

## **Trade unions and Digitalisation in Norway and the UK: Findings from the grocery retail sector**

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## Research Aims

The wider research project, of which this report is a part, seeks to explore the role and influence of trade unions in shaping digital technology and its outcomes in four sectors in Norway and the UK. The project addressed two central questions. First, what involvement and influence do unions have in the implementation and use of digital technologies? Second, what factors affect unions' ability to shape better outcomes for workers? The project focused on lower and intermediate-level workers, specifically:

- **shop-floor workers in grocery retail;**
- production operatives in food and drink processing;
- administrative and clerical workers in financial services; and
- administrative and clerical workers in hospitals.

The researchers worked with trade unions in each country to identify key challenges and opportunities, along with the initiatives currently taking place across the sector. This report discusses findings from the **grocery retail sector**, focusing on **in-store workers in 'brick-and-mortar' supermarkets**, and addresses the following aspects:

- Union involvement the introduction and implementation of digital technologies.
- Union influence in relation to: (a) job losses; (b) labour scheduling; and (c) the monitoring and surveillance of in-store workers.
- Union perspectives on ways to support and bolster unions' role in technology decisions.

## Research Background

Recent years have witnessed intense debate surrounding the ‘Fourth Industrial Revolution’ and the impact of digitalisation on jobs and job quality. While much debate has focused on potential job losses (Frey and Osborne 2017, Arntz et al 2016), there are also important questions around how tasks change, the impact on skill, and the role of technology in the surveillance and monitoring of workers. Critical commentators have warned against ‘technological determinism’, arguing that outcomes are not driven solely by technology, but also depend on public policy, institutions, social actors and workplace contestation (Dølvik and Steen 2018, Lloyd and Payne 2019).

Trade unions are important actors in shaping the use and implementation of new technology in support of workers’ multiple interests. Previous studies in the 1970s and 1980s, however, suggest unions have often struggled to exert influence (Beirne and Ramsay 1992). In the UK, where some unions experimented with ‘New Technology Agreements’ (Williams and Steward 1985), unions arrived ‘too late’ in the decision-making process, and often lacked the knowledge to influence complex IT systems (Deery 1988). Unions fared better in Germany and the Nordic countries, but even here they were not always involved in high-level planning decisions (Sandberg 1985, Deutsch 1986).

Today, the context is even more challenging with ‘neo-liberalisation’, financialisation, and union decline in many European countries (Baccaro and Howell 2017, Visser 2019). The general position taken by unions is that technology has the potential to impact positively or negatively on workers, and that shaping its use to benefit workers and society depends on collective voice and influence (TUC 2017, STUC 2018, Lloyd and Payne 2019). This depends on the power that unions exercise at different levels (national policy, sector and workplace), the approaches taken by dominant actors (government, senior managers), and unions’ own strategies, resources and capabilities (Gasparri and Tassinari 2020, Lloyd and Payne 2021). However, the question remains: *what role are unions playing today?*

Most research focuses either on the ‘platform’ and ‘gig’ economy or, in the case of manufacturing, ‘Industry 4.0’, where attention centres on Germany and Italy. A neglected – yet vitally important – area is the service economy where most of the

workforce are employed. A recent report by Uniglobal (2021) examined the views of 50 trade unionists across Europe. It found that service industries are among those most affected by digitalisation, but these processes can be hard to disentangle from wider restructuring driven by shareholder pressures and companies looking to make cost savings. Where unions are involved in technology decisions, they often feel that this happens ‘too late’, with unions forced into a reactive position aimed at mitigating its worst effects or acting as ‘helpdesks for restructuring.’

The Uniglobal report also notes that the reluctance of management to involve workers and their representatives in decision-making processes is a key reason why management-driven change so often fails. Dealing with technological change can present challenges for unions used to dealing with traditional bargaining items, such as pay and conditions. If unions are to shape digitalisation, they need to be involved early on, have access to all relevant information, and possess the necessary knowledge and expertise to understand technological changes, as well as communicate the benefits of union and worker involvement.

## Comparing Norway and the UK

Norway and the UK were selected for comparison as they offer stark contrasts in their institutional environments and the power relations between social actors. The UK is often seen as more liberalised economy (Lloyd and Payne 2016), while Norway is part of ‘the Nordic model’ (Løken et al 2013, Alsos and Trygstad 2018). **Table 1** summarises key differences between the two countries.

**Table 1:** Key differences between the UK and Norwegian models

<b>UK (neo-liberal economy)</b>	<b>Norway (Nordic welfare state)</b>
Union decline and marginalisation	Strong unions and an enduring 'tripartite' model involving the state and 'social partners'
Weakly-regulated labour market	Strongly regulated labour market involving extensive collective regulation and the law
Extensive low wage labour market and high income inequality	High wage economy and low income inequality
Relatively weak productivity	Relatively strong productivity
Union density: 23% Collective bargaining coverage: 41% (public sector: 91%; private sector: 21.4%)	Union density: 50% Collective bargaining coverage: 70% (public sector: universal; private sector: 52%)
Weak employer organisation	Strong employer organisation
No codetermination in law (e.g. no rights to workers on company board')	Statutory codetermination in companies above a certain size, including work environment committees
No legal rights for unions to be informed and consulted about new technology (only redundancies)	The Basic Agreement and Work Environment Act provide for union involvement in changes affecting workforce.
New technology and work practices are the two areas where unions are least likely to bargain or consult (van Wanrooy et al 2013). CIPD (2020) found that 21% of employees in the private sector report worker representatives being consulted over technology.	Tradition of union involvement in technological rationalisation for productivity-driven competitiveness, forged in the core manufacturing sector (Dølvik and Steen 2018).
Relatively low incidence of jobs characterised by high task discretion and high learning intensity. Relatively high incidence characterised by 'lean production' and Taylorist work organisation (Lorenz 2015)	Relatively high incidence of jobs characterised by high task discretion and high learning intensity. Relatively low incidence characterised by 'lean production' and Taylorist work organisation (Lorenz 2015)

Data Sources: Nergaard 2020, DBEIS 2022

## Grocery Sector Background

Prior to the pandemic, retail accounted for one in ten workers in developed economies (Bözkurt and Grugulis 2011:4), with grocery retail continuing to be the largest sub-sector. Grocery retailing is often noted for the dominance of large supermarket retailers who squeeze down costs through their supply chain in a sector characterised by intense competition and low margins. While most research focuses on the UK and US, the sector has achieved a reputation for low pay, extensive use of part-time and fractional contracts, short and variable hours, and high volumes of student labour (Van Klaveran and Voss Dahm 2011, Carré and Tilly 2017). **Table 2** summarises key features of the competitive environment in the grocery retail sector in the UK and Norway.

