

## Summary & Reflections

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This report has aimed at supplementing the work already conducted by PSI with cutting edge digital considerations, discussions and concerns. Each section has ended with a list of areas that beneficially could be further explored by PSI

In the first section [Democracy - the Duty, Rights and Means to Govern](#), we unravelled the very essence of the digital economy: namely, the datafication of all social and economic relations. It did so in four main parts. 1. a critical review of the datified welfare state and the move away from social issues and problems being understood as shared, to a logic that attributes “risk” to the individual. 2. a discussion of how public services can both abuse, and be abused by, digital technologies causing widespread discrimination and attacks on human rights. This section asserted that the governance of digital technologies as well as transparency and accountability around their intended as well as unintended purpose, aim and structure is urgently called for. 3. We then move on to a call for the establishment of *collective* data rights and exemplified in practice through the formation of data collectives and/or data trusts. 4. The section ended with a critical evaluation of public procurement regulations and guidelines that aim to govern a trillion dollar worldwide public spending

In section two, we zoomed in on [Digital Trade and Tax](#) and discussed that what is essentially at stake here is national governments’ rights and means to govern, to put regulations in place to serve the interests of local businesses, workers and citizens and to have long-term strategies of their own, free from multinational corporate interests, to form digital industrialisation policies and processes. This section also discussed the need for new Digital Tax reforms.

Section three on [Digitalisation and Development](#) was concerned with the particularities in the dissemination and impact of digital technologies on the Global South. Here attention was given to ‘digital colonialism’ - the “Scramble for the Global South” where large-scale tech companies utilise the lack of public investment to build digital infrastructures to extract, analyze, and own user data for profit and market influence with nominal benefit to the data source. We also looked at the inner workings of digital tools, and how the norms, values and biases embedded in them, get transposed to the Global South with no regard for cultural differences.

In section four we discussed [Public Administration - e-governance](#) and the worldwide push for e-governance and e-government. We discussed the risks of overreliance on algorithmic systems and the lack of good governance procedures. The section moved on highlighting the risks to jobs and the threat of exacerbated discrimination and bias. We concluded that there is an absolute need for rigorous and worker and citizen inclusive governance of digital systems and the public-private sector relations that surround them. We asserted that this governance should include the workers’ demands.

Section five on [Local and Regional Government](#) concentrated on the rise of Smart Cities and the datafication of city relations. It concluded that 1. Citizen groups need to be included from the start, 2. A public-private cooperation of this kind needs a strong public interest framing, including mechanisms for democratic control, 3. Transparency is key. There must be a commitment to the public disclosure of all information and negotiation items, 4. A smart city is a surveillance city with all that that entails of privacy concerns. The section moved on to discuss the digitalisation of public infrastructure and governance lessons learnt from remunicipalisation processes.

Section six on [Climate Change & Climate Migration](#) covered Just Transition Policies, the role of technology in combating climate change, but also how digital technology is being deployed to track

and trace climate migration. Massive data extraction by private companies unless rigorously governed can lead to the tracking and tracing of ethnic, religious or cultural groups. Digital identities can be misused, spurring further bias and discrimination.

Section seven on [Health and Social Care Services](#) we look at the benefits and risks of HealthTech, the gender inequality of care, the digitalisation of social care service, job changes and risks and lastly COVID-19 contact tracing apps. We once again concluded that the digitalisation of the healthcare sector requires rigorous governance structures to protect the rights of workers and citizens alike.

In section eight [Work, Workers Rights And Workplace Governance](#) we turned the focus to the impact of digital technologies on work, workers' rights and workplace governance strategies. We examined the topics of workers data rights, the need for the co-governance of algorithmic systems at work and what requirements there should be on workplace that introduce disruptive technology. This section established an urgent need for union responses to prevent the ultimate commodification of workers and the loss of worker power.

Continuing on section eight, section nine on [Skills and Competencies](#) focussed on the increasing use of digital technologies to identify and bridge skills gaps. We discussed that most of these systems neglect the important role of human competencies and argued that unions should spearhead campaigns to bring these competencies to the forefront of discussion on skills and retraining. We added to PSIs skills recommendations requirements that retraining takes place in working time and should be perceived as part of work. This is to ensure equal access and possibility to training, not least for the workers with care responsibilities.

The last section, section 10 [Digital Transformation of Trade Unions](#) looked inwards to the unions themselves and presented three key tools that can support the necessary digital transformation of unions. This transformation will be necessary to counterbalance the mostly private-sector power grab in the labour market.

