

#ADAPTCONFERENCE2024



CALL FOR ABSTRACTS

# What Do Workers Want, Today?

An Interdisciplinary Reflection on  
Representation, Industrial Relations  
and Labour Law

*International Conference XIV Edition*

IN-PERSON EVENT

**Bergamo (Italy)**

**4 – 6 December 2024**

Centro Congressi Giovanni XXIII  
(Viale Papa Giovanni XXIII, 106)

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Today's work is increasingly fragmented and difficult to characterise; changes to production, labour market organisation, the relationship between work and people and, more generally, recent societal developments complicate understanding of workers' needs. The tasks and roles of the workforce are more and more heterogeneous, with this picture which is further compounded by technology. As if this were not enough, representation bodies struggle to reach casual workers, young people and those employed in the services sector. This state of affairs makes it more complex to identify workers' needs, and priority seems to be given to the individual rather than the collective dimension of work. However, emphasis should be placed on representation, unless we imagine a situation in which workers' can claim their rights individually, which might bring about inequalities and discriminatory practices. The role of trade unions and representative bodies as traditionally understood are challenged by massive social and economic transformations (tertiarisation of the economy, diversification of the workforce, unstable employment, government policies, etc.) and new ways of worker participation. Concurrently, employer's organizations also face issues concerning productive and sectoral fragmentation, and the trend toward government regulation of certain issues (e.g., minimum wage) and decentralization or even weakening of collective bargaining. Against this backdrop, the XIV edition of the international conference organized by ADAPT's International School of Higher Education in Labour and Industrial Relations invites scholars and researchers to provide their contributions on workers' current needs, the collective dimension of work, and the relevant factors enhancing people's work, fostering personal fulfilment and professional identity, and creating sustainable and inclusive labour markets. A comparative and interdisciplinary approach will be taken, given the different aspects considered in this conference.

### **Track 1 – What do workers want from labour law?**

In addition to safeguarding the weaker party to the employment relationship – thus ensuring fair competition between employers and work regulation – labour law is evolving to meet new demands.

Questioning what workers want and how labour law should respond to their needs means trying to bring together labour laws and new issues resulting from the social fabric, workers as individuals and collective identities in

which their personality can be expressed. The need for economic and employment security is emerging in a labour market focused on the exchange between work, employment stability and income – which features an increasing number of the working poor.

The ageing of the working population and the different ways new generations conceive the relationship between people and work give rise to new demands – also at the individual level – relating to sustainability – i.e., health conditions that change over time – and the quality of work, which is assessed in terms of the ability to respond to flexibility and work-life balance, as well as individual contribution to society. How does labour law at both national and supranational level respond to workers' traditional needs – i.e., fundamental rights and interests – concurrently promoting a new understanding of work which is more in line with individual claims? This question calls for a comparative analysis of those provisions laid down in response to the above-mentioned issues and to the evolution of the labour law framework and its tools.

## **Track 2 – Artificial Intelligence (AI): moving beyond technological unemployment to address job quality**

The aim of Track 2 is to explore the multifaceted nature of AI expansion with respect to job quality; this concerns labour markets (e.g., What are the new occupations and skills? How can they be developed? How can the impact of AI be managed, particularly on the most vulnerable categories of workers?) and labour relations, within increasingly technologically advanced production contexts. This situation also concerns the role played by workers, including the 'invisible' ones, particularly those in developing countries who are involved in the global AI supply chain, who face increasingly unstable working conditions. Research conducted from an interdisciplinary perspective is welcome that analyses the search of innovation in AI and the risks related to sustainable development, in order to promote fairer labour market outcomes, both in advanced economies and in developing countries. In addition to the impact of AI, this research track considers the development agenda and the limitations of these technologies in driving changes that are inclusive, leading to decent and productive employment.

### **Track 3 – Trade unions and employers’ associations promoting education and training: decline or revival?**

Trade unions and employers’ organisations have played a decisive role, fostering the relationship between training and work among employed workers and young people accessing the labour market for the first time (Germany’s dual system is illustrative in this sense). Nevertheless, the collective dimension of skill-development systems promoted by unions is losing momentum, in a time in which there is an increasing need for quality and inclusive education and training – also in light of demographic transformations and the so-called twin transition. This makes the role of trade unions and employers’ organisation in designing and implementing training schemes as relevant as ever.

Is the decline in the interest of representation in the construction of education and training pathways an inevitable process? From what is it generated? In what contexts (national, local) is it possible to observe this dynamic? Or, conversely: are there contemporary experiences in which it is possible to observe a revival of the role of the social partners in the construction of ‘dual’ education and training? And, finally: how has the relationship between representation bodies, the government, employers and in the regulation and construction of education and training evolved over time? These are some of the questions that can be asked in light of this track, which can be investigated from different disciplinary perspectives, from a comparative perspective, but also thanks to historical analyses, in order to explore the complexity that (has always) characterised the relationship between representation and training.

