STRIKE WHILE AI IS HOT

REBUILDING WORKER POWER FOR THE AGE OF AI

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ABOUT THIS PAPER

The purpose of this paper is to outline how worker power should be reanimated in the face of AI-driven labour market shocks, as part of a decade of progressive national renewal.

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FOREWORD

When working people think about AI, what is front of mind is clear: how will it affect my job and those I care about – will it make work more rewarding, in every sense of the word? Or will put at risk my income, my sense of self and my kids' futures? These straightforward questions are colliding with the uncertainty AI presents.

However, one thing is clear: great technological transitions only result in meaningful social progress when they are shaped actively and decisively. The Industrial Revolution – often casually invoked to describe the possibilities of AI – saw fifty years of wage stagnation while profits soared. It took the difficult birth of the labour movement to tip technological gains towards workers' interests and broader social wellbeing.

The widespread deployment of AI presents a similar process, in an economy already starkly tilted in favour of the wealthy and powerful. Without countervailing power, the pattern is predictable. Productivity gains flow to those who own and deploy the technology. Workers and their communities absorb the costs. And society becomes even more unequal and unstable.

This is neither inevitable nor acceptable. To deliver on the promise of technology to enhance lives, inside and out of the workplace, AI must be designed, governed and negotiated by and for workers. Our guiding principle is simple: change must be done *with* working people, not *to* them.

As the voice of working people across the economy – including academics, scientists and IT specialists at the forefront of the AI revolution – trade unions have a pivotal role to play in shaping the future. Our collective expertise and experience can help deliver the positive outcomes progressives want to see.

All of us must now take clear steps to redress the balance of power at work and in the wider economy, and I welcome this important IPPR contribution to that effort.

Paul Nowak, General Secretary, TUC

SUMMARY

Artificial intelligence is the latest technology to raise the spectre of human labour becoming obsolete. AI technologies can now perform complex cognitive tasks that were once considered exclusively human. If businesses adopt these technologies at scale to replace human work, this could generate a significant productivity windfall – one that is likely to be unevenly distributed throughout society.

AI-driven automation is not a new economic phenomenon: throughout history, technological change has redefined the role of human labour in production. Some technologies have complimented the skills and creativity of workers, while others have undermined human labour and even replaced it altogether. The design of new technologies, and the way they are deployed by firms, determines whether technological progress results in shared prosperity or concentrates wealth in the hands of a minority.

Rebuilding worker power must be an urgent priority for a decade of progressive national renewal. AI's distributional consequences will depend in part on the strength of workers' power, as has been the case with processes of technological change throughout history. AI technologies could be deployed to augment, degrade or displace human labour, and these impacts are not predetermined. Workers' ability to influence AI adoption at the firm level will shape AI's macro-level distributive effects and determine how the technologies impact their working lives.

Workers want the power to both shape and adapt to AI's impacts. Progressives can meet this challenge by giving workers power to influence AI adoption at the firm level, adapt to its effects on the wider labour market, and access communities of workers with similar experiences. Worker power is unevenly distributed, so any effort to enhance workers' capacity to shape and adapt to AI must tackle power asymmetries in the labour market.

As AI is deployed in the real economy, progressives should seek to give workers greater power over how these new technologies are adopted. To achieve this rebalancing from capital to labour, workers must be empowered to shape the use of AI in their workplace. Ministers should legislate to require employers to disclose their use of AI to employees, and to consult (or even negotiate) with their workforce over the introduction of AI technologies. New bargaining rights for unions and codified worker participation rights – meaning workers on boards and a new system of Anglo co-determination – would provide substantive channels for workers to determine how AI impacts their working lives.

Progressives should also develop a new, flexible system of "portable benefits" to support workers through AI-driven disruption in the labour market. Framed as part of a 21st-century model of flexicurity, this approach will give workers access to income support, training, and core protections across jobs, while enabling more fluid movement between roles, sectors, and forms of work. Such a system would be particularly important for workers whose circumstances limit their ability to exercise influence through workplace-specific channels of power.

Portable benefits should be designed to strengthen worker agency and in turn support a more dynamic and adaptable labour market. It would be designed around three pillars.

1. **A worker support levy**: an auto-enrolled system that generates a shared fund for worker power, training and representation for all workers.
2. **A digital "portable benefits wallet"**: giving each worker tailored options on how to spend their funds based on their employment and needs – from collective bargaining access to training credits and legal assistance.
3. **Accredited worker-power organisations**: workers would use their portable benefits on union membership, worker collectives, and legal and training organisations that meet certain standards.

If implemented at a national level, these policies would create a new institutional foundation for worker power at the scale required for the AI era. The age of AI will be defined not only by the technologies it unleashes, but by the political choices made in response to them. By rebuilding worker power now, progressives can ensure that the gains of AI are broadly shared, its risks are collectively managed, and the dignity of work is preserved for the decades ahead.

1. WORKER POWER WILL DETERMINE AI'S IMPACT ON THE ECONOMY

Artificial intelligence is disrupting the world of work. AI technologies can perform complex cognitive tasks that were once thought to be uniquely human (ILO 2025). If businesses adopt these technologies at scale to replace the work done by humans, this could generate a significant productivity windfall – one that is likely to be unevenly distributed across society and capable of radically reshaping the political economy of the labour market.

There is evidence that AI is already beginning to reshape job tasks, change workers' autonomy and disrupt industries – often faster than workers, labour organisations or policymakers can keep pace. But AI's distributional consequences are not pre-determined: the impact of AI technologies on the labour market will depend in part on the strength of workers' power, as has been the case with processes of technological change throughout history. Workers' ability to influence AI adoption at the firm level will shape its macro-level distributive effects. Rebuilding worker power must therefore be an urgent priority for a decade of progressive national renewal.

AI-DRIVEN DISRUPTION IN THE LABOUR MARKET

Artificial intelligence is a multidisciplinary field focussed on "creating intelligent machines" (State of AI 2025). The term 'AI' refers to a cluster of technologies which can perform complex cognitive functions. The most high-profile examples include agentic AI chatbots like OpenAI's ChatGPT, Google's Gemini and Anthropic's Claude, but these tools are the tip of the iceberg in a rapidly evolving sector which is developing a complex mix of new technologies.

AI technologies already demonstrate the potential to automate many tasks currently done by humans. If companies deploy AI technologies to automate human labour, this could generate a productivity windfall that accrues disproportionately to capital owners, while making new groups of workers insecure and redefining the nature of management and autonomy in the workplace.

