As Interviewee 4 recounts:

Well, I suppose I have probably 3 areas that I work in internationally. One would be just with the trade unions, [international institution]. Then the second would be the [committee in Europe], so that's with the employers across Europe and the trade unions across Europe. I sit on that committee as well, and then I sit on the committee, the [European institution]. So, in all three of those arenas, some directly with employers, some just with trade unions, there's a lot wider concerns coming up than the concerns that are being voiced by our members locally

In a similar vein, Interviewee 12 speaks of engagement with international institutions like the OECD:

We have participated in ETUCs, the European Trade Union Confederations, different discussions and meetings on that topic. Also OECD to act as the Trade Union Advisory Committee to OECD. So we are participating in different work groups on that topic.

Larger unions of our sample had already engaged in lobbying regarding the safeguards to be included in the AI Act. As Interviewee 13 notes:

Well, we as a union did lobbying prior to the introduction of the AI Act, as we usually do this on several topics on European regulation.... then we organise our lobbying and usually, particularly also in this case, together with the [Confederation]. Because it's not a question that is focusing only on a certain branch...but because the AI topic influences every branch, and so we usually do this together with the [Confederation].

Similarly, Interviewee 14 recounts their engagement with the AI Act through the national confederation of unions:

Of course, the unions exert influence, and did exert it back then, mainly through the [national confederation], on the various regulations concerning the EU AI Act.

Nonetheless, sometimes, interviewees reported feeling excluded as the EU has different priorities than engaging with workers' rights. Interviewee 26, part of a union representing creative workers, suggested that the EU's desire for its own domestic AI champions itself posed a barrier to effective regulation for their sector:

I wouldn't say the Commission is listening to us as much as we would like. We have a general feeling that because of the geopolitical considerations and the desire to push for European champions that could have the possibility to compete with China, the US, they won't pay too much attention to the creative sector because they believe the European AI sector should be given priority because of these geopolitical considerations

Interviewee 32 also considered lobbying as potentially fruitful but also challenging due to the presence of an opposing side:

Yeah, we definitely are [lobbying].... But it's a difficult one, because the lobby is on both sides, of course. I mean, the tech companies are lobbying as well.

Regarding their demands and expectations from EU regulation, unions largely seek clear safeguards for workers and limitations on companies' use of AI that infringes upon their rights. As Interviewee 8 mentions:

Basically, we are asking policy makers to adopt or to propose such legislation in order to regulate private companies. I mean, that would be the idea that we have enough protection, safeguards and tools for workers that can limit, prevent the negative effects of AI and ensure that there is a fair share of the benefits of AI

For Interviewee 21, that means resisting deregulation tendencies and focusing on privacy, limits to surveillance, and transparency and information rights for workers. For them, this is what distinguishes a European model of AI adoption from dominant international actors:

So we try to make a lot of effort in this. But I must say that now we are facing a wave of deregulation by the European Union...An idea that is a very hot idea now at the European level, is the idea of regulation as an obstacle for innovation and competitiveness. For us as a trade union, it is quite the contrary.

We think that the European Union, as a geographical region, should have technological sovereignty. But at the same time, we should enforce the deployment of these technologies that do not affect fundamental rights. We are talking about fundamental rights, the right to not to be discriminated against, the right of your intimacy not to be monitored, or surveilled, beyond certain limits, and so on...And under the AI Act, we also are entitled to receive information about this. And I think that this issue of transparency should be very important at the European level as a way to deploy different AI implementation regarding the US model or the Chinese model.

Interviewee 26 also stresses the importance of transparency obligations and has mixed feelings about AI Act's safeguards on this:

I think we managed to have some influence over the AI Act, maybe less so about its implementation and the aspects such as the transparency obligations and how the European Commission has developed its guidelines for AI companies. So we're not fully satisfied with the result because there are many exemptions and the obligations are not as strict as we hoped they would be.

For Interviewee 18, the factor that is undermining European regulation on transparency is the geopolitics of the AI industry:

There should be some kind of obligation on the employer to share a level of detail. Yeah, that sounds great, me saying it, but then I know you get into property rights and the American Chamber of Commerce lobby and all that sort of stuff, so it's a real challenge for us, no doubt.