**Table 2:** The grocery retail sector in the UK and Norway

UK	Norway
Dominated by 'the Big Four' supermarkets – Tesco, Sainsburys, Asda and Morrisons (recently acquired by a US private-equity firm). Co-op is a smaller player in the market.	Dominated by Norgesgruppen (includes Meny and Kiwi), Coop and REMA 1000. These three comprise 96% of the market.
Intense competition from foreign-owned 'discounters' (Aldi; Lidl) and online only supermarkets (Ocado)	High barriers for foreign entrants
Early pioneer of e-grocery market (McKevitt 2017)	E-grocery market emerged later but is growing. Most Norwegians still favour short and frequent visits to their local store

New '4.0 technologies', such as 'AI', 'Big Data' and 'The Internet of Things', promise to radically transform retail operations, yet research suggests that this has yet to take off (Barile et al 2018). The main developments in digital technologies has been the growth in online shopping and 'omni-channel' service delivery, combining online and in-store offerings to customers, coupled with developments in warehousing and

logistics (Hunt and Rolf 2020). For in-store workers, digitalisation may include the use of self-service checkouts, labour scheduling software, barcodes and till scanners, handheld scanners for ordering goods, digital pricing, digital shelf-labelling, smart sensors and CCTV/cameras.

Commentators suggest a number of future scenarios for a more digitalised retail sector (Wallace-Stephens and Lockey 2019). There are concerns that digitalisation will reduce demand for labour and lead to job losses as more shopping moves on-line and supermarkets experiment with ‘cashier-less’ stores (Harrison 2018). While retail workers are often seen as vulnerable to automation due to their ‘routine’ job tasks (Frey and Osborne 2017), customer preferences for social interaction and being served by a human may present limits to automation. Over the past 15 years, employment levels in retail have remained fairly stable in Europe, and few are predicting rapid and substantial job losses (Hunt and Rolf 2020). **Table 3** shows retail employment trends in the Norway and UK have not changed significantly since 2008, excepting the impact of the pandemic.

**Table 3:** Total employment in retail in the UK and Norway

Year	UK	Norway
2008	3,106,926	214,448
2012	3,062,192	213,964
2018	3,214,535	232,094
2020	2,926,900	211,623

Source: Eurostat, Office for National Statistics

Some scenarios for the future of retail focus on the potential to reduce routine tasks and expand skilled work and customer interaction, others highlight greater scope for the monitoring and surveillance of workers, data collection, labour scheduling, deskilling and work intensification (Evans and Kitchin 2018). Rolf and Harris (2022) also highlight the use of ‘automated self-service HR’ for delivering payslips, work rotas, and training resources via an app on a smartphone.



Hunt and Rolf (2022) note that the retail sector in most developed countries is typified by levels of unionisation and collective bargaining coverage below the national and service sector average, and that partnership-oriented and service-based unionism predominate (Lynch et al 2011). Strikes are relatively rare. Reflecting their national industrial relations and labour market ‘models’, there are differences in the role played by employer organisations and unions in the retail sector in the UK and Norway, as summarised in **Table 4**.

**Table 4:** The role of unions and employers in retail sector in the UK and Norway

UK	Norway
No sectoral collective bargaining – the employers’ body, The British Retail Consortium, is mainly a lobby group.	Multi-level bargaining. The main level is the sectoral collective agreement between Virke (employers’ organisation) and HK (commercial and officer workers’ union).
Wholesale & retail: Union density: 12% (but higher in supermarkets), collective bargaining coverage 29.4%	Wholesale & retail: Union density: 24% (but higher in supermarkets), collective bargaining coverage 39%
Collective agreements in three of the ‘big four’ supermarkets but not in the discounters.	Collective agreements in the major supermarkets, some cover all stores, others only where union organisation
Multi-unionism (USDAW, Unite and GMB)	Single unionism – HK for store workers
USDAW has negotiated ‘partnership agreements’ with some supermarkets. Tesco’s is the largest private-sector agreement in the UK in terms of employees covered.	In some companies, the sector agreement is applied to all stores. In others, it requires a union rep and 10% of workers to be unionised in the store. Companies usually pay the collectively-agreed tariff across all stores.
Pay is just above the national minimum wage. Morrisons was the first supermarket to recently pay £10/hour.	Typical pay rates are significantly higher in Norwegian supermarkets compared with the UK. <sup>1</sup>

Data Sources: Nergaard 2020, DBEIS 2022

<sup>1</sup> The collective agreement (2020-22) includes a minimum salary for workers aged 18 of 161.70 NOK per hour. There are 6 pay levels, rising to 220.30 NOK for workers with a trade certificate or 6 years of service. At current exchange rates, this equates to £13.45 and £18.32 respectively. There are also additional pay supplements for those who work 12 hours plus: after 6pm (£1.75/hour), after 9pm and after 1pm on Saturdays (£3.50/hour), and after 4pm on Saturdays (£7.00/hour).



