The impact of digitalisation on job quality and social dialogue in public services in Poland and the European Union

Roundtable
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REPORT

The European-Commission funded DIGIQU@LPUB project, led by the European Social Observatory (OSE), deals with the relevant and timely concept of digitalisation, understood as the use of new digital technologies and the resulting work-related transformation processes. More specifically, as **Bart Vanhercke** (OSE) points out, the project aims to understand the impact that digitalisation inevitably has on job quality, from the perspective of those employed in public services and of trade unions. The project covers and compares eight countries, considering the following sectors: public administration, electricity and the health sector. Its key ambition is to raise awareness among social stakeholders about the topic. Quoting **Krzysztof Getka** (Friedrich Ebert Foundation) 'digitalisation is a snowball rumbling down the hill at increasing speed', thus impacting many aspects of our lives. Digitalisation carries many threats which we need to understand in depth, in order to tackle them in the most efficient way possible. We are only at the beginning of this process.

Session 1 - Setting the scene

Chair: Bart Vanhercke – European Social Observatory

Salvo Leonardi on the 'Impact of digitalisation on social dialogue'.

According to S. Leonardi (Fondazione Giuseppe di Vittorio), the rationale behind the project is first and foremost the importance of social dialogue. The latter helps to prevent: (i) negative impacts of digitalisation on jobs; and (ii) further individualization and fragmentation. At the same time, social dialogue fosters: (i) social responsibility and sustainable use of new digital tech; (ii) humanization of work, autonomy, well-being; and (iii) consensual anticipation of change, to the benefit of workers. The research focused on approaches and priorities that trade unions should take on in addressing these issues, and how sectoral and national-level systems are influenced by digitalisation. Collective bargaining differs considerably among the eight countries examined. One important take-away is that digitalisation does not happen homogenously and evenly, neither across nor within countries and sectors. Recommendations to policymakers include tackling issues such as digital literacy, stakeholders' involvement, upskilling of workers, the right to disconnect, and improved information and consultation rights. More attention should also be paid to the generational ICT divide, which could cause new forms of social exclusion.

Richard Pond: State of play of social dialogue on digitalisation in the public services in the European Union

According to R. Pond (European Public Services Union, EPSU), the EU has a peculiar structure of social dialogue. It is a system that is financially and politically supported by the European Commission, with sectoral social dialogue committees which meet regularly with representatives of social partners. One crucial aspect, which should be made full use of, is that trade unions and employers can jointly make representations to the Commission. The most active social dialogue committee is in central government, where there was first an agreement on restructuring in 2015 and more recently, in October last year, on digitalisation ([1]). The latter is considered as a step forward on the cross-sectoral level, underlining the

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1. EPSU, 'EU Social Partners adopt agreement on digitalisation for central and federal government', https://www.epsu.org/article/eu-social-partners-adopt-agreement-digitalisation-central-and-federal-government

importance of addressing digitalisation jointly. This agreement covers telework, health and safety, artificial intelligence, and the impact on central government services; however, at the moment its implementation as a directive is on hold. The focus should be on the extent to which social dialogue can be used to bring about robust agreement, and whether these are a positive step forward in European exchanges.

Maciej Pańków: Looking for a needle in a haystack? Digitalisation, job quality and social dialogue in Poland

Presenting the Polish case study as 'looking for a needle in a haystack', M. Pańków (Institute of Public Affairs, ISP) introduced the data collected on social dialogue, which, in the metaphor, is the haystack. The study combined quantitative and qualitative research. The energy sector, as pointed out, is very advanced in terms of digitalisation. There are two aspects to the digitalisation of the public administration sector: first, solutions for citizens to communicate with the government, and second, platforms to ensure internal communications. Within the sector, social security institutions and monetary supervisory bodies are the most digitalized. The least advanced are local government institutions, due to their reduced budget. In the health sector, digitalisation has mainly affected patients' activities online and digital solutions such as e-prescriptions.

Looking at the impact of digitalisation, the energy sector (survey) viewed the process positively, following adoption of the new technology and upskilling. Digitalisation is perceived as resulting in more flexibility and independence, less stress, and a better workplace. In the public administration (quantitative data), digitalisation has had a positive impact on the quality of services and on society as a whole. The personal experience of employees has been less positive. Despite the data privacy problems which hampered teleworking, the public administration certainly has the largest potential for remote working. In the healthcare sector, digitalisation has not profoundly impacted workplaces, since the sector is rigidly regulated, hence the nature of the tasks has remained unchanged. Moving on to the 'needle' in the metaphor, it seems that there is a lack of discussion on the topic of digitalisation in collective bargaining and at the same time there is a lack of effective consultation mechanisms. Employee representatives have only moderate interest in the topic and social dialogue is insufficient at the workplace level.

