A green and digital future

2. What role does the digital economy have in enabling the UK's growth?

The digital economy is a key part of the UK's growth plan. However, we are concerned that the digital economy is inviting harms. We are particularly concerned about the use of algorithmic digital technologies in making work more insecure, intense, and introducing additional algorithmically driven discrimination.

We are starting to see the usage of Artificial Intelligence (AI) driven systems in the workplace. Most prevalently, among our members, AI is being used in surveillance. This can be used for monitoring health and safety, but also in terms of checking for compliance with policies and procedures. We are also seeing the use of AI in time management and work optimisation. Our members are regularly experiencing surveillance which creates substantial incursions on their working lives.

The use of AI is more prevalent in some sectors, such as logistics and finance, than others, such as justice, although we are seeing more firm-level variance than sector level variance.

One area of concern is the usage of AI tools in recruitment. It is difficult to know to what extent employers are using algorithms for recruitment as often the workers who experience this do not know that it is happening and the relationship between employer and prospective employee is usually brief. Yet, there is also significant potential for discrimination in this process, and this lack of transparency is consequently troubling.

It is certainly possible that well paid skilled jobs could potentially be lost to AI as a style of management which originated in the gig-economy becomes more prevalent across all sectors. AI has the potential to break down skilled jobs into atomised tasks. These tasks can either be completed by AI or other technologies, or by individual people who are required to complete specific defined tasks in a highly structured environment with significant loss to skill, autonomy, and dignity. However, it is also possible that through taking a human-centred approach to developing new systems work could be made better. Routine tasks can be removed from peoples' workloads, ensuring that they are more productive, and able to focus on the aspects of work which are more interesting, or nuanced, such as interpreting the outcomes of routine processes, or developing relationships and supporting customers.

We don't believe that existing regulation protects workers from the risks posed by the usage of AI and algorithms or encourages the development of systems that support human dignity. It is critical that employers and workers' representatives co-design and monitor the introduction, implementation, and usage of technologies in the workplace to ensure that they are fit for purpose and meet the needs of workers as well as employers. To do this technology change must be brought firmly into the scope of collective bargaining and recognised as an area in which worker consultation is legally required. Currently, guidelines on data protection impact assessments do suggest that consultation should be "considered" but this doesn't go far enough.

Strengthening protections around wholly automated decision making would also be sensible. There are issues with the enforcement of current protections under the GDPR, which are themselves under threat from the current Conservative government's legislative plans. The line between a solely automated decision and one in which a person has a meaningful impact is blurred, making the GDPR hard to enforce. The next Labour government should introduce legislation to give a meaningful right of human review and continue to explore how algorithmic transparency can be promoted in the interests of workers.

4. What policies can help deliver Labour's existing pledges on green growth, particularly the Green Prosperity Plan?

The UK government must provide direct support for the decarbonisation of the steel industry. This should mirror the investment into decarbonisation provided by governments around the world. We welcome Labour's pledge to invest £3bn into the decarbonisation of the steel industry.

As the industrial landscape of the UK changes, the UK government must invest in a just transition. Community, in partnership with Prospect Union produced a report[1] considering the just transition of the steel and energy industries. We called for all transitions to respect the ILO's principles of just transition, with a commitment to national dialogue involving government, employers, and trade unions. We also stressed the importance of having a national plan for clearly delineating the responsibilities of different actors at national and regional level. We argued that the UK needed devolution of power and resources to regional and local decision makers, aligning with that national framework. We called for a comprehensive framework for the involvement of workers and their representatives in the processes of workplace change. And finally, we called for obligations on listed companies to report their performance on environmental indicators, and the management of the workforce for a just transition. The next Labour government should take forward these recommendations.

In our view, a just transition means providing clear pathways for workers whose jobs and industries will change. The next Labour government should provide rich skills offer to support workers to acquire the green skills that they will require in the industries of the future. Where industries will drastically change, or reduce in size, clear pathways for the jobs that these workers will undertake in future must be set out. Workers must be provided with advice, guidance and, in some cases, direct offers of job transfers. These steps are essential to support families and communities around the UK.

Community, in partnership with Prospect commissioned a report into the just transition of the steel and energy industries. The contributions in the energy sector highlight positive stories about how workers can be supported during plant changes as well as the less positive examples where the policy response wasn't right.

5. What policies can help contribute to the four missions outlined in Labour's industrial strategy?

We commend the mission driven government pioneered by Labour's industrial strategy. We believe that the following policies would support the missions.

1. **Delivering clean power by 2030**

One factor that will help is ensuring that energy pricing for green energy is fair. Marginal pricing means that UK consumers pay for the most expensive unit produced, we are paying the price of coal for energy which is produced by much cheaper and greener methods. We acknowledge that this was a positive early in the development of green electricity generation because it powerfully incentivised green producers to enter the market. However, gradually reducing this offer, in conjunction with a switch to greener production methods, would mean consumers facing lower costs, create further incentives for polluting energy producers to switch to greener methods, and would still allow green energy to be produced profitably. This would support consumers, including our members who are struggling with high energy prices. These greener methods should include the development of more

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[1] David Coats, 2021, A Just Transition? Managing the challenges of technology, trade, climate change and COVID-19, available at https://communitytunew.wpenginepowered.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/Just-Transition-Report.pdf

nuclear capacity in the UK, supporting low-carbon energy generation around the clock, even when the sun is not shining or the wind not blowing.

Relatedly, the costs of power are crippling heavy industry such as the steel industry. The next Labour government must ensure that UK steel producers pay equivalent energy prices to their French and German competitors in order to support a level playing field in market.

2. Harnessing data for the public good

One of the key problems that the next labour government will face is ensuring that the public is empowered to understand and care about the use of their data. Work done in the UK has focused on digital literacy but has not fundamentally had a democratic focus, ensuring that data controllers such as big tech companies and platform providers are accountable to the UK public for the ways they use their data. The Ada Lovelace Institute has explored models of digital stewardship, where custodians are appointed to represent the interests of citizens to ensure that their data is used in a way that promotes the public good.

This shifts the focus away from data as an individual's property which can be controlled due to individual rights and shifts to an understanding that one individual's data may not be particularly valuable, but our collective data is incredibly powerful.

We believe that there must be restrictions on the way in which algorithmic systems can be used in order to protect citizens' rights and make sure that they have the power to hold big tech companies to account. As noted above, the next Labour government must ensure that workers, consumers, and citizens are empowered to understand how their data is used. People must have empowered actors in their corner to defend their rights and advance the public good. For example, this could include appointing data custodians, as well as providing resources to the trade union movement and consumer rights groups to ensure that they can engage in debates about data driven technologies on a level playing field with big technology companies. These advocates should work in shaping legislation as well as standard setting processes.

3. Caring for the future

We were delighted to see the care system highlighted as one of Labour's policy priorities. The work of caring has been systematically undervalued, with terrible costs. At Community we are proud to represent early years workers and care workers, two sectors which are predominantly female and significantly underpaid given the important work that these workers do.

We believe that all workers should be paid at least the real living wage. The next Labour government should use its procurement powers to ensure that all local government procurement of care services includes conditionality on the provider to pay at least the Real Living Wage to staff in the sector. This would encourage competitive bids that offer fair pay to staff.

4. Building a more resilient economy

One key policy which is fundamental to building a resilient economy is to build domestic capacity.

Domestic capacity in raw materials, particularly steel, is critical to national defence. The next Labour government should be clear that it's not just going to allow other countries which do subsidise their steel markets to eliminate the steel industry from the UK leaving us without domestic sources of these critical products.

March 2023. Please contact research@community-tu.org for further information.