Workers' representatives in Norway have rights enshrined in both law and collective agreements to be informed and consulted about any technology changes affecting the workforce. In the UK, much depends on whether company-level 'partnership agreements' provide opportunities for involvement. However, no research has yet examined this issue. There are also questions as to whether, or how far, the Norwegian micro-model of joint decision-making around technological rationalisation, established in its core manufacturing sector, applies in the case of retail, where union density is lower, and where some stores lack union presence and/or have 'participation gaps' (Alsos and Trygstad 2018). Alsos and Trygstad (2018) found that only a quarter of union representatives in retail stated they had formal and informal discussions with management (compared with over half in manufacturing), with 4 in 10 reporting this seldom or never happened (compared with 1 in 6 in manufacturing). They suggest the situation in retail may more closely resemble that facing retail unions in neo-liberal countries, such as the UK and US, than the prototypical 'Norwegian model' associated with large manufacturing companies.

The next section outlines the research methods that were used to address whether, or to what extent, unions in the two countries are involved in the implementation and use of digital technologies, and their ability to shape better outcomes for workers.

## Research Methods

Qualitative research was undertaken to explore the role of USDAW<sup>2</sup> and HK<sup>3</sup> in dealing with new technology, and the opportunities and challenges they face. The unions were selected because they are the main ones representing in-store workers in the two countries. The main method involved semi-structured interviews with national and/or regional officers as well as workplace representatives (see **Table 5**). This was supplemented with secondary data from union web pages, policy documents and press releases.

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<sup>2</sup> The Union of Shop, Distributive and Allied Workers (USDAW) is one of the UK largest unions with over 360,000 members, <https://www.usdaw.org.uk/About-Us>

<sup>3</sup> *Handel og Kontor* (HK), the union of employees in commerce and offices, is Norway's second largest union in the private sector with over 70,000 members in retail, service administration, finance, marketing and banking.

**Table 5: Research Interviews**

Interviewee	Country	Position
USDAW-regional-officer1	UK	Regional secretary
USDAW-regional-officer2	UK	Regional secretary
USDAW-area-officer1	UK	Area officer <sup>^</sup>
USADW-area-officer2	UK	Area officer <sup>^</sup>
USDAW-senior-rep1	UK	Area/workplace rep (Co-op) <sup>^</sup>
USDAW-workplace-rep1	UK	Workplace rep (Tesco)
USDAW-workplace-rep2	UK	Workplace rep (Tesco)
USDAW-workplace-rep3	UK	Workplace rep (Tesco)
USDAW-workplace-rep4	UK	Workplace rep (Tesco)
USDAW-workplace-rep5	UK	Workplace rep (Tesco)
USDAW-workplace-rep6	UK	Workplace rep (Sainsbury's)
HK-national-officer1	Norway	National officer
HK-national-officer2	Norway	National officer
HK-national-officer3	Norway	National officer
HK-senior-rep1	Norway	Workplace rep/area rep (Kiwi) <sup>^</sup>
HK-senior-rep2	Norway	Area rep (Coop1) <sup>*^</sup>
HK-senior-rep3	Norway	Area rep (Coop2) <sup>*^</sup>
HK-senior-rep4	Norway	Area rep (Coop3) <sup>*^</sup>
HK-senior-rep5	Norway	Area rep (Coop3) <sup>*^</sup>
HK-senior-rep6	Norway	Area rep (Meny) <sup>^</sup>
HK-workplace-rep1	Norway	Workplace rep (Kiwi)
HK-workplace-rep2	Norway	Workplace rep (Kiwi)
HK-workplace-rep3	Norway	Workplace rep (Kiwi)
<b>Total</b>		<b>23</b>

\*In the UK, the Co-op is one organisation under a single management. In Norway the Coop structure is complex, comprising several different entities under separate ownership and management which tend to operate across a particular region.

<sup>^</sup> 'Area officer' is a paid official of the union. 'Area rep' is an elected representative covering multiple stores in a geographical area.

Interviews took place between April 2021 and February 2022 with union representatives drawn from four supermarket chains in the UK and three chains in Norway. In total, 23 interviews were conducted, using Microsoft Teams or Zoom, with

at least two of the research team present. Interviews lasted between 60 and 90 minutes, and were audio-recorded and transcribed in full. The next section outlines the main findings.

## Research Findings

The research findings are divided into three sections: first, union involvement in decisions concerning the introduction and implementation of digital technologies; second, unions' role in influencing the use of such technology in relation to (a) job losses; (b) labour scheduling; and (c) the monitoring and surveillance of in-store workers; and, third, unions' perspectives on supporting and training union representatives to deal with introduction of new technology.

### ***Union involvement in decision-making***

In both countries, unions seek to shape the use of technology to obtain the best outcome for workers.

*it's about shaping it and also making sure it's fit-for-purpose (USDAW-regional-officer1)*

*I don't think you can stop the digitalisation... but we have to deal with it as wisely as we can. (HK-national-officer1).*

In the UK, union officers insisted they had a voice through their 'partnership agreements' with major supermarkets. As one regional officer noted: '*Anything that's affecting work, we've got big agreements ... there'll be parts of that around automation*' (USDAW-regional-officer1). Companies will sometimes seek the union's view on planned technology changes in terms of their impact on workers. Union voice was seen as strongest where a partnership agreement enabled the union to achieve high levels of membership. The 'best' partnership agreement was said to be with Tesco, where the union had '*a really prominent voice and it's well received*' (USDAW-regional-

officer1). At Sainsbury's, a joint recognition agreement with Unite – which covers representation and grievances but not bargaining over pay and conditions – was seen as dividing and weakening union influence.

Even with the best partnership agreement, however, the union had to be constantly vigilant; otherwise it would be *'very easy to side-line us... we have to make sure, hello we're here you know'* (USDAW-regional-officer1). Officers noted 'big changes' were generally discussed in 'national forums' (e.g. Tesco) and 'joint consultative committees' (JCCs) (e.g. Co-op), which include both union representatives and employees. There is also an opportunity for workplace representatives to feedback through the regional and national officers into central discussions with company management.