Moving beyond the AI Act, 2 interviewees (8 and 21) are actively advocating for a broad directive on algorithmic management which will expand the protections afforded by the Platform Work Directive to all workers subjected to algorithmic management. Interviewee 8 argues that:

In a nutshell, we are demanding a directive on algorithmic management, based on the provision of the platform directive. So the platform directive has a chapter on algorithmic management, but it's only restricted to platform workers. And what we see now is that algorithmic management, of course,

b) National regulation and lobbying

Evidently, interviewees often reported engaging with national regulation and trying to apply pressure to national politicians. A few interviewees seemed to prefer to engage at the national level; for example, Interviewee 14 argues for more nation-specific regulation:

I don't think you can prescribe that [regulations] across the board...And there are regulations where I think: Come on, guys, that's really over the top, that's unacceptable. Not everyone understands that. Not all cultures in Europe understand it the same way.

Furthermore, in contrast to other interviewees that focus on AI, Interviewee 17 underplays its importance for workers:

The AI Act will play a more advisory role, because it's technically not a labour market law. So it's far from us.

For interviewees, it is important that they are not starting from scratch, as existing national legislative frameworks provide an important foundation for governing AI at work. As Interviewee 21 reports:

In fact, we have legal support because of the regular law. We have in [country], work councils that are entitled to receive information about the parameters, the rules, and instructions of the algorithm management system if they affect working conditions. In many cases, we have to go to the labour inspection or even to the courts just in order to reclaim the excess that they actually gave. This is the key point, information.

On this note, Interviewee 16 notes how national labour law provides concrete protections of workers' rights that are more robust than the AI Act:

The Workers' Council Act in [country] already gives an advisory right, or even an agreement right to workers' council. So our Workers' Council law is already stronger than what the AI Act gives workers' councils. In general as a workers' council, you can stop the implementation of AI. Because you can even argue that the employer of the management should ask advice first from the Workers' Council before implementing.

These quotes, alongside what was discussed above on supranational regulation, demonstrate a potentially emerging mistrust or disillusionment with the AI Act among trade unionists. It is possible that given a pre-existing framework that established safeguards against unregulated introduction of AI, trade unionists expected a more advanced intervention by the AI Act. Nonetheless, the large majority of our sample affirms the need for supranational governance and advocates for multi-level regulation with different levels acting in a complementary manner to protect workers' rights. For Interviewee 31, it is clear that:

We definitely need better European regulation, but also not European regulation, but country level regulation.

In a similar manner, Interviewee 21 describes how their union operates:

To sum up, [we work] in two levels. First, we are trying to push for a specific regulation at the European level, but also at the national level. At the European level through the European [organisation] for a specific directive, or in the case of [country] for specific regulation on the use of algorithm management and AI tools at the workplaces. I think it's important.

Interviewees report that engaging with policymakers at the national level is also challenging and requires commitment of resources and time. Interviewee 29 reports that this is a high priority for union leadership but also a field where coordination is essential:

Especially, the head of our organisation is always trying to engage with all types of politicians, politics, especially on the national level. But it's tough. These people there, everybody wants their ear, everybody wants something from them, and they have a limited amount of time. So we're doing our best. Not going to say that we've had no amount of success...and especially in this field, I think we should tag along with other organisations and work together, like other unions or other people in the creative sector, because we can't do it all by ourselves.

Interviewee 9 also reports some success in engaging with national policymakers:

But, basically, the first meeting of it, sponsored by the Minister, was yesterday, so there were 41 stakeholders at it. We were one of the stakeholders. In fairness, they thanked us at the start that we were the driving force behind it, and you can see it at the start of the [relevant document].

As deliberation is at an early stage in most countries, interviewees were mostly focused on "getting a seat at the table" and making sure that their participation is meaningful. Interviewee 19 expresses the desire for meaningful involvement in official meetings and working groups:

There's an argument by us that this [government] subgroup on AI needed to be established. It's now being established and we have written to the [politician] through [union]. There goes the co-design aspect from our point of view from concept to delivery. So if there's going to be an AI group at a high level...we would like to be part of not just the group, but what the group looks at, what its outcomes are supposed to be, and all that kind of stuff.

This concern derives from previous experience of unions being excluded from deliberation:

The [government] AI committee published a report in which they talked about the use of AI in public service and they never invited public service unions in to make a contribution to that discussion (Interviewee 19).

c) Identified gaps in regulation

As already mentioned, interviewees expressed concerns that unions are often excluded from deliberation processes and are not consulted on impending changes or, when they are included, that consultation is merely tokenistic. Furthermore, interviewees identified specific gaps in existing regulation at both the national and supranational levels. As might be expected, this is

contingent on unions' resources and familiarity with the regulatory landscape; unionists with greater knowledge of existing regulation are better positioned to identify shortcomings in the framework.