The prospect of AI automating human labour has become one of the most prominent public debates around AI. Industry figures warn that AI could automate a huge number of jobs. Mustafa Suleyman, Microsoft AI's CEO, predicts AI will be capable of performing all professional service skills within 18 months, while Anthropic CEO Dario Amodei believes that AI could replace half of all entry-level white collar jobs and push unemployment up by 10 to 20 per cent within five years (Angelo 2026, VandeHei and Allen 2025). Politicians like US senator Bernie Sanders and London mayor Sadiq Khan have also warned about the potential for AI to destroy jobs (Sanders 2025, BBC 2026).

Economic and financial institutions strike a more cautious tone. Goldman Sachs estimates that 6 to 7 per cent of US workers could be displaced if firms adopt AI on a wide scale, translating into a 0.6 per cent rise in the unemployment rate if displacement plays out over a decade (Goldman Sachs 2026). Institutions like the IMF and World Economic Forum also anticipate that AI will result in a small rise in unemployment during a transitional phase, but do not expect that AI will significantly increase structural unemployment (Leopold 2025, Cazzaniga et al 2024).

Instead of ushering in a "jobs apocalypse", AI technologies have the potential to raise productivity growth and improve people's experience of their jobs. The OECD estimates that AI will add 0.39 per cent to the UK's annual labour productivity growth over the next decade, rising to 1.27 per cent if business adoption is strong and the capabilities of AI technologies are significantly expanded (Filippucci et al 2025). This could translate into a better experience of work if AI technologies free people of the more monotonous parts of their jobs. In the legal sector, for example, anecdotal evidence suggests that agentic AI is automating routine tasks and freeing up junior staff to focus on more valuable parts of their role (O'Connor and Burn-Murdoch 2025).

The extent of AI's future boost to productivity will depend on the speed of AI adoption and the future capabilities of AI technologies. AI's impact on productivity is likely to be uneven, improving performance for some tasks but worsening it for others – a result of AI's "jagged technological frontier" (Dell'Acqua et al 2023).

HOW COULD AI DISRUPT THE LABOUR MARKET?

Experts distinguish between technologies which "produce and coordinate" – directly changing the task content of jobs, the allocation of tasks between workers, or replacing human labour altogether – and "monitoring and deciding" technologies, which change workers' autonomy (Gingrich et al 2025). AI technologies fall under both categories.

AI could impact the distribution of wages and employment by directly changing the task content of workers' jobs. It could also allow firms to automate monitoring and decision-making in ways which would harm job quality. Through these various channels of automation, AI has the potential to disrupt the labour market by **augmenting**, **degrading** and **displacing** work.

TABLE 1.1: AI HAS THE POTENTIAL TO DISRUPT THE LABOUR MARKET THROUGH AUGMENTATION, DEGRADATION AND DISPLACEMENT

	Definition	Evidence
Augmentation	Complimenting human labour and improving the experience of work.	AI's ability to collaborate with workers could enable them to perform more sophisticated tasks related to their jobs, tackle new tasks and acquire new expertise (Acemoglu et al 2026).
Degradation	Undermining human labour and negatively impacting the experience of work.	AI could worsen the quality of jobs by intensifying work and enabling greater surveillance and algorithmic management of workers (Ranganathan and Maggie Ye 2026, Zhang et al 2025).*
Displacement	Suppressing labour demand by allowing firms to automate entire roles.	AI could directly replace human workers. Researchers predicted that between 1 and 8 million jobs could be displaced in the UK by agentic AI (Sharp et al 2024, Jung and Srinivasa Desikan 2024).

Source: Authors' analysis

***Surveillance and algorithmic management technologies can negatively impact job quality, potentially diminishing worker autonomy, intensifying workloads, increasing stress and undermining fundamental workplace rights (Baiocco et al 2022, Parkes 2023, Atkinson and Evans 2025). Uber drivers have been "auto-fired" without an appeals process (Butler 2021), Asda's AI-powered new stocktaking system has been criticised by workers for slowing down their jobs (Organise 2026) and according to the Institute for the Future of Work "quality of life [for workers] negatively correlated with frequency of interaction with newer workplace technologies such as wearables, robotics, AI and ML software" (Soffia et al 2024).**

When workers were asked about their experience of the impacts of AI in the workplace, their responses shed light on how augmentation, degradation and displacement are currently playing out in the labour market (Organise 2025).

- **Augmentation**: 20 per cent said it was already helping them at work (or had the potential to).
- **Degradation**: 21 per cent said it was making their jobs worse.
- **Displacement**: 4 per cent said they had lost their jobs because of AI.

This evidence suggests that AI-driven augmentation and degradation are more dominant trends in the labour market than displacement, although there is clearly a data collection challenge: workers in sectors where labour demand is falling because of AI automation may not actually *know* that this is dampening demand. The latest macroeconomic evidence does support the idea, however, that there is currently no visible economy-wide displacement of jobs due to AI.

The table below provides quotes which give an insight into how augmentation, degradation and displacement are playing out in UK workplaces.

TABLE 1.2: DIRECT WORKER TESTIMONY GIVES AN INSIGHT INTO HOW AI-DRIVEN AUGMENTATION, DEGRADATION AND DISPLACEMENT ARE PLAYING OUT

Augmentation	Degradation	Displacement
"AI is being used to do boring and repetitive task and pull information from several systems to make reports. I spend more of my time on interesting tasks that require more logic or thinking." – Charity manager	"I work [in a community-based healthcare role]. Planning and allocation of calls has now been taken over by AI and some days our workers can be travelling over 60 miles in one shift." – Healthcare worker "[A national supermarket] has announced a new AI tracking system that watches how long we take to do everything at work ... The system is flawed and is going to make even the most loyal staff leave." – Supermarket worker	"My job has pretty much been replaced by AI" – Freelance translator "Junior roles are already being automated by AI" – National journalist

Source: Survey conducted by Organise (2025)

AI DISRUPTION COULD RADICALLY CHANGE THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF THE LABOUR MARKET

Even if AI is currently augmenting and degrading more jobs than it is automating completely, the potential for AI to displace significant numbers of workers in the near future must be taken seriously. There is evidence that AI is already displacing specific roles, such as freelance graphic designers and copyeditors, and a growing volume of anecdotal evidence that many companies and workers are now incorporating AI into their workflows (Demirci et al 2024).

AI's deployment could mark a radical shift in the political economy of the labour market, because – unlike previous waves of automation – the jobs most exposed to AI are overwhelmingly white collar and higher paid (ILO 2025, Henseke et al 2025). In the UK, back office work is currently the most exposed, but other high-skilled jobs could become increasingly affected as AI evolves (Jung and Srinivasa Desikan 2024).

AI's impacts may not be showing up in macroeconomic data yet, but the current public debate generated by rising unemployment rates may presage the politics of a labour market where large numbers of workers become displaced by AI (Burn-Murdoch and O'Connor 2026). Workers who already have precarious positions in the labour market could be made more insecure, while groups of workers who currently have relatively stable positions could experience newfound precarity. Whereas insecurity has mostly been experienced by workers with weaker voices in the public arena, this could soon change if those with higher human and social capital are negatively impacted.