Some interviewees questioned how much influence the union had in relation to technology decisions: *'union influence, it's not so much on the digital side'* (USDAW-senior-rep1). It is not uncommon for supermarkets to restructure systems without informing the union, and to be very selective in the information they provide. As one area officer noted:

*Generally, I find out the first time I've heard about it... sometimes they will have conversations in advance... trying to gauge opinion on where we're going with this... employers will generally only give information they think is pertinent.* (USDAW-area-officer1).

Another noted how the employer has *'the autonomy to just decide it's a new business package we're going to bring in'* (USDAW-area-officer2).

In the UK, workplace representatives felt they had some involvement through the national forums and JCCs, but otherwise relied on national officers seeking their views and then feeding this back to the company. This sometimes leads to confusion around the changes that have been agreed with the union at national level, and a

feeling that there is '*an awful lot of office-based decisions*' driven by the company (USDAW-workplace-rep1):<sup>4</sup>

*This [technology] just comes in and we just have to make sure that we can mop it up... [the company] will...[discuss] with the national officers and they'll sit and say, well how's this gonna work, duh, duh, duh. But as reps on the grass, other than going through our forums, going through our national officers... we have no influence... And half the time it's still not what they have agreed.* (USDAW-workplace-rep2)

A Sainsbury's rep felt by the time workers were informed '*it's more or less been decided*' and described their own involvement as '*none at all*' (USDAW-workplace-rep6), while a Morrisons' rep saw technology coming '*from on high*' (USDAW-workplace-rep5). Workplace reps also pointed to employers cutting back on training when new systems or HR tools, such as digitalised payslips, are introduced, with most delivered online within very restricted timeframes: '*the training isn't there for people to use the equipment*' (USDAW-workplace-rep5); '*training is pitched up all of a sudden at week 26 and they're supposed to have [the new system] out there by week 27*' (USDAW-workplace-rep-1).

In Norway, unions and workplace representatives have rights to be consulted on technology changes affecting workers, but how does this work in practice? As in the UK, there is variation across companies. In the Coop, which has a complex structure with different parts under separate ownership and management, the picture is not uniform. In one region, interviews revealed a positive story of union involvement that reflected a history of cooperative employment relations. Senior management wanted to work with the union and actively supported union organisation.

*I have leaders in my company that want the same, they want people to be organised. It's the best way to work together... They are paying for extra people*

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<sup>4</sup> A recent survey of 3300 members found that 9 in 10 believed technology was introduced without consultation, while 3 in 4 felt better consultation would make the use of technology more effective. USDAW (2022) *Understanding Technology and Automation: Shaping the Future of Work*, <https://www.usdaw.org.uk/CMSPages/GetFile.aspx?guid=ff9d6be4-675a-4842-842b-c983300dbeba>

*to be out in the company to organise and... listening to all of our opinions about everything. (HK-senior-rep4)*

The company was following collective agreements ‘*very carefully*’, with the union often represented in steering groups on technology changes or otherwise consulted. This positive example was not representative of other parts of the Coop however:

*they don't want me to interfere in all that. (HK-senior-rep2)*

*it's decided at the [company] headquarters... More and more, they don't want to talk to us at all. (HK-senior-rep3)*

The positive case appears still more exceptional when compared to other supermarket chains in Norway. In Kiwi and Meny, the data suggests senior managers simply implement changes without involving the union. As one area organiser in Kiwi noted, ‘*it's not supposed to be that way but it often is*’ (HK-senior-rep1). A new app for the payment of salaries, which involved workers registering when they clocked in and out of work, had created problems after some workers without smart phones had been left not knowing whether they were going to be paid that month.

Another issue concerns whether union representation on company boards makes a difference. In the UK, where there is no legal provision for worker representation on boards, union officers felt the union was not involved in technology decisions early enough. Board-level representation would, as one put it, make ‘*a massive difference*’ (USDAW-regional-officer1). Indeed, this is something USDAW is actively campaigning for.<sup>5</sup>

In Norway, where there are co-determination laws, the picture appears complex. Most interviewees felt that even where unions had representation, decisions were already made by management prior to the board. A senior representative in Kiwi remarked: ‘*the way it's done now is that the management has decided this. They*

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<sup>5</sup> USDAW (2019) *Industrial Strategy for Retail*, <http://www.usdaw.org.uk/industrialstrategy#:~:text=Usdaw%20believes%20that%20we%20need,help%20future%2Dproof%20the%20sector>



*inform the board members and then cased closed'* (HK-senior-rep1). In Meny, the company had exploited union divisions, after different groups within the union had made two separate lists of candidates, thus enabling a list consisting entirely of store managers to be elected. In the Coop, senior union representatives also noted problems with management controlling decisions that previously would have been discussed in board meetings. A senior representative commented: *'the administration makes more of the decisions we used to have in the board'* (HK-senior-rep2). Even in the part of the Coop with the positive example of union involvement noted earlier, the union had been unable to secure board representation owing to these roles going to representatives of workers in warehouse and distribution who were in a different union.

### **Union influence**

#### *Job losses*

This section examines union perspectives on job losses resulting from technological change and wider restructuring, and how they dealt with this issue. In both countries, unions are concerned about the impact of self-service technologies, online shopping, and the prospect of 'cashier-less stores'.

In the UK, an area officer referred to *'huge concerns around job security'* (USDAW-area-officer1).<sup>6</sup> Some labour-saving technologies, such as self-service tills, were seen as 'just impossible' to resist (USDAW-regional-officer2). The union adopted a pragmatic stance of being willing *'to move with technology ... but try to protect as many jobs as we can'* (USDAW-area-officer2). While some redundancies were considered to be unavoidable, officers insisted that business plans were rigorously scrutinised. Where job losses could not be prevented, the focus was on managing the changes through voluntary severance and labour turnover. A major concern was that supermarkets were removing workers on established contracts with better terms and conditions and hiring workers on short-hour 'flexi-contracts' of as little as 7.5 or 10 hours.