For Interviewee 16, the AI Act is too abstract, does not pay attention to the specific details of AI implementation in the workplace and the standardisation procedures in place do not apply for organisations deploying AI:

The EU is not thinking about the implementation part. So they are trying to get a technological product approved for the EU market based on the AI Act. But we're not having a conversation yet about the use ... and transparency ... and implementation in the workplace itself... The standardisation helps in following the law, but does not give you the ability to actually be in compliance with the law... The standardisation is mostly around developers from what I've seen. And not so much the implementation of AI. And I'm not sure if the implementers are sitting at the table of the standardisation for the developers.

Interviewee 26, discussing AI's impact on the creative industries, is critical of the AI Act for failing to adequately protect copyright or address the damage already caused by AI companies:

So does the EU framework protect performers sufficiently? I don't think so, because it shouldn't be a right to opt out. It should certainly be an opt-in. And all the creators should have been recognised the right to authorise or prohibit. And because of this opt-out mechanism, a lot of scraping has occurred that cannot be undone, and it's going to be quite difficult to compensate properly if we talk about compensation, because, I mean, some artists might prefer not to have their contents used at all by AI, and now it's too late for all the repertoire that was already available somehow on the internet. Everything has been scraped

On the other hand, Interviewee 14 welcomes the AI Act but notes specific gaps in attribution of liability. The answer for them lies in collective bargaining:

The EU AI Act is already putting pressure on companies. It's actually a good thing it exists. Companies are already feeling compelled to act; after all, we have to do something...We haven't even seen the major liability issues yet, the first big lawsuits concerning liability claims arising from AI errors. Who assumes liability? Who pays? Who is responsible if someone is harmed? We don't have any of that yet. So it will take some time before we get there, but I believe that in the future, we as unions will have to negotiate these issues hard in collective bargaining agreements.

For Interviewee 19, the main issue with national policy documents is a refusal to acknowledge trade unions and workers as stakeholders in the implementation of AI. According to them, this leads to overlooking the necessary measures for workers' rights:

Then there's a document...it makes a single reference to engaging with unions in the use of AI in the workplace over 100 pages. And it's very specifically restricted... And similarly, the commission on AI is similarly restrictive and poor on the idea that workers would be at all involved in these changes. It's just really, really poor....And it's coupled with an unwillingness at some stages to even recognise the value of engaging with workers. And certainly there is not a track record of adequate engagement with workers on a string of issues. And then also absolutely everything needs reform. I think the

safeguards that we're talking about in the red lines that we're talking about are critical in that kind of environment.

Overall, interviewees were able to identify sector-specific issues and provide an outline of what meaningful engagement between policymakers and trade unions should entail. They were also aware of narrow-symbolic forms of participation and actively rejected them. However, only a small proportion of our sample was able to engage with the nuances and complexities of the AI Act and the broader EU regulatory framework. Once again, organisational size and resources emerged as crucial factors.

Section 5: Limitations

The primary limitation of this study is that workers' experiences and attitudes were largely mediated through trade union representatives. While engaging with unionists provided valuable insights into the experiences and concerns of workers across different sectors and contexts, it means that the report does not draw directly on workers' lived experiences. As such, the findings should be understood as reflecting union representatives' perceptions of workers' lived experiences, rather than first-hand accounts from workers themselves. Future research could address this limitation through direct engagement with workers, including through large-scale surveys, interviews, or focus groups.

The study also has limitations in terms of worker representation. The reliance on trade union networks means that some groups of workers are less visible in the research, particularly those in under-unionised sectors, regions, and communities or workers in non-standard forms of work. This includes gig workers, freelancers, people in informal employment, unemployed persons, students, and other workers in forms of employment where union membership and representation may be less established. Their experiences and perspectives may differ significantly from those captured through trade union representatives.

Finally, the research was conducted across multiple European contexts, but participation was limited by language accessibility. Interviews and engagement were conducted in English, Greek, Romanian, and German, meaning that workers and union representatives who could not participate in these languages were not directly represented. This may have further limited the geographical and social diversity of perspectives captured in the study. The complexity of the various national contexts within the EU, combined with the need to anonymise research means that analytic specificity here is limited. To build on this work, the ideas about and impacts of AI need to be examined in particular local contexts.

