



BroadVoice

Broadening the spectrum of employee voice in workplace innovation

Implementing Effective Direct Worker Participation in the Age of technological and social innovation

Netherlands – National Report

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BroadVoice's national report from the Netherlands discusses the existing regulative and policy framework, and company practises of workers' participation in the Netherlands in the context of work- and organisation-related innovations at the workplace level. The underlying research is based on analyses of academic literature, policy documents, collective agreements, a preliminary workers' survey, four case studies (15 in-depth interviews) and observations from a workshop with 25 stakeholders in the Netherlands.

In retrospect, since 1970s we have seen fluctuating social partners' attention in issues of technological and social innovation in the Netherlands, and related effects on employment, jobs and work processes. In recent years we can see more social partners paying attention to policies on issues of technological and social innovation in the Netherlands, including the impact of Artificial Intelligence (AI). In 2023, the tripartite Socio-Economic Council published a report supporting and recommending to social partners and companies greater professional workers' autonomy and worker participation in the context of more social and smarter ways of organising work ('social innovation'). In 2025, the same council develops guidelines for social partners and companies regarding social dialogue and workers participation about the introduction and impact of AI on employment, organisations, job quality, skills formation and other related topics.

A recent survey shows that there is strong support among the Dutch working population themselves for more collective bargaining and social dialogue on work-related AI regulations. Nevertheless, our research conclude on the one hand that there have been never that much activities and results about technological innovation in collective bargaining, and on the other hand, that also case studies we developed in this project (specifically around AI) do show many barriers in workers participation. In cases of company-level bargaining (around 15% of the total collective bargaining coverage in the Netherlands), trade unions are – as in sector-level bargaining – limiting their scope of action to primary terms and conditions of employment such as wages, working hours and pensions. Furthermore, unions negotiate about the conditions in case of collective dismissals resulting from restructuring and technological impacts on jobs and employment. The weak point in Dutch industrial relations is that that most of these involvements of unions just start at a late phase of organisational change and that direct forms of workers participation are not organised in a structural way.

Because of the low presence of unions at company and workplace levels and their priorities on issues of financial terms and conditions of employment, the main collective power resource for workers in the Netherlands for discussing technological and social innovation are located with the works councils. These councils function independently from trade unions because the Dutch model of workers' representation is a dual one. According to co-determination legislation in the Netherlands, work councils do indeed have consultation rights in cases of the introduction and/or change in new technology in the company. In 2018, the tripartite Socio-Economic Council published guidelines for works councils to be involved earlier and better during technological change (informed, consulted and co-decided).

Although co-determination legislation in the Netherlands does give works councils formally and in principle quite strong consultation rights in case of the introduction of and/or change in new technology in the company, three of the four case studies in this report show that works councils are not prioritising this task. The councils under study are slowly searching for new roles in this field, such as in discussing work related risks of AI. Compared to earlier technological innovations, controlling AI seems extra challenging because of its gradually introduction into work processes, including by some (white collar) employees themselves. The first case study (Solvay) is a best case of an active European Works Council that agreed on a 'Global Framework Agreement on Digital Transformation' in order to stimulate regular technology assessments by management and workers' representatives in all the companies. This multinational is also preparing new regulations on discussing work-related risks of AI. The other cases show limited involvements of works councils, HR managers and IT specialists in integrating new technologies with social and organisational policies. Regarding direct participation, we found in all cases quite ad-hoc patterns of different direct worker participation, largely dependent on the initiative of management. Interestingly, one of the case studies, namely the one in the care sector, provides some evidence on the possibility for (sectoral) collective bargaining parties to promote direct employee voice within companies.

Based on our research and discussion with stakeholders in a final workshop in the Netherlands, we recommend the following:

- i. Better training and knowledge acquisition for trade unions and works councils in the field of technological innovation, especially in these times of fast upcoming possibilities and the use of AI.
- ii. More early involvement of employees' representatives in innovation processes in collective bargaining and works council consultations to increase their effective influence. Awareness of the importance of being involved early in innovation processes, making assessments of technology, and negotiating about social/HR effects.
- iii. Making direct worker participation practices in the workplace more structured, integrated and robust by a promoting the role of trade unions and works councils (in the context of improving job quality) and through a key role for management in the companies (in the context of productivity).
- iv. More involvement of HR managers in technological change in the companies, more cooperation between IT departments and HR departments and better integrated 'socio-technical' innovation strategies.
- v. Awareness that innovation can easily be initiated unilaterally and processed by management or technology. More research needed in the opportunities of 'Employee-driven innovation' in the Netherlands.