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<sup>6</sup> A survey of 3300 members found one in five were extremely concerned about job security in the next five years, while two-thirds expected changes to their job as result of technology. See USDAW (2022) *Understanding Technology and Automation: Shaping the Future of Work*, <https://www.usdaw.org.uk/CMSPages/GetFile.aspx?guid=ff9d6be4-675a-4842-842b-c983300dbeba>



In Norway, the use of self-service technology appears less widespread and has met more resistance from customers. A senior representative in Kiwi noted how self-scanning tills had been removed from stores after just three months following a customer backlash. It was claimed Norwegian customers did not like to see technology destroying store workers' jobs, although some representatives saw the technology as freeing-up workers to do more varied tasks.<sup>7</sup>

Interviews with area officers and workplace representatives suggest that while digitalisation could result in fewer jobs, at present it was not seen as having a major impact as changes were managed through labour turnover or moving displaced workers to other jobs. As one put it: *'if everything should go on-line, of course people will lose their jobs. But I'm not really worried as this stands today'* (HK-senior-rep6). In terms of skills, few workplace representatives in both countries noted any major difficulties workers had with the use of new technologies as part of their work, such as scanners and computerised till systems. The main problems were around the shift to digital HR systems, such as pay slips and shift allocations, which required use of applications on smart phones. For some, usually older workers, with limited digital skills, this presented challenges that companies had not considered when introducing these changes.

In both countries, union officers emphasise the need for workers to receive help with education and retraining to cope with technological change and, if necessary, switch jobs.<sup>8</sup> As Hunt and Rolf (2022) note, a key issue is 'who pays?' and how costs are shared between government, employers, unions and workers. In the UK, the context is one where employer-provided training has declined significantly over recent decades<sup>9</sup>, and there are few collective mechanisms for making employers bear some of the cost of the retraining and re-skilling agenda.

USDAW has long supported and encouraged retail workers to take up lifelong learning opportunities using what was the state-funded UK-wide Union Learning Fund, which supported the role of 'union learning representatives' (ULRs) in this area. In

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<sup>7</sup> There are emerging signs of customer dissatisfaction with self-service tills in UK but perhaps for somewhat different reasons. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/business-61467165>

<sup>8</sup> USDAW (2022) *Understanding Technology and Automation: Shaping the Future of Work*, <https://www.usdaw.org.uk/CMSPages/GetFile.aspx?guid=ff9d6be4-675a-4842-842b-c983300dbeba>

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.unionlearn.org.uk/sites/default/files/publication/Training%20trends%20in%20Britain.pdf>

2021, the UK Conservative government closed this fund in England. The role of ULRs continues, but with far fewer resources to support members. In April of the same year, the government launched a 'lifetime skills guarantee' in England, backed up with £95million for 2021/22 to enable adults currently without a 'level 3 qualification' to undertake one of 400 approved qualifications for free. While USDAW welcomed this initiative, the union argued that, without the support and encouragement of ULRs, many low qualified workers will not access the entitlement. However, union pleas to retain the £12m ULF were rejected, although funding remains available in the other UK devolved nations. In some companies, ULRs are embracing the role of 'Digital Champions' to help workers lacking basic digital skills to learn to use new technologies introduced in the workplace.

In Norway, national officers argued that potential job losses present a particular challenge for retail workers with low levels of formal education or with Norwegian language issues who could struggle to find alternative employment. HK is using its political connections through the 'tripartite system' and the two-yearly bargaining rounds with the employers' association, Virke, to push for retail workers to gain more rights to undertake education. One project has secured opportunities for nearly 500 members to secure certification as 'skilled workers' (with a 10% addition to pay as part of the collective agreement) using the so-called 'practice-based' route in the Norwegian vocational education and training system. This allows workers with at least five years' experience to take the same test as an apprentice but, unlike in other sectors, has not been readily available to retail workers. Relationships with employers 'took time' to build but, as a national officer noted, '*it works*' (HK-national-officer2). How much progress has been made to date beyond this is unclear, but national officers were hopeful of a breakthrough in the May 2022 bargaining round. Past attempts in Norway to find solutions to the 'who pays?' problem through tripartite agreements, under the 'Competence Reform', have struggled to overcome employers' unwillingness to fund educational leave and subsistence costs where this is not linked directly to company needs (Payne 2006).

### ***Labour scheduling, hours and contracts***

In both countries, supermarkets use software to provide store managers with a total number of labour hours linked to temporal patterns of consumer demand which can be used to inform labour scheduling decisions. Combined with flexible zero/small hour contracts, employers can intensify work by reducing downtime and pass risk on to workers whose hours fluctuate with customer demand making it difficult to juggle work and life. The use of algorithms to allocate shifts also threatens to make this more problematic for workers, not least parents and carers, although the research did not suggest these systems are used extensively in either country at present.

In the UK, there is no legal requirement to provide workers with notice of changes to work schedules. The use of 'heat maps' that track customer footfall to drive scheduling decisions around the allocation of shifts was seen as problematic as it could not take account of unforeseen contingencies and staff availability

*They're all fairly good on a good day, but what if somebody goes sick, or there's an emergency or something, a breakdown has happened in stores, the fridges have gone down... then it all falls apart. (USDAW-area-officer2)*

*If you left it to run you would have a situation where you'd have people on the wrong hours... [and] shifts where you've got nobody in'. (USDAW-senior-rep1)*

The Coop operates a system called 'Shift' where workers can see their work schedules using an 'app' on their personal devices, which team leaders can use to change shifts. USDAW has expressed concerns that this has the potential to create a situation where workers may find it difficult to 'switch off' during non-work hours.<sup>10</sup>

It appears store managers in the UK retain discretion in making labour scheduling decisions, which they can use positively or negatively for workers in terms of favouritism and discipline. One representative felt the situation had improved over the years thanks to union pressure, such that workers were no longer treated as an 'absolute number' with 'hours constantly changed':

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<sup>10</sup> USDAW (2022) *Understanding Technology and Automation: Shaping the Future of Work*, <https://www.usdaw.org.uk/CMSPages/GetFile.aspx?guid=ff9d6be4-675a-4842-842b-c983300dbeba>

*the union... said, 'enough's enough... we're sick of being just pushed from pillar to post, we are human beings'. And [the company] have brought it back to say, 'actually you are a person, you're not a number'. (USDAW-workplace-rep2)*

An area officer, however, pointed to the shift to short-hour 'flexi-contracts' which provided little stability or predictability, and claimed that in many stores even those on established contracts were often expected to 'flex-up' (USDAW-area-officer2).

