

Protecting the Working Class in an Era of Automation

Teresa Soares and Daniel Polomski



Mahidol University

Roundtable Brief

The Fourth Industrial Revolution - “characterized by a fusion of technologies that is blurring the lines between the physical, digital, and biological spheres”¹ - has the potential to fundamentally change the way we live and work. In order to foster opportunities and reckon with highly disruptive challenges new, inclusive, and distinctly political solutions will be necessary.



On 27 February 2018, the Institute of Human Rights and Peace Studies, Mahidol University, organized a roundtable on “Protecting the Working Class in an Era of Automation,” featuring Associate Professor Sabrina Zajak, Ussarin Kaewpradap, Patchareeboon (Mam) Sakulpitakphon and chair Dr. Matthew Mullen. The roundtable had a deliberately ambitious scope, allowing for an open dialogue around how to reduce the risks and amplify the benefits of automation through efforts like redistributing added value, re-organizing and

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repurposing labour, and invigorating the type of governance that could make a just transition possible.

A starting point of discussion was whether there is basis for the anxiety, hope, or mixture thereof. Will the Fourth Industrial Revolution really be ‘the end of work’ or ‘the rise of the robots’? Pessimists sound alarms regarding the pace of automation and its potentially devastating impact on the global workforce. Optimists point to new possibilities, challenging the premise that the Fourth Industrial Revolution will leave the working poor behind. Whether pessimistic or optimistic, there was a consensus that the task of the day is to adapt and try to get ahead of change, as automation is already well underway and only gaining momentum.

Ussarin Kaewpradap from the State Enterprises Workers' Relations Confederation (SERC), spoke of the essential role unions play in informing, equipping and mobilizing workers in this new era. At the same time, Kaewpradap flagged ambivalence among unionists with regard to the future of work. On the one hand, automation is painted as a threat with the potential to displace 50% of the global workforce and to deepen inequality between the 1% percent and the rest – contrasting the view that automation only affects low income workers in developing countries. On

¹ See Schwab, K. 2015. *The Fourth Industrial Revolution: What it Means and How to Respond*. Available at: <https://www.weforum.org>

the other hand, automation may lead to safer, healthier workplaces and improve the quality of life of millions of workers. Kaewpradap and the roundtable came to conclude on the importance of tripartite responses to this juxtaposition, in which



workers safeguard one another, governments provide protection and regulation,

and commercial actors work with both governments and labour to avoid adverse impacts.

Assoc. Prof. Dr. Sabrina Zajak brought attention to how the decentralization of work and the workplace in the platform / gig economy undermines workers' leverage, as workplace solidarity is increasingly difficult to achieve among large masses of so-called click workers. It is at this crossroad of a transforming labour market that took the roundtable to a discussion on global, social movements. "Access to information is higher than ever before. It is here that we must tap in to create solidarity across stakeholders in contrast to online echo chambers", Assoc. Prof. Zajak noted. The same technologies that are leading to fragmentation of labour make it possible to bypass physical barriers for workers and mobilize. When speaking to this and other possibilities, Patchareeboon (Mam) Sakulpitakphon spoke of the importance of engaging business enterprises and seeing them as possible allies in problem solving. She highlighted that companies are being called on to respect human rights and implement the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights,

which includes the protection of worker's rights. Companies are now asked to identify potential human rights risk and take action to remedy, including providing

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compensation to those adversely impacted. Thus, companies have a responsibility to prepare and equip their workforce if turning to automation. There are opportunities for multi-stakeholder, shared-value partnerships to ensure a strong, just transition. For instance, companies can form partnerships with universities to provide education or re-training to displaced workers prior to ease their dismissal or repurposing.

In the end, the roundtable brought forward three overarching take-aways. First, the challenges and opportunities that automation presents are part technical, but principally political. At the forefront of every looming threat is a political problem, a problem of inequality, inequity, incompetence, exploitation, or apathy. Second, doing nothing is not an option. Even optimists recognize that a failure to channel automation and digitization into opportunities will likely lead to wide-spread disruption and suffering.



Whether the call to action is a global, social

movement that creates a new era of solidarity and re-distribution of benefits, or baby steps in piloting innovation that aims to protect the workers – it's heading towards the right direction', as Mam described. Regardless, it is apt time for more talk and more action to keep pace with the Fourth Industrial Revolution. Lastly, because automation presents complex problems, aristocratic traps become more common. Problem solving and

innovation in this new era of automation ought to constantly circle back to the needs, rights, ambitions, and insights of

those who are shouldering the bulk of the burden.