The recent public conversation generated by the falling demand for graduates gives some insight into how the displacement of white collar work by AI could disrupt the political economy of the labour market. The decline in graduate job listings is already undermining the idea of a smooth pathway from higher education into a good career (though there is little evidence that this is primarily attributable to AI). In the most extreme scenarios, AI-driven displacement is projected to completely upend the notion of attaining the "good life" through a career in professional services (Shumer 2026). These near-apocalyptic predictions of AI-induced job losses create a vision of an even more weakened social contract, potentially exacerbating the most damaging trends of post-industrial British political economy.

WORKERS WANT THE POWER TO SHAPE AND ADAPT TO AI'S IMPACTS

AI's disruptive effects and distributional consequences are not fixed. As with earlier processes of technological change, its impact on the labour market will depend in part on the strength of workers' power. Throughout history, worker power has influenced whether technology-driven productivity improvements translated into widespread prosperity or concentrated wealth among the elite (Acemoglu and Johnson 2023). AI represents the latest evolution of this political economy challenge.

WHAT IS WORKER POWER?

Worker power is the control and influence that workers have over decision making in their workplace. It manifests at a collective, organisational and individual level.

- **Collective**: The institutionalised power a group of workers has through organisations like unions or professional associations.
- **Organisational**: Workers' ability to influence decision-making within a firm, realised through mechanisms for worker voice and employee representation.
- **Individual**: Shaped by a worker's position in a particular firm's power structure, and in the wider labour market.

These forms of power combine to determine workers' capacity to influence the introduction of new technologies.

At a macro level, AI has the potential to generate a significant productivity windfall which could accrue disproportionately to businesses and capital owners. The distribution of this windfall will be determined by what happens at the micro level of the firm, and specifically workers' ability to determine how AI is adopted (Gingrich et al 2025). Worker power will determine whether AI technologies improve their experience of work, make their job worse, or render their skills obsolete. Worker power is therefore essential in ensuring that

workers enjoy the benefits of AI, including its potential to boost job satisfaction and drive economic growth.

Workers want the power to determine how AI impacts their working lives. When asked what would help them to adapt to AI, workers cited the following (Organise 2025).

- A meaningful say over how AI is used in their workplace.
- Protection from unfair uses of AI at work.
- Training in new skills as jobs evolve.
- Access to networks of other workers in similar situations.

Progressives can meet this challenge by providing workers with sufficient power to influence AI adoption at the firm level, adapt to its effects in the labour market, and access communities of workers with similar experiences.[1]

The following chapters outline how progressives can empower workers to shape the way AI impacts their working lives, and introduce a new flexible package of worker support that is adapted to the 21st-century economy. Chapter 2 focusses on building new channels of collective and organisational power, while chapters 3 and 4 outline how progressives can strengthen workers' individual power to adapt to AI-driven disruption.

1 This paper focusses on how workers can adapt to and influence AI's impacts at the firm and labour market level – not on the state's role in directing technological innovation by stimulating pro-worker AI technologies. A number of recent reports have made significant contributions to the latter part of the debate, including Jung and Srivinasa Desikan (2024) and Cantwell-Corn (2025).

2. EMPOWERING WORKERS TO SHAPE THE FUTURE OF AI

Worker power will determine the economic impacts of AI. The primary site of contestation will be at the level of the firm. To shape the effects of AI, workers need to influence how AI technologies are deployed in their workplace. This chapter sets out how progressives can shift control over how new technologies are adopted away from capital and toward labour.

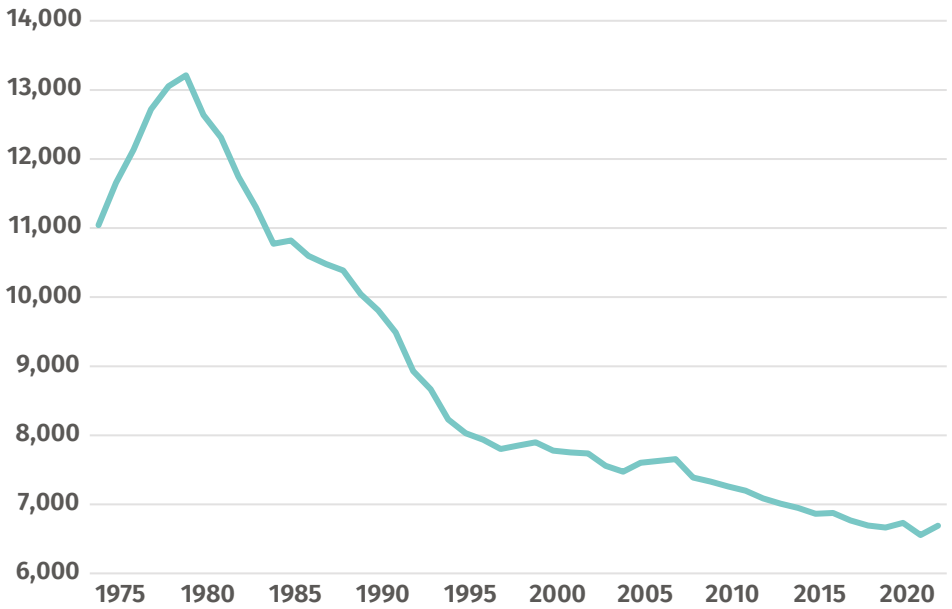
Collective and organisational channels of power will give workers a voice in AI adoption, providing formal consultative and bargaining mechanisms to determine how new technologies affect their work. The starting point for workers is unequal because these forms of power are distributed unevenly across the economy. To give workers power over AI adoption as part of a decade of national renewal, progressives must tackle these power asymmetries.

WORKER POWER IS UNEQUALLY DISTRIBUTED

Workers' access to collective and organisational power is unequal. In Britain's post-industrial political economy, worker power has become increasingly workplace-specific and individualised, creating an imbalanced landscape of economic power.

FIGURE 2.1: TRADE UNION POWER HAS DECLINED SIGNIFICANTLY FROM ITS PEAK IN THE 1970S

Trade union membership (thousands), 1974–2022



Source: IPPR analysis of DBT (2025)

Collective worker power institutions, like trade unions, have declined significantly since their heyday. Union membership peaked in the 1970s, when unions leveraged structural bargaining power over the distribution of national income and exercised sufficient political power to topple successive governments over workers' pay and union rights. More than half of UK employees were union members in 1979; now only one in five are (see figure 2.1), and union power is mostly concentrated in the public sector.