In Norway, the law provides workers with rights to two weeks' notice when making changes to their work schedules, extending to four weeks where there is a collective agreement, and that this should be undertaken in cooperation with workers' representatives. This makes automated scheduling difficult, and the research did not uncover any examples. In some companies, interviewees felt store managers considered workers' needs when making scheduling decisions: *'we work with the leaders to make the best [scheduling] solutions for our employees'* (HK-senior-rep4). In many cases, however, much depends on the individual store manager. A Meny area representative spoke of a *'lot of bullying'* if people refuse to cover shifts and there is no workplace representative to defend their rights (HK-senior-rep6).

Kiwi and Meny had introduced a new 'app' two years ago (without consultation with the union) that could be downloaded onto a smartphone. This was seen as a positive change as it allowed workers themselves to swap shifts. In both countries, the use of labour scheduling apps was seen as creating issues for some older workers who did not have a smartphone and were not 'tech savvy'.

In both countries, retailers have already used automation, such as self-service checkouts, as a means of cutting costs by reducing headcounts, squeezing labour hours and intensifying work. Tackling labour casualisation – although not directly related to technology – is a key union priority. USDAW is campaigning for a minimum 16-hour a week contract for retail workers, contracts that reflect 'normal' working hours, a ban on 'zero-hours' contracts, and a 'real' living wage<sup>11</sup>. The union has

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<sup>11</sup> USDAW (2022) Understanding Technology and Automation: Shaping the Future of Work, <https://www.usdaw.org.uk/CMSPages/GetFile.aspx?guid=ff9d6be4-675a-4842-842b-c983300dbeba>

persuaded Tesco (which uses 7.5 hour contracts) to pilot a 16-hour minimum contract in some of its stores.

In Norway, the use of short-hour flexi-contracts (in some cases as low as 6% or 5.7 hours a week), extended opening hours (until 11pm at night), under-staffing and work intensification were noted by many respondents. Under the law and collective agreements, workers on established part-time contracts have preferential rights to have their hours made up to a full-time position (if desired), rather than companies using available hours to create more fractional or part-time posts. Seniority rules also mean that longer-serving workers should have priority when extra shifts are available. The research uncovered many examples of interviewees reporting these rules were often infringed and that much depended on the presence of a strong workplace representative who knew the rules and actively enforced them. These issues are a central focus for HK political lobbying, and the newly elected Labour government has strengthened regulations in these areas that had been relaxed under the previous centre-right government.

### ***Monitoring and surveillance***

Another key issue for unions is how technologies impact on the monitoring and surveillance of in-store workers and the role of unions in this area. In this section, we look at the use of 'scan rates' for checkout operators, 'pick rates' for workers supporting on-line or 'dot.com' shopping, and CCTV.

#### *Scan rates for checkout operators*

In the UK, the use of scan rates to monitor the speed at which staff scan items at checkouts is common in supermarkets, for example at Sainsbury's, staff are expected to scan 25 items per minute. Only at the Co-op were no scan rates reported. Union officers and representatives were adamant that they '*really would dig our heels in on that*' (UK-senior-rep1). Even where scan rates are in place, it seems they are rarely used to discipline workers for not scanning items quickly enough. Where such situations do arise, the union will push back, citing company commitments to providing 'quality' customer service. However, there is concern that they still place undue

pressure on staff to meet the targets. In Norway, we found no evidence of scan rates being used.

### *Dot.com pick rates*

Another area of concern stems from the move to online/omni-channel grocery retail which can involve a dedicated group of workers going around the store ‘picking’ items for customer orders. In the UK, interviewees noted how ‘time and motion’ studies were undertaken in ‘dark stores’, with ‘no customers’ in the way or asking questions, in order to set unrealistic pick rates. One workplace representative commented, tongue-in-cheek, how supermarkets ‘used Usain Bolt to run around the store and do the pick and then...that’s the average [time]’ (USDAW-workplace-rep1).

At Tesco the pick rate had been suspended during the pandemic. As lockdown restrictions eased, the rate was reinstated and increased to 171 items per hour and then to 191. An area officer insisted the union would challenge ‘on every single occasion’ and, if necessary, ‘do our own tests’ (USDAW-area-officer2). However, it remains unclear how much influence the union has exerted on actual pick rates. The union has pushed back strongly where workers have been disciplined for being too slow, citing practical constraints in ‘real stores’ and insisting the rate is ‘guidance only’ (USDAW-area-officer2). As one representative commented: ‘Over my dead body. The first person gets a disciplinary for their pick speed ... I’ll put a massive complaint in...I’ll go to the health and safety, I’ll go to anywhere, because you’re not penalising anybody’ (USDAW-workplace-rep1).

In Norway, the picture appears variable. In part of the Coop, bigger stores have begun to expand on-line service channels. Some union officers were not aware of any issues with pick rates and, if they did arise, ‘would be fighting it very hard’ (HK-senior-rep4). A union representative in Meny, however, highlighted ‘big problems’ with younger workers being used intensively (HK-senior-rep6). The company was using a loophole in the collective agreement to employ young workers for under 12 hours a week to do picking on night shifts without paying the premium for night work negotiated for those on bigger contracts.