### **Track 4 – The evolution of worker representation in the context of twin transitions: is there any room for direct forms of worker participation?**

Under the current processes of development of labour organization, characterised by an increasing emphasis on direct worker participation, the traditional role of trade unions and employee representatives may be challenged. Similarly, the tools for representative activities (collective bargaining, co-determination, information and consultation) might compete competing with direct and informal channels for worker participation in business decisions, increasingly made available by employers and sometimes made possible by technological innovation. This track investigates the different trade union approaches to ‘employee-driven

innovation', characterised by a close cooperation between workers and companies, in light of the different power resources available to the parties and national legislative frameworks, but also the influence of the European Commission's cross-cutting priorities (e.g., the European Green Deal). The strategies of trade unions to promote workers' participation and their contribution to claim their interests will also be the subject of this track.

### **Track 5 – Workers and industrial relations against the background of the socio-ecological transition**

Climate change and environmental degradation have highlighted the need for collaborative action at the international, European, national and territorial levels to facilitate the ecological transition. However, there is growing evidence that this requires efforts not only to reduce carbon dependence and promote climate-neutral activities, but also to protect citizens, workers and vulnerable groups during ongoing transformations and reconversions. Reflecting on whether and to what extent this is compatible with the current capitalist system, this new paradigm of work raises the question of who decides what is produced and how it is produced. In this regard, it seems central to support participation, democracy, and equality in the transition processes of sectors, local areas, and communities to ensure that the transition to climate-neutral economies does not exacerbate existing discrimination, but rather serves as an opportunity to address and reduce it. Given this correlation between green and socioeconomic transitions, it is imperative to recognise a central role for the social partners and industrial relations systems as privileged actors in constructively guiding and shaping the path of this fundamental transformation. This track investigates these complex issues, encouraging the analysis of collective bargaining, industrial relations, labour law and the changing dynamics in labour markets through the lens of socio-ecological transitions. The goal is to explore how workers and industrial relations systems react in response to these transformations, taking into consideration the challenges faced, the goals pursued, and the tools and actions implemented by social partners that can respond to the intricate dynamics of the transition, recognizing the connection between environmental and social issues.

## **Track 6 – Lifelong learning as a key to workers’ empowerment**

Both the transformations of work (technological progress, ecological transition, demographic aging) and the emergence of new demands from workers, such as the need for greater participation in organizational and strategic choices, as well as an increasing personalization of work, suggest that special attention should be paid to the issue of worker training and, more generally, the right to lifelong learning. With this in mind, new studies investigating rules, policies and institutions that, at both the national and supranational levels, contribute to workers’ new skills development. The topic lends itself to reflections from different disciplines that (labour law, industrial relations, sociology of labour, etc.). Examples include: the legal-institutional framework of reference in the different legal systems; the contribution of collective bargaining and the social partners; the tools and policies for training workers; the tools and policies for training workers outside the employment relationship; the institutions (public, private, collective) involved in the design, financing and implementation of measures in favour of lifelong learning.

## **Track 7 – Representation, communication and languages: collective interests and disintermediation in the age of social media**

In recent times, the global labour movement has experienced a remarkable revival, defying the common perception of its decline. In the context of the changing nature of contemporary labour, voice, a term which is difficult to render in other languages and contexts as an expression of the English-speaking union dimension, often emerges from spontaneous organizing efforts, challenging the traditional know-how of pre-existing unions. These dynamics often turn out to be closely linked to communication methods and strategies for using social media. These are presented on the one hand as indispensable tools for collective autonomy in order to communicate with its members and promote their sense of belonging, and on the other hand as devices capable of disintermediating the pre-established collective actor and giving rise to independent forms of aggregation. These dynamics affect not only trade unions, but representation, more generally. In particular, the influence of employer’s organisations is also facing significant challenges in Western countries. In response, in many national contexts, these entities have attempted to expand their service delivery function to businesses, disregarding communication strategies related to

representation in the narrow sense. Underlying this process for employers' organisations is a profound and enduring process of change in companies, which are increasingly specialized and thus inclined to express new needs for representation. This is also evidenced at the European level by the recent protests of agricultural workers in Europe, often organized through digital media and also directed toward business associations. Employers' organisations, traditionally inclined to operate behind the scenes, are now being forced to reinterpret their public engagement. How, then, are associations interpreting and coping with these changes? What strategies do they adopt to meet the challenges of the changing world of work while fulfilling their function of protecting and promoting the interests of their representatives?