In previous decades, progressive strategies on worker power have focussed on strengthening individual power and "modernising" collective power. New Labour's approach was guided by the emphasis on "education, education, education" and the potential for British workers to take up their place in the burgeoning "knowledge economy" (O'Donovan 2019). Ministers sought to equip workers with skills and knowledge to enhance their individual power in a fast-changing labour market. New Labour allied itself with the TUC's commitment to "partnership" under John Monks and sought to simplify the process of union recognition, but kept in place the Thatcher-era restrictions on industrial action (Daniels and McIlroy 2009). Trade union membership continued to decline (Brown 2011).

As worker power became more workplace-specific and individualised, it also became more unequal. In the UK, the extent of workers' organisational power is entirely at the discretion of employers, meaning it is generally very weak. The UK is an outlier in Europe for its limited workplace-level participation rights for employees. Organisational worker power, in the form of employee representation at board level, is codified into law in most European states (ETUI 2026a). British workers do not enjoy these rights.

Individual power is also unequal. The labour market which emerged from de-industrialisation provided employment opportunities in high-productivity service sectors for some people, but pervasive and debilitating insecurity for many others, especially those at the sharp end of low paid and precarious service work (Goos and Manning 2007). Insecurity has become so prevalent that it amounts to a "structural injustice" in Britain's post-industrial economy (Collins 2024).

In the aftermath of the financial crash, policymakers came to recognise that job insecurity shapes many workers' experience of the labour market (Taylor 2017). Zero hours contracts and the gig economy have become buzzwords for jobs where workers have very little influence over the fundamentals of their contracts of employment, including their hours of work and basic employment rights. The current Labour government is using legislative change to strengthen the individual and collective rights of employed workers through the Employment Rights Act. This legislative approach could be expanded to give workers new, substantive rights to shape AI's deployment.

PROGRESSIVES SHOULD GIVE WORKERS THE POWER TO SHAPE AI DEPLOYMENT

AI demands a renewed focus among progressives on strengthening workers' power. To shape the introduction of AI in their workplace, workers will need a combination of collective and organisational power. But they do not have equal access to either. Any efforts to shore up worker power for the AI economy must level the landscape of economic power, giving all workers a say over how AI affects their working lives.

To address power asymmetries in the UK labour market, progressives should introduce a new legal duty on employers to consult their workforce when deploying AI. This duty should require employers to disclose where they are

adopting AI in ways which will impact what the tasks workers do and the way they are managed, and if it will be used to monitor their performance.

To give workers meaningful decision-making power over the introduction of AI, this duty could require employers to negotiate its use with their workforce. IPPR has previously proposed that the government should legislate to ensure employers engage in negotiation – through trade unions or other channels of worker voice – when introducing technologies used to monitor or track workers (Atkinson and Evans 2025). This duty could be enacted and expanded to cover the use of all AI technologies, as part of the government's planned consultation on the use of surveillance technologies (DBT 2024).

The main trade-off to navigate is how much control over technology adoption should shift from employers to workers. There are currently very few guardrails on how businesses can adopt AI, and this flexibility may make it easier for firms to unlock pockets of growth where the technology delivers productivity improvements. Introducing a duty to require employers to negotiate with their workforce would restrict their freedom in adopting AI. But the risk of not sufficiently empowering workers to shape adoption is that AI automation generates a productivity windfall which is unfairly distributed, thereby worsening inequality and adding to social discontent.

This new requirement should be framed as an opportunity for workers to shape the future of AI. It is likely that a political constituency for this kind of commitment already exists: half of UK adults are worried that AI will take or alter their jobs (Partridge 2025). It should also be framed as an opportunity to improve transparency and trust within the workplace, since the introduction of technologies to monitor and track workers can harm their trust in employers (Parkes 2023).[2]

STRENGTHEN COLLECTIVE POWER THROUGH AN EXPANDED ROLE FOR UNIONS

In workplaces where a trade union is recognised, the presumption should be that this consultation process will occur through collective bargaining. For the 40 per cent of workers in the UK who are covered by a collective agreement, trade unions are likely to be their primary source of influence over AI. This agreement gives workers a channel of power to shape AI adoption through their elected representatives and relevant trade union officials.

Recent union campaigns – like negotiations over the use of algorithmic management technologies by unions in logistics, and ongoing campaigns by unions in the creative industries over the use of AI – provide examples of how union bargaining over AI might work in practice.[3] Giving unions a say over AI adoption can improve the uptake of new technologies while mitigating potentially negative consequences for workers. Evidence shows that industries with stronger institutions of collective power tend to adopt technology more effectively, without negative consequences for workers (Van Overbeke 2023).

Unions' ability to shape the introduction of AI currently depends on their aggregate power and the specific terms of their collective agreements with employers. Through legislating the Employment Rights Act, the government has made it easier

2 Algorithmic tech makes workers more visible to employers, while obscuring their own role from workers (Kellogg et al 2020). In non-unionised warehouses, where workers have little leverage, management can unilaterally implement surveillance and productivity-tracking devices (Reese and Allison 2023). Managers have sometimes used surveillance technology to crack down on workers' collective organisation into unions (Braverman 1974, Rogers 2023).

3 For logistics, see the Hermes/GMB and Royal Mail/CWU agreements (Rolf et al 2022; CWU 2020). For creative industries, see the ongoing campaign by Equity members (Bakare 2025).

for trade unions to organise workplaces and achieve recognition with employers (Carter et al 2026). These changes will support unions to recruit new members and increase their collective power.

However, trade union law does not equip representatives and officials with substantive rights to shape AI adoption. Collective agreements give unions bargaining power over the terms and conditions of employees, and while AI technologies clearly have the potential to significantly impact working conditions, there is no formal presumption that unions have bargaining rights over AI deployment. To secure the right to negotiate over AI's introduction, unions must currently push for this to be included in their collective agreements with employers. Without wider intervention, this is likely to lead to patchy coverage of union bargaining rights over AI, which will depend on the extent of union power in specific workplaces and the willingness of employers to cede control over technology adoption.

Progressives should legislate to require employers to consult with recognised trade unions on the introduction of AI technologies. The TUC has already developed a draft bill which would enact this duty in relation to algorithmic management technologies (Towers 2024). This duty could be expanded to other AI technologies, including generative and agentic AI. Since AI is a broad and rapidly-evolving technological field, ministers would need to consult on the breadth of the legal duty.

BUILD ORGANISATIONAL POWER THROUGH NEW WORKER PARTICIPATION RIGHTS

While unions are a vital source of collective power, most UK workers aren't union members and six in 10 are not covered by a collective agreement. These workers don't currently have immediate access to this channel of power, but they should also have the ability to shape how AI affects their working lives.

Progressives should introduce a new system of legally-codified worker participation rights to facilitate a meaningful consultation process over AI adoption. The aim would be to build workers' organisational power at a significant inflection point for the labour market.