Section 6: Discussion

While AI has driven a sense of anxiety and uncertainty amongst many workers, these fears are largely rooted in future expectations rather than ongoing disruption. The European trade unionists interviewed in our study did not report widespread radical change or mass technological unemployment. However, this does not mean that AI is not being adopted. While the extent and nature of adoption unsurprisingly varies from sector to sector, almost all interviewees reported it being used by either workers or management in their sectors.

Interviewees articulated how labour processes are being reconfigured in diverse, if not revolutionary, ways. Many interviewees described the use or articulated a desire to use AI to automate mundane tasks and repetitive aspects of work. Some thought that in doing so it might also improve the quality of work. However, interviewees also worried that AI adoption could lead to job loss, the intensification of work, and perhaps most concerningly, the loss of control of workers over their work. This was expressed most typically in terms of human oversight or choice. The idea that machines would make important decisions was rejected by all interviewees.

One insight that emerges from this study is that while European trade unions recognise AI as a topic deserving of immediate attention, they tend to lack the resources they perceive as necessary to adequately address it. Interviewees expressed a sense of urgency around developing capacity and expertise on the subject, unanimously expressing an anxiety about being perceived as Luddites. They tended to align with dominant, technologically deterministic narratives about the inevitable spread of AI across all sectors of the economy, yet they did not accept that benefits to workers would necessarily result from this.

Almost all interviewees reported some degree of engagement with AI and having developed, to varying levels of detail, their union's perspective and demands around AI. The degree of preparedness depends heavily on sectoral characteristics, union resources and national labour laws. Sectors with low levels of digital maturity reported overall lower engagement with AI, pushing it further down their organisations' list of priorities. On the other hand, unions and union federations with greater access to resources and favourable legal contexts were able to collaborate with research institutions, hire experts, develop detailed positions, and, in some cases, begin training their members and shop-floor representatives. In these cases, the goal is twofold: to foster a deeper understanding of AI in members and to develop technical skills to utilise it and guide its deployment.

Nonetheless, the relation of European trade unions to AI is largely one of reaction. Interviewees described their unions as trying to catch up with the rise of AI and its adoption in the workplaces of their members, whether this is occurring in a bottom-up fashion by tech-savvy workers or through initiatives taken by employers. This reactive position was predominantly articulated in terms of an opacity or a lack of transparency around AI. The opacity around AI was multifarious. Interviewees cited the technical opacity of algorithmic management

systems, the types of data collected and processed by AI, how AI models make decisions, surveillance in the workplace, among others.

They also described two kinds of social opacity involved in AI adoption, where the opaque function of AI models was further cloaked in an operational opacity deriving from a lack of understanding of AI on the parts both of the union and of the employers who are deploying it. This opacity can limit union dialogue with the employer as neither party really knows what is going on. A further sense of opacity derived from the dominance of US Big Tech firms in the AI industry. This sense of opacity is social—and political—as it results from the refusal of Big Tech companies to disclose information they consider to be essential trade secrets.

This tripartite sense of opacity around AI was expressed most clearly in our interviewees discussions around AI and collective bargaining. Collective bargaining is a key means by which disputes between workers and employers are resolved, typically in the form of collective agreements. Collective bargaining on AI was until recently only something discussed in the abstract by academics (De Stefano, 2019, 2020; Aloisi & Gramano, 2019) but as this study shows, it is now a reality. While only a minority of our interviewees reported having established a collective agreement pertaining to AI, for the large majority of our sample this was a clearly defined goal for the immediate future. This reflects broader international tendencies on collective bargaining (Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, 2025). Yet, the path to a collective agreement was obscured by the three types of social opacity around AI: a) a lack of understanding AI within the union, b) a lack of understanding combined with a lack of willingness to bargain on the part of the employer, and c) US Big Tech companies being wholly beyond the reach of European collective bargaining.

The first two types of opacity relate to broader, longstanding trends in labour management. With the rise of precarious employment, and the weakening of trade unions and post-war safeguards for workers, unions have been increasingly strapped for resources and employers increasingly reluctant to engage with unions and concede limits to their managerial prerogative (Moody, 2017). This dynamic has become even more pervasive in the post-2008 environment, where companies operate under increasing competitive pressures and view AI, and new technologies more generally, as a means of increasing productivity and expanding their market share. Our findings indicate that employers' stance towards bargaining over AI oscillates between outright refusal to negotiate and tokenistic forms of union participation. If this approach persists, and given that AI is becoming increasingly widespread and its effects more strongly felt by workers, tensions can be expected to rise. These tensions are further exacerbated by the third type of opacity and related issues of digital sovereignty, particularly when European employers adopt AI technologies that they themselves do not fully understand or control. This can create a situation in which AI is largely beyond the reach of collective bargaining. For instance, a collective agreement with a European employer which relies on OpenAI's models will not be able to intervene if the US government mandates a "kill switch" and cuts cloud access to countries or firms it deems contrary to American interests (Rudolph, 2025).