Session 2 - Roundtable with Polish stakeholders

Chair: Dominik Owczarek – Institute of Public Affairs

Lead questions for the second panel:

1. What should we do to ensure that digitalisation processes are better planned and implemented in collaboration with the social partners, across industries and at the national level?
2. How will social dialogue contribute to enhancing job quality in the public sector?
3. How will this participation in digitalisation processes impact the quality of public services as a whole?

Katarzyna Nosalska, Head of the Centre for the Development of Digital Competence, Ministry of Digitalisation

Transformation in society and labour will generate some fear, so there is a need to make sure that there is social participation and communication, as a foundation for social dialogue. The 'Digital Competence Development Programme' is a response to the challenges faced by many social groups as a result of the digital transformation. The main objectives are (i) to develop digital education, as a basis for the future digital economy, make training available broadly (50% of Poles have basic digital skills, the aim is 80% by 2030) and (ii) to target the group of ICT experts, increase the share of female specialists.

There is a gap in digital skills, including generic skills, among both employers and employees, which is even more acute in the public services. The level of satisfaction with the digital training provided is significantly lower than in other industries. The hope is that this programme, aiming to disseminate digital training and to make it accessible to employees, will fill this gap.

Beata Wójcik, Chair of the Trade Union of the Employees of the Social Insurance Institution

How do employees view digitalisation? According to B. Wójcik, the recent pandemic exacerbated existing problems; it especially forced many to the edge of society, increasing social and digital exclusion. This was true not only for the elderly, but even for people applying

for social benefits. There are several digital challenges to be looked at. Citizens experienced problems related to basic issues such as registering on online portals. Embedded difficulties in applications could be tackled by task force groups created by the employers, but the latter are reluctant to cooperate. The hardware is also very often outdated. Another issue is the onboarding of newly hired employees, which is not done in a structured way, due to general overwork and lower wages. Unfortunately, few employers are willing to help and participate in these issues.

Robert Lisicki, Head of the Labour Law Department, Lewiatan Confederation

According to R. Lisicki, certain things are common to employees and employers. Digitalisation, especially in the public services, is about enhancing performance, and easing certain processes and tailing them off. The challenges for employers include implementing programs when dealing with many stakeholders at the sectoral level. Among the private sector employers, on the other hand, trade union representation is very scarce. The Lewiatan Confederation encourages social dialogue and urges workers to set up some form of representation. Another issue is the low number of workers involved in developing their digital skills and upskilling. Without these we cannot expect employers to put in place effective actions. As pointed out by Lisicki, it is a two-way street: if we want the employers to take effective action, employees need to be ready for this action. What seems to be lacking is, again, an efficient social and sectoral dialogue.

Adrian Zandberg, Co-chairman of the Razem Party, Member of Parliament

What is meant by better work organization? Is it really just to increase productivity? This is one of the reasons why we need to improve social dialogue, according to A. Zandberg. In 20th century Europe, social dialogue was seen as a place to confront the interests of the various stakeholders. Nowadays, due to the weakening of organized labour and the far-reaching technological revolution, we need to tackle the reorganization of work itself, taking account of the weakened position of employees. There is a big challenge facing the public sector. On the one hand, it is not possible to adopt a techno-optimistic attitude and just copy and paste solutions already implemented in certain branches. On the other hand, a genuine social dialogue mechanism is needed for digitalisation of the public sector, which will be a blueprint for other sectors of the economy. There is scope for improvement in this sector, as it does not follow the logic of profit, according to the MP. Digitalisation processes can also entrench social inequalities, to a certain degree, and the public administration has not been tackling

these processes effectively. For instance, sharing data more transparently means that workers are more aware of how their workplaces are managed. This is one of the areas in which shaping of public policies needs to take place, although this data-sharing practice has not yet been enshrined in legislation. The MP's concluding remark was that digitalisation should, in the future, be used as a 'push tool' for more transparent and cutting-edge policies.

The individual country reports and (shorter) working papers resulting from the DIGIQU@LPUB project can be downloaded from https://www.ose.be/digiqualpub/