As outlined above, British workers do not have any participation rights enshrined in law. Workers' collective and organisational power relies on voluntarist collective bargaining, which since the late 1970s has been in sustained decline. Codifying participation rights in statute would mark a significant departure from this voluntarist tradition and would significantly equalise the landscape of workers' economic power.

Evidence suggests that worker participation rights are associated with better and fairer economic performance. Countries with strong workers' participation rights perform better on R&D expenditure, employment rates, and levels of poverty and inequality (TUC 2022). Non-union worker participation is currently enacted through voluntary channels like independent works councils or joint consultative committees (Willman et al 2013). These channels are completely at the discretion of employers. Codifying this kind of participation into law would create a much fairer system of worker voice.

There are several options that progressives could take to codify worker participation into law. The first concerns the involvement of workers in existing decision-making structures within a firm's governance (like the board). This is common in Europe, where 14 states – including France, Germany and the Netherlands – have legislation which requires companies in both the private and public sectors to have board-level representation chosen by employees

(ETUI 2026a). The TUC recommends that worker directors, elected by the workforce, should comprise one-third of the board at companies with over 250 staff (TUC 2022).

Another option is to create new worker participation structures within a firm's governance. Countries like Belgium, France and Spain provide workplace representation though independent bodies which co-exist alongside trade unions, like works councils (ETUI 2026b). Parliament could mandate businesses of a certain size to introduce works councils that can influence decisions relating to workers' terms and conditions.

Given the potential scale of AI-driven disruption in the labour market, there is a strong case for progressives opting for a combination of both board level and independent organisational power. The government should equip Acas with the power and resources to support employers to create new systems of participation. To ensure that businesses are accountable, the government should allow workers to raise breaches of the duty with the new Fair Work Agency. The enforcement body should be equipped with the authority and tools to process and investigate claims that employers have breached the new requirement.

These changes would amount to a fundamental rebalancing of power over technology adoption from capital to labour. At this pivotal moment in AI's deployment into the real economy, strengthening collective power and building new forms of organisational power are crucial. These measures would also create a much fairer landscape of worker voice by equalising access to workplace-based organisational power.

However, workers who fall outside the standard employment relationship will struggle to leverage these kinds of powers. The next chapter outlines how the changing nature of modern work demands a complementary strategy on individual worker power.

3. BUILDING FLEXIBLE WORKER POWER FOR THE MODERN ECONOMY

The labour market in which AI is being deployed is not the labour market of the mid-20th century. Many people work in contexts which fall outside of the standard employment relationship. The growth of precarious employment, gig work, self-employment and short-tenure roles has reshaped the landscape of economic power, and AI has the potential to accelerate this fragmentation. The workplace-specific channels of power outlined in chapter 2 – union recognition, collective bargaining, worker participation rights – are all vital, but they presuppose a relatively stable employment relationship between a worker and a single employer.

A share of the workforce already does not have this and AI-driven disruption could quickly and unpredictably grow this insecure part of the labour market. Progressives therefore need a complementary solution; one that travels with the worker rather than attaching to the workplace. This chapter outlines the challenge of rebuilding worker power for the 21st-century economy and how UK trade unions, European countries and policymakers have adapted to the changing labour market.

CONSTITUTING WORKER POWER FOR THE 21ST-CENTURY ECONOMY

A new imagining of worker power requires new institutional infrastructure on a national scale. Only economy-wide infrastructure is capable of strengthening *all* workers' power. The policies offered in the previous chapter will build pathways back into collective power institutions and create new organisational infrastructure through which workers can exercise voice. This will facilitate new forms of engagement by people working in regular contractual arrangements, but progressives also need a solution for people working multiple and short-tenure jobs, and for self-employed people. To do this effectively, it must match the scale of the challenge across four key principles.

1. Flexibility – rebuilding individual power for a changing labour market

The labour market has already changed significantly since the peak of British trade unionism. The private sector has increased as a share of the overall workforce and, more recently, insecure and gig economy work has siloed workers. Workers need flexible support which travels with them across jobs, employers and employment statuses, giving individuals a stable foundation of support, regardless of how fragmented their working lives become.

2. Scale – creating the conditions for renewed collective power

The solution must operate at systems-level, national scale. Lessons can be learnt from attempts to modernise unions in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Despite some isolated successes, these efforts did not deliver system-wide renewal (Tait and Phibbs 2018). The challenge of reimagining the architecture of worker power must be conceived nationally. New national infrastructure could reconnect a far wider group of workers to collective institutions – including unions – than current

voluntary membership models allow, reversing the long decline in collective power by building individual support as a route into collectivism.

3. Relevance – building organisational power around modern expectations

Any new model must respond to shifting cultural expectations. Over the past decade, the rise of the subscription economy has seen a pronounced shift away from "one-size-fits-all" services towards "Netflix-era" tailored offerings built around individual choice and flexible consumption (Lagunes 2024). New, national-scale infrastructure should allow workers to prioritise the forms of power which suit them best, be that training, legal support, union membership or worker collectives.

4. Responsibility – sharing the burden of power building across collective and individual actors

A new model must address who bears responsibility for skilling up workers in the AI era. Over recent decades, UK employers have shifted away from long-term, career-spanning investment toward shorter, modular training tied to immediate needs (Tahir 2023). Workers need individual entitlements they can draw on directly, as well as collective institutions — unions, worker organisations, accredited training bodies — that can bargain for training at scale. Progressives should aim for a model in which individual, organisational and collective power reinforce rather than substitute for one another.

LESSONS ON ADAPTING WORKER POWER FOR THE 21ST-CENTURY ECONOMY

The evolution of trade unions, other countries' approaches to widespread worker power initiatives, and examples of UK policies designed to improve workers' lives provide insights into how flexible modern power could work in practice.

UK trade unions

Lessons can be learned from attempts to modernise trade unions. Unions themselves have recognised that the traditional workplace can no longer function as the only anchor point for collective representation. These work patterns are already more common with younger people and most common in the private sector (Tait and Phibbs 2018). AI-driven disruption to the labour market could rapidly and unpredictably lead to rises in mobility, short-tenure work and self-employment, creating a need for new forms of portable, cross-employer support.

Unions representing self-employed workers – particularly in the creative industries – offer useful models of portable, cross-employer support. Bectu, a union for self-employed and freelance workers in the creative industries, provides rate cards for members and negotiates national agreements covering pay and conditions across employers (Gipson 2020). Similarly, Equity, the performing arts and entertainment trade union, has collective agreements and minimum pay rates across the entertainment industries which are not exclusive to union members (Equity 2026).

The TUC's WorkSmart initiative – a blend of individual and collective worker power opportunities tailored to each worker's needs – also provides inspiration for how flexible worker power could be put into practice. The WorkSmart career coaching app was developed after a year-long research project with young people. Its aim was to "engage young workers where they are and bring them on a journey to collectivism at work", creating a pathway from individualised support to collective power and, ultimately, union membership (TUC 2019).