Opacity in its various forms thus motivates European trade unions to have an interest in labour law and regulation as a means of influencing AI adoption. This means that across Europe, trade unions face widely differing prospects for increasing their influence on AI. Interviewees from

countries where a voluntary union membership system is in place reported that employers' unwillingness to bargain is particularly high. On the contrary, interviewees from countries with stronger frameworks for organised labour felt more confident in their efforts to negotiate around AI in the workplace. Interviewees tended to view EU regulations about AI as a promising start, but expected little from them in the way of collective bargaining as they do not pertain specifically to labour. Overall, interviewees treated regulation as a necessary, but not sufficient, condition for protecting workers' rights amid AI adoption. In their view, regulation has the potential to strengthen unions and workers and facilitate collective bargaining by establishing specific obligations for employers introducing AI systems in the workplace. Regulation is seen as a multidimensional process that works best when different levels are aligned: supranational regulation, national labour law, and sector-specific collective agreements are all considered essential and complementary by our interviewees. Within this effort, different organisations have divergent priorities, with some arguing for the primacy of lobbying at the EU level, while others consider the national level more favourable for trade unions to exert pressure and influence policy. Yet, they pointed out that even national regulation could be influenced by geopolitics and wide-ranging efforts of US interests to secure a favourable global environment for US capital.

We suggest that the situation of European trade unions can be understood as a reconfiguration of the question of control in the labour-management relation. Traditionally, the "frontier of control" (Woodcock, 2022) has been negotiated between workers and employers, with the state playing the role of third party, predominantly acting in favour of employers (Edwards, 1979). However, in the present context of European AI adoption, a fourth and fifth actor come into play: the major players of the AI industry, almost all of which are located in the USA, as well as the US government. While the Big Tech firms of China were mentioned by a few interviewees, they wield relatively little influence in Europe and were not described as impinging on union operations. European AI adoption thus presents a five-way interaction between employers, workers and their representatives, European governments, US Big Tech, and the US state. Taking inspiration from Liu Cixin's novel *The Three-Body Problem* (2008), we might refer to this situation as a five-body problem of control in which the struggle between workers and management is further complicated by the unpredictable movements of an aggressive and well-resourced Big Tech and governments both European and abroad. This conceptualisation highlights both the growing complexity of AI introduction in the workplace and the fact that the issue of control is becoming political in the sense that contesting who gets to introduce new technology, who has access to trade secrets, and who determines how to use AI, is moving beyond the confines of workplace issues. This presents an avenue for further research.

We note that this struggle for control is not limited to control over the labour process, but also the opacity surrounding AI in multiple layers. Our findings indicate that the issue of knowledge and information rights, frequently raised by our interviewees, serves as a proxy through which the broader question of control is articulated, and through which limits to managerial prerogative in the workplace are sought to be established. Interviewees displaying significant expertise on AI were able to translate their knowledge into an understanding of how the question of control is reframed due to introduction of AI and, in some cases, they formulated concrete policy suggestions on a national and supranational level. Nonetheless, it should be stated that our sample does not allow further generalisations regarding the role of knowledge.

For example, we cannot establish a correlation between knowledge of AI and more optimistic or pessimistic attitudes towards it.

In closing, we wish to highlight one more notable aspect of these interviews: a disjunction between broad statements about AI in general and more narrow discussions around the applications of AI within specific sectors. The former type of discourse is relatively balanced in terms of expected benefits versus risks. However when it comes to the sectors in which they work, trade unionists have less to say about benefits and instead articulate a range of risks. This, we contend, suggests a tension within European trade unions. This is a tension between their embrace of circulating promissory expectations about AI, their desire not to be perceived as Luddites, and the reality of the practical impacts that AI adoption is having in their sectors so far.

Section 7: Conclusion

This report aimed to incorporate the perspective of European trade unions in order to enrich FORSEE's insights of how successful AI is envisioned. It examined how European trade unions understand the observed and expected effects of AI in the workplace and on workers and how these understandings shape organisational responses and strategies. It shows that while unions could have the potential to shape the deployment of AI, they are often overlooked as stakeholders in AI development and currently occupy a reactionary position.