## CCTV

Another issue concerns the use of CCTV to monitor workers. In the UK, there were frequent references to *'living with Big Brother'*. Although supermarkets state that cameras are there solely to protect against theft, in practice workers are monitored *'when they walk into the store, if they're arriving late for their shift, it's all managed'* (USDAW-area-officer2). Union officers and representatives felt that GDPR was very clear, however, and did not permit the use of cameras for monitoring workers' performance. Nevertheless, it was widely reported that some store managers could get *'a bit exuberant'*:

*Good god... employers seem to think that CCTV is there for monitoring performance... when it quite clearly states it's there for security purposes.*  
(USDAW-area-officer1)

Examples given were of a worker on the self-service checkouts who had been disciplined for failing to spot a customer theft, and management deliberately setting up CCTV to spy on a trolley park attendant who they suspected of taking too many breaks and *'stealing company time'*. Where store managers over-stepped the mark and used CCTV footage to discipline workers, interviewees felt the union was in a strong position to challenge, and, if necessarily, will escalate the matter within the union. Without union oversight, it was generally felt management could *'run riot'* with the technology (USDAW-area-officer1).

In Norway, there are *'really strong GDPR rights compared to many other countries'* (HK-national-officer3). Some interviewees commented how they could not *'remember any cases that I've been involved in with cameras or surveillance'* (HK-senior-rep5). Several others in Kiwi and Meny, however, noted that *'it happens anyway'* (HK-workplace-rep1). One referred to how her manager would *'spy on how many times workers were taking a cigarette break which was not allowed under the law'* (HK-workplace-rep2). Another commented *'sometimes he used to like to come out into the shop and say that "you have been standing here talking to each other for too long"'* (HK-senior-rep3). Again, where there is a strong workplace representative who knows the regulations, these issues can be dealt with quite easily. If the store



manager remains recalcitrant, the union rep will take this up with senior company management, or HR, which is usually sufficient for an errant manager to be reprimanded: *'then the daily manager of that local shop is basically being told, like, you better do your job [abide by the law and agreements]'* (HK-senior-rep1). This situation is very different where there is no union representative, or a representative that does not challenge management: *'it's a huge mix depending on whether the rep is strong'* (HK-senior-rep1).

### ***Perspectives on union support and training representatives to deal with new technology***

This section examines union resources and the support available to help workplace representatives deal with the introduction of new technology in the workplace, including the training of workplace representatives. In the UK, a key issue is the facility time that employers provide for representatives which was seen as a *'major bone of contention'* as *'none of the managers want to give our reps time off work to do their duties'* (USDAW-regional-officer2). Interviews with workplace representatives suggest the picture is variable: *'we get the time released for what we ask for'* (USDAW-workplace-rep2). The interviewee felt a bigger problem was 'apathy' among representatives and not making enough use of facility time:

*I'm seeing more apathy among reps than I've ever done... I'm getting people [reps] coming to me quite often now and saying 'have you any idea what it [union policy] says about this?' And I'm thinking 'well go and have a look at it' [the policy].* (USDAW-workplace-rep2)

HK was generally considered to be a well-resourced union with 100 staff in its Oslo head office servicing nearly 80,000 union members. Strike pay is 60-70% of salary, much higher than that available to USDAW members. The data is inconclusive about the facility time available for HK representatives but again appears variable. As one area representative noted: *'We have 100% so we have a full-time position as a union leader but that is not the case in other Co-ops'* (HK-senior-rep4). Recruiting workplace representatives was also seen as challenging in many cases either

because the role was seen as too much trouble or because they were fearful. While a workplace representative is needed in most companies for the collective agreement to be applied in an individual store, the data suggests there are significant challenges in terms of representatives who exist 'on paper' but who are not very active in terms of the role. Again, the picture is variable and complex.

In both countries, workplace representatives were positive about the support they received from their national union, including the training on offer to workplace representatives. USDAW provides new representatives with eight days of classroom training which covers all the main areas needed to be a workplace representative. This includes training on GDPR, privacy issues, and handling members' personal data. However, it was felt there was room to have more specific training around how to handle the introduction of technology in the workplace. As one put it: *'I think we're missing a trick if we don't provide our own training'* (USDAW-regional-officer1).

In Norway, training for representatives consists of three courses, each lasting three days. This includes training on GDPR as well as the protections in the law and collective agreements for workers regarding the use of technology, and the rights for workplace representatives to be consulted. A senior representative in Meny noted that while the training was of good quality, the problem was most representatives did not take it up (HK-senior-rep6). A representative in Kiwi, who had just completed a course for local representatives, felt there was little focus on technology: *'we don't learn much about technology, really. It's more about how your workplace is and how to make it better'* (HK-workplace-rep3). As in the UK, it was generally felt that having more dedicated courses would be helpful, particularly when it came to having the knowledge to engage with its introduction and use:

*I don't fear technology, but what I fear is the role union leaders have... We don't have the understanding.* (HK-senior-rep4).

*Reps... have to dive into the information... and see the back side of it. That's something that might be difficult for a lot of people. They haven't any education in that.* (HK-senior-rep5).

Examples were also given of how some senior representatives in Norway were trying to work with companies to *educate managers* about their obligations to work with union representatives under the collective agreement, including in relation to technology issues. For a senior representative in Kiwi (HK-senior-rep1), this was a relatively new development aimed at turning around a culture of ‘us-and-them’ relations, and was still very challenging. In one part of the Coop, it reflected a more cooperative climate of employment relations noted earlier:

*I am working a lot with the company to equip both leaders and the [shop] stewards so they work together on everything. We have conferences, we have meetings, we have local agreements, which we are educating them in. (HK-senior-rep4)*

Among the suggestions put forward for improving the situation elsewhere were using the national union clubs, and other forms of networking, to help representatives from different companies to share experiences around the implementation and use of technology. This was seen as important in building consensus and agreement around how to challenge management, given the different experiences of representatives in different companies, including, if necessary, winning support for strike action.

## **Summary and conclusions**

It is perhaps fair to say technology has not been the number one priority for either union. Rather, given employers’ focus on low margins and squeezing labour costs, the focus has been on pay, contracts and hours, where there are substantial country differences that are only touched on briefly in this report. However, automation is a concern for both unions, and is gaining increasing attention.