## Concluding Reflections

Digital technology is not born evil. It is not born good either. The impact of digital technologies on the quality of work, on workers' and trade union rights, on citizens' human rights and privacy rights, and on the types of work that will be available is essentially a result of the regulation that is - or not - in place. Through collective agreements public service workers and their unions have a strong possibility to ensure that workplace digital technologies augment and support worker wellbeing and gender equality, and not the opposite. But this demands that staff reps and unions build their capacity to negotiate on the core of digital tech - namely data. Workers' data rights are poorly developed across the world<sup>1</sup>. This is not coincidental and most certainly a result of heavy industry lobbyism. These rights need to be improved. Unions also need a foundation of knowledge on the different types of digital technology and importantly on the instructions given to artificial intelligence, algorithmic systems and even machine learning. They need to know what transparency to demand, and they need to hold management accountable.

There is no way around having to acquire this knowledge and understanding if the unions are to maintain or build power in the workplace and society. They need to know what questions to ask management about the systems, and they must ensure that management will mitigate adverse effects

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<sup>1</sup> <https://fivemedia.com/articles/employers-are-tracking-us-lets-track-them-back/> Colclough, 2020

on workers. We know datasets are biased, because we humans are. To ensure diverse and inclusive labour markets, workers need a seat at the governance table.

Similarly, trade unions must not be blind to how digital technologies can be used to infringe their rights to organise, to assemble, to free speech and to campaign. Recent Amazon and Facebook leaks<sup>2</sup> have revealed how they are designing and deploying tools that will flag possible union organising activities amongst their employees. Other AI-driven tools are being deployed to scrap available data from social media, local news and chat rooms to provide companies with early warnings of employee discontent. One such company, [prewave.ai](https://prewave.ai) even made their way into a trade union and technology training event hosted in Europe. Many unions use Whatsapp to communicate with members and between one another. Yet Whatsapp is owned by Facebook who in turn has issued a statement that they want to share data between the two services. Facebook, well known for selling data, could well become the means through which union organising can be identified and cracked down before it even got off the ground. Similarly, many unions have opted for cloud-based solutions, leaving all documents and emails in the cloud for the cloud owners to see. It is therefore pertinent that unions think privacy, security and protection far more into their tools and strategies than is the case today. Alternatives exist.

Quality Public Services are not a given and the quest by public sector unions to ensure them is under attack from the private sector power grab that is taking place through digitalisation. Public sector unions across all sectors need to reach out and work with citizens to raise the awareness of the public and together campaign for the democratic provision of QPS. Public sector unions and their members need to be aware of the problems of digitalisation in outsourcing and privatisation and the dangers that need to be exposed and opposed. Where this is not possible, we must push for better management practices concerning the terms of engagement with private companies in all and any form of PPP, procurement or outsourcing. This will allow us to retain the possibility to assert democratic control and have the legal and practical possibility of remunicipalisation. We must work with the public to educate them about these dangers to their services quality, inclusion and democracy. Data extracted and generated in these public-private relations must *at least* be jointly controlled and jointly assessed. If not, the public sector will lose their autonomy to interpret and act upon the data findings. Without public sector capacity building, a void is created that will only allow the continuation of private sector power grab leading to even more public sector dependency and a hollowing out of the public sector's means to govern.

Unions collectively should become the spearhead of an alternative digital ethos - one that does not commodify and objectify workers and citizens but empowers them. Public services unions have a key role to play as the workers who see the impact on society, have responsibility for regulating digital capital, protecting democratic institutions and are involved in public policy making. Here stronger workers' data rights are an essential prerequisite for the establishment of collective data rights, and the formation of data cooperatives, data collectives, data commons, open data and/or data trusts. On the contrary, if nothing changes and the current trajectory is followed, workers and their unions will very soon be subject to opaque digital systems that they - and indeed management in many circumstances - have little power over.

As the social and economic consequences of the COVID-19 crisis begin to show themselves, there seems little doubt that we are entering in years of economic hardship. With this will follow the need to find cost-cutting measures in both the public and private sector. Automation of tasks and jobs and the expanded use of digital technologies will most likely occur, although their long-term cost-saving

<sup>2</sup> <https://theintercept.com/2020/06/11/facebook-workplace-unionize/> and  
<https://www.vox.com/recode/2020/10/6/21502639/amazon-union-busting-tracking-memo-spoc>

benefits are actually not clear. To fund the welfare state and ensure quality public services going forward, new tax regimes and, through these, a renewed redistribution of wealth will be vital.

The digitalisation of our economies, public services and societies demands a digitally informed response from public service unions. The tools presented in the last section of this report offer concrete ways to make this happen. This report has aimed to situate PSIs work in a digital context and within some of the most important challenges to public service worker autonomy posed by digital technologies. It is not a conclusive, nor a comprehensive report. Rather, and hopefully, the start of a living document to be updated and debated as public service unions conquer the digital world.