Recent research also points to workers valuing both individual support and collective power. In a survey of 2,000 workers, 70 per cent said they wanted

a blend of personal support and collective power at work (Organise 2025). This underlines the fact that workers are not turning away from collectivism, but that they do want tailored support that recognises the complexity and instability of modern working life.

These initiatives shed light on the principles behind a reanimation of worker power for the 21st century.

- A systems-level approach is needed; while trade union pilots to modernise for a digital labour market showed promise, they were unable to meet the scale of change.
- There is not a binary choice between building individual and collective worker power; unions themselves have acknowledged the pipeline from individual support to collective power.

European worker support

Across Europe, examples of worker protection systems demonstrate that employment-related benefits can be portable and universal. These models show how rights and support can follow workers across jobs, sectors and employment statuses.

Scandinavia's Ghent system offers one of the strongest examples of portable worker protection. Here, unions administer unemployment benefits, which ensure collective institutions support workers through different employment statuses and jobs. This system has helped sustain some of the highest rates of union membership and collective bargaining in Europe (Thomas 2023). Its key lesson is clear: when essential individual worker support is provided through collective institutions, workers remain connected to structures that amplify their power. Individual worker support becomes a route into collectivism.

Germany provides another powerful model. Sector-wide training levies – jointly governed by unions and employer associations – fund portable skills development across workers' careers (BIBB 2026). Combined with sectoral collective bargaining, this ensures that minimum standards, rights and training entitlements follow workers, regardless of their employer. The German experience shows how shared, cross-employer funding can underpin a universal system of worker development, productivity, and protection.

Belgium's social security system extends core protections to self-employed workers through mandatory contributions to social insurance funds, providing them with access to basic healthcare, sickness and disability benefits, and maternity protection. Under the Belgian social security scheme, self-employed workers who join a recognised social insurance fund and pay the requisite contributions are covered for medical care, sickness and disability benefits and maternity entitlements, alongside pensions. Belgium's social protection framework shows it is possible to incorporate freelancers and other self-employed workers into its statutory social insurance system, albeit with variations in level and conditions compared with standard employee schemes (Samyn 2024).

Taken together, these models illustrate two shared principles.

- Collective governance ensures benefits are accountable and worker led.
- Universal portability supports workers through job transitions and work instability.

UK policy initiatives to support workers

Two government policies introduced over the last decade – the Apprenticeship Levy and auto-enrolment pensions – offer useful examples of systems-level, work-related initiatives that can inform new models of worker power in the AI era.

The Apprenticeship Levy is a payroll-based training tax introduced in 2017 to encourage employers to invest in apprenticeships and help build workforce skills. Despite its intentions, evidence indicates that the levy has not worked as planned. Since its introduction, employer investment in training has fallen by £9.5 billion in real terms, while skills shortages have increased and apprenticeship starts for under-25s have dropped by around a third (Dromey and Otto 2025). Moreover, significant amounts of levy funds raised have gone unspent (Shaw 2024). Critics argue that the levy's rigid design, narrow focus on apprenticeships, and lack of broader training flexibility have constrained its effectiveness at stimulating skills investment and addressing labour market needs.

Lessons can be drawn from this when designing new and evolved forms of worker power. The practical infrastructure elements of a digital account show that a national tech solution, customisable to different needs (in this case to individuals rather than businesses), is possible. A wide range of accredited worker support initiatives are critical to avoid the Apprenticeship Levy's rigid focus which left levy funds unspent.

The UK's introduction of auto-enrolment pensions is a good example of systems-level, work-related political and cultural change. Automatic enrolment was introduced through the Pensions Act 2008, which required employers to enrol eligible workers into a pension scheme unless they chose to opt out. The Act also created the National Employment Savings Trust (NEST) as a low-cost default option (DWP 2022).

Evidence shows the policy worked. Participation among eligible private sector workers jumped sharply and is now at near universal levels for eligible workers. Total contributions and savings have risen substantially across industries, and by framing saving as the default, complexity and hesitation were reduced for both employers and workers – a behavioural "nudge" aligned with wider social goals to improve financial resilience (Karjalainen 2022).

Building on the success of auto-enrolment pensions, policymakers have also explored the idea of auto-enrolment into trade union membership (Dromey 2018). Three lessons stand out for designing worker power in the AI era.

- The importance of a supportive and diverse coalition of stakeholders over a decade.
- A national, systems-level policy that affects all employed workers, ensuring benefits are attached to workers rather than jobs.
- Phased implementation which increased eligible workers and contribution rates over time.

The next chapter outlines how progressives can combine these lessons to imagine a flexible worker power fit for the 21st century.

4. CREATING A NEW SYSTEM OF "PORTABLE BENEFITS"

Workers need adaptable, personalised forms of power for a fast-changing labour market – supporting new AI-era skills needs, managing uncertainty and built around modern expectations of choice. Progressives should invest in "portable benefits": a flexible system of worker support tailored to the AI era, capable of rebuilding worker power as part of a decade of national renewal.

This chapter sets out how portable benefits can build individual worker power that supports workers in the modern economy of today and tomorrow. They would offer a new institutional foundation for worker power at the scale required for the AI transition.

A NEW, FLEXIBLE SYSTEM OF PORTABLE BENEFITS

Portable benefits would work through three mechanisms:

1. **A worker support levy**: an auto-enrolled system that generates a shared fund for worker power, training and representation for all workers.
2. **A digital "portable benefits wallet"**: giving each worker tailored options on how to spend their funds based on their employment and needs – from collective bargaining access to training credits to legal assistance.
3. **Accredited worker-power organisations**: workers would use their portable benefits on union membership, worker collectives, and legal and training organisations that meet certain standards.

WORKER SUPPORT LEVY

The worker support levy is an auto-enrolled contribution that generates a shared fund to support worker power, training and representation. Three broad options exist for funding it.

One option would be an AI windfall levy, applied to firms that benefit most from automation and productivity gains. AI has the potential to generate large economic rents for firms that adopt it early and at scale. A modest levy on these gains could recycle part of that windfall into the workforce, funding retraining, legal protections and collective bargaining capacity. The advantage of this approach is that it directly links the social cost of technological disruption to those who profit most from it.

The risk is that revenues may be volatile and politically contested, particularly given the global nature of AI firms. Another issue is that levies could be seen as penalising firms for innovating. However, this conflates the target of the levy with its effect. The worker support levy would apply not to investment or R&D expenditure, but to the economic gains realised once automation is deployed at scale. Firms that invest heavily without capturing windfall gains would contribute little. Where automation generates significant productivity gains to shareholders while displacing workers, the levy requires firms to bear a modest portion of what they would otherwise pass on to the state and affected communities. A well-designed levy won't dampen innovation incentives; it may, however, be necessary

to sustain the political and social conditions under which continued technological adoption remains viable.