In the UK, USDAW’s current role in technology decisions appears to be mainly limited to national officers being informed or consulted when company management decides this is needed, amid concerns that such involvement occurs too late. A recent survey of 3300 members suggests nine in ten believe technology is introduced without consultation. The union is pushing for a statutory right to consultation over new

technology that can underpin the wider use of ‘new technology agreements’ as well stronger union recognition rights.<sup>12</sup> Workplace representatives can feedback through consultative forums, and national officers will sometimes seek a workforce perspective on planned or piloted technology changes. The research suggests there may be issues around communication between national and workplace levels in terms of what has been agreed ‘nationally’ prior to the technology arriving in the workplace where representatives then have to deal with it.

In Norway, unions have stronger rights through the law and collective agreements to be involved in decisions around the use of new technology. While these regulations clearly matter, the big challenge for HK is ensuring this works in practice – and that depends on union organisation. There is evidence that some companies flout the regulations and agreements at all levels, and are intent on avoiding any union involvement in technology decisions. Without union organisation it is not always possible for the sectoral agreement to be applied in individual stores and, even with an agreement, much depends on the presence of a strong and proactive workplace representative to challenge and enforce it. Using co-determination laws to secure board-representation in Norway also appears to present challenges. The problems of a lack of members being willing to become workplace representatives, and ‘rep apathy’ in some cases, were mentioned in both countries, although quantifying the scale of the challenge is beyond this research project.

There are differences across companies and stores in both countries, and the approach of management is clearly important. The Tesco partnership agreement, despite its limitations, is still held up by USDAW as affording the best opportunity for the union to be informed and consulted on technology decisions. This agreement is also considered to be vital for recruiting union members and bolstering union influence. The best example of union involvement in Norway was found in one part of the Coop where company management was very supportive of a role for unions. However, it appears far from typical of the wider company, let alone the grocery retail sector as a whole. Outside of this particular example, union involvement in technology decisions does not look that different to the UK.

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<sup>12</sup> USDAW (2022) *Understanding Technology and Automation: Shaping the Future of Work*, <https://www.usdaw.org.uk/CMSPages/GetFile.aspx?guid=ff9d6be4-675a-4842-842b-c983300dbeba>

In both countries, unions are not resistant to all technology but seek to shape its implementation and use for the benefit of workers. There are concerns that technology developments could result in significant job losses in the future and USDAW is campaigning for stronger statutory redundancy protections.<sup>13</sup> However, to date, most employment effects, whether from technology or wider restructuring, have been managed through voluntary severance and labour turnover which is central to union strategies of avoiding compulsory redundancies.

There are some interesting country differences about the potential to use automated labour scheduling. This is much harder in Norway where workers are required by the law and collective agreements to have significant periods of notice before changes are made to their schedules. In both countries, store managers appear to retain considerable discretion in making scheduling decisions, subject to centralised constraints on total labour hours available. Unions have a vital role in advocating the benefits of scheduling approaches that take account of individual worker needs and life circumstances, as well as defending workers against bullying and favouritism. Although we find little evidence of automated scheduling, any move in this direction would make it harder to challenge management as they could hide their decisions 'behind the algorithm'.

In terms of the use of technology for the monitoring and surveillance of workers, unions play an important role in protecting workers. Further research would be helpful in terms of workers involved in 'picking' for online shopping, and the role that unions are playing in this area. GDPR legislation is much stronger in Norway, but offers important protections in both countries. However, in both countries, there are issues of some store managers going too far and using CCTV to monitor and, in some cases, discipline workers. Again, workplace representatives play a vital defensive role. In the UK, workplace representatives rely on GDPR laws which may not always work in their favour in the courts, whereas in Norway GDPR laws are not only stronger but unions can also draw on provisions contained in collective agreements.

A further issue concerns what can be done to increase or bolster unions' role in decisions relating to the use and implementation of new technology. The national

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<sup>13</sup> USDAW (2022) *Understanding Technology and Automation: Shaping the Future of Work*, <https://www.usdaw.org.uk/CMSPages/GetFile.aspx?guid=ff9d6be4-675a-4842-842b-c983300dbeba>

union was generally seen as playing a positive and supportive role in both countries. In the UK, the extent to which the wider ‘partnership approach’ is essential for union organising and influence, or weakens the union’s ability to challenge management, is controversial, and divided opinion among interviewees. The context of multi-unionism also creates challenges by dividing and weakening union influence in some cases, and points to the need for inter-union cooperation. In Norway, sectoral agreements need to be backed up by union organisation and, in a sector with high labour churn, much may depend upon employer support as well as the union’s own activism.

The data also raises questions around whether training for workplace representatives in both countries should have additional components that explicitly address the challenges involved in dealing with the introduction and use of new technology. How far unions should seek to educate and support workers in dealing with, as well as understanding, digital technologies is worthy of reflection. The role of ‘union learning representatives’ in the UK acting as ‘digital champions’ may be interesting for unions in other countries, even if it raises issues around whether unions should fund such activity as opposed to the employer.

Where do unions go next? USDAW is actively campaigning for a statutory right to be consulted over technology as well as more support for retail apprenticeships, a right to paid leave for education and training and re-starting the ULF in England, alongside other improvements to union and worker rights, wages and welfare protections.<sup>14</sup> However, it is difficult to imagine progress being made under the current UK Conservative government. In Norway, HK is pushing for state and employer support for education and retraining opportunities through the tripartite system and bargaining rounds. Access to certified transferable skills that equip retail workers for other jobs, backed up by welfare systems with high unemployment benefits that help individuals to transition to other jobs, can help to deal with the disruptive effects of digitalisation. It is unclear what progress has been made so far, but the prospects look a little brighter with a recently elected Labour government. Unions cannot, however, rely just on institutional and legal supports. The automation challenge only serves to further underscore the importance of union organising.

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<sup>14</sup> USDAW (2022) *Understanding Technology and Automation: Shaping the Future of Work*, <https://www.usdaw.org.uk/CMSPages/GetFile.aspx?guid=ff9d6be4-675a-4842-842b-c983300dbeba>



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