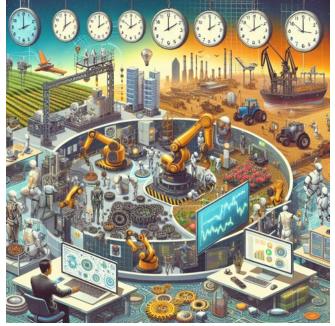# Cyborg Workers 2.0: The Past, Present and Future of Automated Labour

- The Social and Environmental Costs of Big Tech -

'The Ecologies of Automated Labor' by DALL-E 3, August 16, 2024.[1]

International Conference at the European Trade Union Institute
Brussels, Belgium

February 13 and 14, 2025

With a keynote lecture by

Ursula Huws (University of Hertfordshire)

Additional keynote speakers to be announced.

In recent years, the Big Tech industry has garnered increasing attention as a panacea for societal challenges. Various technological fixes and automation solutions promise to solve the ecological crisis, democratize education and access to information, enhance global connectivity and provide resources and platforms for job creation, economic growth and the development of new industries. Nevertheless, while emphasis has often been placed on the creation of value through innovation in the tech industry, it is equally crucial to address the phenomenon of value *extraction*–i.e., the exploitation of various labour activities and scarce material resources–to grasp the social, political, economic and environmental implications of automation and technological advances.

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[1] The image was generated by DALL-E 3, an Open AI bot. Asked about how much energy and labor DALL-E 3 consumed to create the image, the bot had no answer.

Important social impacts of the Big Tech industry include concerns about the mass automation of labour leading to job displacement and social unrest, the gig economy fostering precarious working conditions and the exploitation of AI crowdworkers primarily in the Global South. Additionally, there are worries about the rapid societal changes induced by technological advancements and automation solutions, privacy infringements through the collection and commodification of user data and the adverse effects of social media on mental health.

From an ecological perspective, the environmental impacts of the Big Tech industry encompass concerns over programmed obsolescence contributing to electronic waste, the substantial and increasing energy consumption of data centers and technology infrastructure and the environmental degradation associated with the extraction of rare earth elements and minerals for electronic device manufacturing. These phenomena also imply important geopolitical consequences, including worker exploitation in the Global South, increasing climate refugees, and trade between political and economic adversaries.

The discourse surrounding the activities of the Big Tech industry has extensively examined the social ramifications of automation solutions as well as the ecological implications of automated technologies within the domain of Big Tech. However, the *intersection and relationship* between the social and ecological costs of technological innovation and the automation of labour have received comparatively limited attention. This conference thus seeks to critically examine these social, political, economic and environmental issues related to automation and innovation in the Big Tech industry. It seeks to question the presumed symbiosis between technological and economic progress and societal well-being as well as to pursue the question of whether and to what extent the social and environmental impacts of emerging technologies are interrelated. Moreover, we aim to delve into the historical roots that have shaped the current state of Big Tech and the pressing social and environmental challenges of the present day. Of particular interest is the exploration of the role of labour automation in reshaping employment landscapes and the potential repercussions for workers worldwide. Still further, we seek to engage intersectional (feminist, postcolonial, decolonial, posthumanist and other) perspectives in the pursuit of a more equitable and sustainable future.

We invite scholars from diverse disciplines—including history, philosophy, environmental studies, ecology, sociology, anthropology, economics and related fields—to contribute their insights and expertise. We encourage interdisciplinary perspectives to foster a comprehensive understanding of the complex relationships between technology, capitalism, society, labour and the environment. More specifically, we seek contributions that address the following questions:

- What are the social consequences of job displacement and how does the potential mass automation of labour due to Big Tech innovation contribute to it?
- To what extent does automation impact and exploit the environment and its resources? And what are the hidden labours of environmental exploitation?
- What is the relationship between the social and environmental impacts of automation and technological developments?
- How has automation been implemented, discussed, and resisted in the past, and how do past experiences differ from contemporary ones?
- What is the effect of automation on creating precarious working conditions and labour? How have automation and IT developments shaped capital accumulation?

- What are the impacts of technological innovation on gender relations and norms and labours of care?

Our conference builds on conversations and interventions launched at the international conference, "Cyborg Workers: The Past, Present, and Future of Automated Work," which took place at the Aarhus Institute of Advanced Studies in June 2023.

The current conference organizing team includes Aída Ponce Del Castillo (ETUI, Belgium), Magdalena Malecka (Aarhus Institute of Advanced Studies, Denmark), Philipp Reick (Technische Universität Berlin, Germany), Rabih Jamil (University of Montreal, Canada), Joel Bock (Old Dominion University, United States), Michele Santoro (Italy), Sarah Earnshaw (Katholische Universität Eichstätt-Ingolstadt, Germany), and Richard A. Bachmann (University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, United States).

Call for Abstracts

Please **submit your proposal** of no more than **400 words** as well as **a short bio** of no more than **150 words**, via **this Google form**. For co-authored papers, please identify a first author. If accepted, the first author will be presenting the co-authored paper at the conference.

The **submission deadline** for proposals is **Friday, November 1, 2024**.

We will send out **acceptance notifications by mid-November.** We will **prioritize notifying participants who will need a visa** to travel to Brussels. Please let us know in the Google form if you will need a visa so we can prepare supporting documentation in a timely manner.

We also strive to make limited funds available to accepted participants (first authors) to cover travel and accommodation expenses. Preference will be given to scholars from the Global South. We will be in touch about the details with accepted participants.

Should you have any **questions**, please feel free to **contact Richard A. Bachmann** (North America and Global South Contact) at **ribachm@umich.edu** or **Michele Santoro** (Europe Contact) at **santoromichele7047@gmail.com**.
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