A second option would be worker contributions, collected through PAYE or self-assessment in the same way as auto-enrolment pension payments. This would mirror systems in which workers build up entitlements through regular, small contributions. It's also an important principle of union membership that members pay 'dues' themselves. The advantage is that it creates a strong sense of ownership and portability. However, on its own it risks placing the burden on those least able to afford it, particularly low paid and insecure workers.[4]

A third option would be employer contributions, either on all employers or on sectors where work is particularly fragmented or platform-mediated. In the US, a proposal for a portable benefit model would require digital labour platforms or labour 'brokers' to pay a percentage of each contract or transaction into a portable benefit fund on behalf of workers (Gervis and Steward 2021). This model is designed to reflect the reality that businesses are the primary beneficiaries of flexible labour and should therefore contribute to redressing worker instability issues.

In practice, the most robust model would be a hybrid system, combining employer and worker contributions and, where politically feasible, a modest AI windfall levy. This would generate sufficient scale to fund meaningful worker power infrastructure while ensuring the most vulnerable low income workers receive contributions too.

A DIGITAL "PORTABLE BENEFITS WALLET"

Every worker would be given access to a portable benefits wallet, a secure digital account where their contributions and entitlements across any number of income streams are held and which they control. This wallet would allow workers to allocate their portable benefits across a menu of accredited options, such as trade union membership, legal advice, training, or insurance products.

International precedents show that this kind of credit-based system can work at scale. Belgium's eco-cheques and Sweden's wellness credits allow workers to receive 'credits' which can be spent only on approved categories of goods and services. A similar principle could be applied here, ensuring that funds are used for worker power.

If credits are not used, they could roll over or be automatically directed into a default option, such as auto-enrolment trade union membership, preventing funds from expiring unused (Dromey 2018). There would need to be a verified algorithmic process for determining the most suitable default solution for each worker, especially for workers in insecure work and multi employment where this may change frequently.

While auto-enrolment pensions demonstrate that default enrolment dramatically increases participation, the portable benefits model has some differences which must be tested to prove the hypothesis. Workers must actively choose how to allocate credits, not simply accept a default investment strategy as with most company pension schemes. Pilot programs should test different default options and communication strategies to maximise active participation.

4 There are groups who would risk being excluded if the system relied only on PAYE or self-assessment. Very low paid workers, those in informal or cash-in-hand work, and people earning under £1,000 who do not submit tax returns would not accrue entitlements. People outside the labour market, including young people locked out of entry-level jobs by automation, would also not accumulate benefits. These gaps underline the need for complementary access routes, for example through state-funded credits for extremely low earners or alternative stronger provision for job seekers.

There are also important privacy and governance risks to manage. The wallet must be designed so that choices about collective representation cannot be monitored by employers or used for retaliation, and workers must not be required to declare union membership in order to use their benefits.

ACCREDITED WORKER-POWER ORGANISATIONS

Portable benefits would be spent through a regulated menu of accredited worker-power organisations. These would include traditional trade unions, new worker associations, and organisations to provide support for specific issues such legal advice, training or insurance.

This design reflects a deliberate logic: that individual support and collective power are not binary but interconnected. Scandinavia's Ghent system referenced earlier offers the clearest illustration of this principle in practice. By routing unemployment benefits through trade unions, Ghent system countries created a direct link between the individual support worker's needs and the collective institutions that amplify their power, sustaining union density rates much higher than in the UK. The lesson is not that the UK should replicate Ghent directly, but that when workers access essential individual support through collective institutions, they remain connected to those institutions over time. Individual entitlement becomes a route into collectivism.

Portable benefits would apply this logic to the AI era. Workers who might never have considered or been aware of union membership would find themselves connected to collective institutions through choosing how to spend their wallet entitlements. This would encourage trade unions to remain the primary institutions for collective bargaining in workplaces and sectors where such bargaining is viable, while extending their reach into the growing parts of the labour market where it currently is not. Portable benefits could incentivise millions more workers to join unions and pay dues automatically through their wallets, removing financial and administrative barriers and beginning to rebuild the collective power that decades of labour market fragmentation have eroded.

Alongside this, new worker associations and digital collectives would provide representation for freelancers, platform workers and the self-employed who aren't served by workplace-based unionism. These could organise across platforms, professions or geographic regions, building collective voice in fragmented industries or sectors.

Several organisations already use trade unions to provide individual services to members – for example, Valla, a legal platform to help identify and resolve workplace issues affordably, and training providers such as e-Careers and the Workers' Educational Association (WEA). Providing customised access to these services complements standard trade union membership and offers the flexibility and customisation that many workers now want.

Other worker associations or organisations include the Organise Network, which supports workers to self-organise to improve pay and conditions at work, and the Association of Independent Professionals and the Self-Employed (IPSE), a membership group for the self-employed. Other worker power organisations that offer solidarity memberships include the Worker Support Centre and the Work Rights Centre who help the most disadvantaged people in Britain access employment justice.

Organisations would become accredited through a national body, potentially overseen by (or developed within) the Fair Work Agency or the certification officer. Accreditation would require clear governance, transparency and accountability,

as well as proven delivery of worker benefit. Workers would be signposted to accredited providers through their digital wallets.

One of the aims of accredited organisations would be to provide workers with the training necessary to adapt to AI. Although the government has announced an AI skills hub to offer free training to 10 million workers by 2030, learning AI skills is not the only problem to solve; workers may find it advantageous to retrain with manual skills or other professions entirely (DSIT 2026). There's also been immediate criticism of the government's AI skills hub course offering, which provided links to third-party providers with out-of-date or irrelevant content (Titcomb 2026).

Many employers are focussed on rapid AI rollouts, but there isn't evidence that the same employer investment is being put into re-skilling workers whose roles may be automated. Portable benefits help address this by incentivising workers to take direct control over their training. As AI reshapes their roles, workers can access relevant re-skilling without depending on employer approval. This could be done with existing providers (some already used by unions) such as Coursera, Simplilearn, and NVQ qualifications or for specific industries such as green energy platforms like Greenworkx.

This system would do more than fund existing institutions. It could create a new market for worker power, driving innovation in how representation, training and support are delivered. It would also allow unions to scale into new sectors, enable new organisational forms to emerge, and ensure that worker voice evolves alongside the changing labour market.

ANTICIPATED EFFECTS OF PORTABLE BENEFITS

Taken together, the worker support levy, the portable benefits wallet and the system of accredited worker-power organisations provide a practical, scalable way to rebuild worker power. They combine collective strength with individual choice, national scale with personal control, and long-term security with flexibility, creating a new social infrastructure capable of meeting the profound changes now reshaping work.