The findings reveal significant concern among union representatives that AI could erode workers' autonomy, control, and employment security. However, this should not be understood as a wholesale rejection of AI. In fact, most interviewees were keen not to be characterised as Luddites. Instead, their concerns centred on how AI is deployed, whose interest it serves, and how they can secure workers' shares of those benefits. Notably, these issues were largely seen to be affecting white-collar workers who may have been less exposed to earlier waves of automation.

A critical finding is that workers and unions currently have limited influence over AI deployment. They often find themselves in a defensive position, constrained by limited resources and technical expertise, opaque AI systems, and a lack of employer willingness to negotiate. This imbalance is reinforced by the structure of AI development itself, with many workplace systems produced by large, foreign technology companies with limited incentives to engage with European unions.

Unions are nevertheless working to strengthen their position through research, capacity building, lobbying, litigation, and, in a limited but growing number of cases, collective bargaining. However, their actual ability to influence AI adoption is very uneven. The critical insight is that while AI adoption may be difficult to prevent, its consequences are not predetermined and need to be addressed dependent on the sectoral labour conditions. Decisions about whether AI augments or replaces workers, improves or undermines job quality, and distributes benefits and risks necessarily involve local questions of governance and power.

This has important implications for how AI “success” is defined. If success is measured only through productivity or competitiveness, workers risk being pushed aside. To ensure that economic growth includes the workers powering growth, workers’ perspectives should be an essential measure of “success.” Performative consultations are not enough: workers and their representatives must be involved in discussions about AI deployment early enough to influence digital transformation agendas. This means supporting workers’ capacity and giving them the time and resources needed to meaningfully engage. Researchers and policymakers must likewise ensure that workers’ voices are not overlooked in discussions of AI and economic growth.

Ultimately, the question is not simply whether AI will transform European workplaces, but what kind of transformation should be pursued and according to whose definition of success. If AI is to deliver genuinely successful outcomes, workers cannot remain passive subjects of technological change: they must have a meaningful role in determining its direction.

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Appendix

Appendix 1: Questionnaire guiding the interviews

1. The present

A) Individual experience with AI so far

1. What is your job/role? (at work and/or in the union)
2. How familiar are you with AI?
3. Do you use AI at work?

If yes:

- What for and how often?
- Which models?

If no:

- Why not?
- Do you want to?

B) Sectoral experience with AI so far

1. What are the key use cases of AI in your sector/industry?
2. How widespread is AI adoption/use in your sector/industry?
3. How would you describe the attitude of workers toward AI?
4. Have members of your union expressed concerns over AI?
 - If so, what?
5. How is AI being discussed by management or presented to workers?

c) Union experience with AI so far

6. Has your union defined its position on AI?

If yes:

- What is its position? How was this established?
- What does the union want to do with AI?
- What are the union's biggest concerns about AI?
- What is the desired division of labour between workers and AI?
- How does AI fit into the union's strategic goals?
- Have you negotiated AI-related clauses in collective agreements?
 - i. What kinds of AI issues are most difficult to negotiate (data access, algorithmic transparency, productivity targets)?

- Do workers agree with the union's position on AI?

If no:

- Why not?

D) Union response / capacity

7. Does the union use AI in its operations? How?
8. What barriers do you face to meaningful engagement with members on topics surrounding AI?
9. How prepared do you feel your union is to engage with employers on AI deployment?
10. Do you have access to technical expertise to assess employer claims about AI systems?
11. Does AI impinge on collective bargaining?
12. Does AI impinge on organising?
13. Are workers looking to unions for protection, negotiation, or training support?
14. Have issues around AI increased interest in union membership?

E) Regulation / Barriers

15. Are you familiar with AI regulation?
16. Has your union engaged with national or EU policymakers on AI regulation?
17. Any gaps?
18. Are there any red lines where AI must not be involved?

2. The Future

19. What does the future of work in your industry look like?
 - See what they say, then go after specific topics if not mentioned by them already
20. What near term opportunities does your union see for AI?
21. What longer term opportunities?
22. What division of labour between worker and AI would you like to see?
23. What kind of regulation or action from governments is needed?
24. How will organising look in the future?

Specific topics to bring up:

- Upskilling / (re)training
- Augmentation

25. What immediate or near term challenges does your union foresee?
26. What about in the longer term?

Specific topics to bring up:

- deskillling
- bargaining
- job loss
- surveillance
- intensification
- control
- regulation (lack thereof)