As a national, systems-level initiative, introducing portable benefits would signify a cultural reset on the importance of worker voice, engagement and influence; a reversal of decades of deliberate political weakening of trade unions in particular (Machin 2000). Crucially, it would also stimulate a more dynamic market in worker-power organisations themselves. By giving workers portable funds they can direct toward the organisations that best serve their needs, portable benefits encourage unions, worker associations and other accredited bodies to remain relevant, responsive and effective. This is a departure from models that rely solely on employer recognition or legislative mandate to sustain worker institutions; instead, it roots their legitimacy in the active choices of workers themselves.

Workplace-based support systems are not naturally geared toward job transitions. Employer-provided training ends when employment ends, and workplace-specific union benefits such as collective bargaining agreements become irrelevant when workers move on. Portable benefits address this by attaching types of worker power support to the worker, not just the job. But this portability does more than smooth transitions; it actively enables them. Workers who currently feel unable to leave a job for fear of losing access to training, benefits or collective support would find that constraint removed. By making worker power genuinely portable, this system has the potential to make labour markets more dynamic: encouraging movement between roles and

sectors, supporting reskilling, and reducing the kind of labour market lock-in that concentrates risk among the most precarious workers.

Access to accredited organisations such as training providers, legal advisors, trade unions and worker networks would remain available whether someone is employed, self-employed, between jobs, or moving into entirely new sectors.

The most significant potential of portable benefits, however, lies in how they reconfigure the relationship between individual, organisational and collective worker power. The current landscape is one of stark imbalance. Collective power has declined sharply, organisational power remains largely at employers' discretion, and individual power is highly unequal across the labour market. Portable benefits intervene first at the individual level – giving workers direct, personal entitlements – but are designed so that strengthening individual power becomes a channel into collective power, rather than a substitute for it.

For unions, portable benefits could boost membership by encouraging workers to direct their wallets toward existing collective infrastructure. They would open new funding streams as workers gain stronger incentives to join their relevant union, create membership pipelines that bring millions of currently non-unionised workers into contact with collective institutions, and preserve unions' unique role in workplace-based bargaining.

For lower paid private sector workers and the self-employed – those most exposed to AI's unequal impacts and the least likely to be unionised – portable benefits offer a critical lifeline during a period of increasing insecurity. Easy-to-access individual support such as training platforms, WorkerTech tools that help workers track hours and challenge underpay, or accessible legal advice platforms all provide an immediate, practical floor of individual power. WorkerTech platforms could partner with unions to provide a pathway from individual support to collective bargaining, consistent with the TUC's identified growth strategy (TUC 2019), making individual support a route into collectivism.

For higher paid private sector workers and self-employed professionals – those who have historically relied on strong individual power but have little experience of collective action – portable benefits open a new channel. As AI could degrade or displace roles that have previously felt secure, this group may find collective institutions newly relevant. Portable benefits meet them where they are, offering individual support first, while making collective options visible, accessible and easy to adopt.

THE PATH TO PORTABLE BENEFITS

Building portable benefits is a decade-long project requiring sustained political will, broad coalition-building, and careful phased implementation. The model has the potential to reverse decades of worker power decline and create infrastructure suited to a fast-changing, unpredictable job market.

Success requires engagement across trade unions, other worker organisations, progressive parties, and responsible employers. Unions must be convinced that portable benefits augment rather than replace their role. Other worker organisations need to see opportunities for sustainable funding. And employers need to understand the business case: reduced turnover, improved skills, better workplace relations, and level playing fields. This coalition building must begin early and continue throughout implementation.

Any new initiative with a price tag will face political obstacles. The funding mechanism chosen (worker contributions, employer levy, AI windfall tax, or hybrid) will determine both the scale of resources available and the political feasibility.

Following the auto-enrolment pensions model, a phased approach can help manage costs, while demonstrating early successes can build the case for broader implementation. This allows time to develop robust technology infrastructure, refine accreditation standards, and demonstrate value before reaching full scale. Contribution rates could also start modest and increase over time as the system proves its worth.

Before national rollout, pilot programs in specific sectors or regions could test different design elements: funding mechanisms, wallet interfaces, default options, accreditation processes. Rigorous evaluation of these pilots would identify what works and what needs adjustment, building evidence for the full system.

The challenges are significant, but so is the need. As AI is predicted to disrupt work at unprecedented speed, the question is not whether to reimagine worker power infrastructure, but how to do so effectively to withstand unpredictable changes over the next decade. Portable benefits offer a comprehensive answer: a system that combines individual choice with collective strength, modern delivery with enduring principles, and practical mechanisms with ambitious goals. They represent a genuine opportunity to reanimate worker power for the AI era.

5. CONCLUSION

We stand at a pivotal moment in the history of work. Artificial intelligence is not a distant prospect – it is already reshaping jobs, restructuring industries, and redrawing the boundaries between human and machine labour. The question is not whether AI will disrupt working life, but who will have the power to shape that disruption – and whose interests it will ultimately serve.

Throughout history, the consequences of technological change have never been technologically determined. They have been politically and institutionally determined, shaped by the balance of power between capital and labour, and by the choices governments make about how to regulate, tax and harness new technologies. AI is no different. If workers lack the power to influence how AI is introduced into their workplaces, the productivity gains it generates risk accruing overwhelmingly to those who own and deploy it. If, on the other hand, workers are equipped with a meaningful voice and genuine agency, AI could be steered toward outcomes that raise living standards, improve job quality and distribute prosperity more evenly.

This report has argued for two complementary pillars of progressive policy. The first is a new statutory duty requiring employers to disclose their use of AI and to consult or negotiate with workers over its introduction. Where workers are organised in trade unions, this duty would strengthen existing collective bargaining. Where they are not, it would create new channels of worker voice – board-level representation for workers and new independent committees to shape workplace policy – which are capable of holding employers to account. Backed by the enforcement powers of the Fair Work Agency, this duty would give workers a genuine stake in decisions that profoundly affect their lives.

The second pillar is a new system of portable benefits: a national, auto-enrolled infrastructure that attaches rights, resources and representation to workers rather than jobs. Combining a worker support levy, a digital benefits wallet and a network of accredited worker power organisations, portable benefits would extend meaningful power to workers who are most exposed to AI's disruptive effects and least protected by existing institutions. Portable benefits would constitute a genuine reanimation of worker power for the 21st century.

Neither of these proposals are simple to deliver. Both require sustained political commitment, careful coalition building and phased implementation over time. But the scale of the challenge demands ambition. Workers themselves are clear: they want the power to shape AI's effects in their workplaces, the support to adapt to its disruption in the wider labour market, and the solidarity of communities of workers who share their experience. Progressive policymakers have both the opportunity and the responsibility to meet that demand to deliver a decade of national renewal.

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