### **Track 8 – Workers' interests and collective bargaining: wage issues and social (in)security**

For a long time, wages have occupied a central role in collective bargaining, and this is because of the fact that wages are one of the main elements of the bargaining exchange between employers and workers. However, the evolution of collective bargaining systems profoundly challenges this centrality: frequently, the focus of union negotiations shifts and dwells not so much on wage levels as on the need to cope with multiple and new protection needs, partly because of the organizational transformations taking place in the world of work. Moreover, in light of a gradual crisis of public welfare systems and their ability to respond to the protection needs that may arise throughout workers' working careers, some collective bargaining systems are attempting to build a social protection system alongside the public one in order to cope with growing insecurities at the social level. This trend imposes the obligation to ask what workers today seek in the negotiating exchange with the employer: only a wage to defend their purchasing power in the face of the various economic conjunctures? Or are we facing a radical change, where in the exchange proper to the employment relationship, not only the economic value of the work performed takes centre stage, but also the interest—especially of the worker—in obtaining various guarantees that are capable of responding to a wide variety of needs and improving the quality of his or her life? In the face of these questions, the track aims to stimulate and promote investigations and reflections aimed at revealing whether and how the bargaining dynamics

of collective bargaining are changing in different countries, as well as on the effects of these changes on individual employment relations.

### **Track 9 – Equality of opportunity in the labour market and the role of social dialogue**

Discrimination in the world of work, in addition to violating the fundamental rights of citizens, affects the promotion of decent living and working conditions, which are essential for economic and social progress and the creation of truly sustainable development. That is why, today, talking about equality of opportunity in the labour market calls for the need to adopt strategies at the international and national levels to deal with discriminatory mechanisms based on gender, religion, ethnicity, age, sexual orientation and health status. Talking about equality of opportunity invites reflection on the various factors that affect the quality and quantity of work, today monitored through indicators that describe the persistence of inequalities pertaining to the conditions of access and permanence in the labour market, wage dynamics and the development of jobs and career paths. These are crucial profiles to ensure the proper and equitable functioning of economic and social systems, to outline the path for the development of social protection systems suitable to meet the needs of citizens, and to reduce the gap in opportunities for vulnerable groups (women, the over-55s, young people, and people with disabilities). Institutions that regulate the world of work have a fundamental role in defining a more equitable and sustainable development path, as also demonstrated by the role played by social dialogue in promoting incentive and corrective mechanisms also and especially through collective bargaining. This track therefore seeks to explore the issue of inequality in the labour market in order to answer some questions: what do workers today understand by equality of opportunity in the labour market? In different national or regional contexts, what is meant by 'equality of opportunity' in the labour market? What is the role played by social dialogue in tackling discrimination and what are the good practices?

### **Track 10 – Local dynamics for competitive, inclusive and sustainable labour markets**

This research track aims to explore in depth the complex interconnections between spatial dynamics and labour markets, with a particular focus on



achieving a balance between competitiveness, inclusiveness and sustainability. Both theoretical and empirical contributions aimed at shedding light on the multiple dimensions that shape workers' aspirations, individual growth opportunities, both personal and professional, and the creation of social capital at the local level (e.g., through innovative organizational models, through public-private partnership initiatives, and collaborations with a supply chain perspective) are encouraged. Reflections in response to this track may also focus on the collective dimension of work, where collaboration and interactions among different stakeholders and actors in local labour markets play a key role. Finally, an additional element of interest is that of the role of the territorial dimension versus that of global value chains. How can local bodies, and the actors that drive them, influence the quality of work within these chains? How can local dynamics be governed to ensure quality, safe and satisfactory working conditions for workers involved in the different stages of global value chains? How do production chains impact local competitiveness and attractiveness?

## **DEADLINES**

- Abstracts can be submitted between **18 March and 31 May 2024**
- Authors of selected papers will be notified by **28 June 2024**
- Authors are kindly asked to confirm their in-person attendance by **6 September 2024**
- The final version of the papers must be sent by **31 October 2024**

## **GUIDELINES FOR ABSTRACT SUBMISSION**

Abstracts must be submitted on-line through the [Abstract Submission Portal](#), which also contains detailed instructions for abstract submission. The collection of selected abstracts will be published, accepted proposals will be published in the Book of Abstracts on the official event website.

## **SCIENTIFIC COMMITTEE**

To ensure high standards, the ADAPT International Scientific Committee below is fully involved in all the organizational stages of the conference:

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## PAPERS

The best papers presented at the Conference will be selected and, depending on the topic, evaluated for publication in [Professionalità studi](#), [Diritto delle Relazioni Industriali](#), [E-Journal of International and Comparative Labour Studies](#) and [Revista Internacional y Comparada de Relaciones Laborales y Derecho del Empleo](#) or in a special issue to be included in the [ADAPT Labour Studies BookSeries \(Cambridge Scholars Publishing\)](#). Editors will also consider for publication the papers by those who are unable to attend the Conference but are willing to provide their contribution just the same.

## CONFERENCE FEES

Participation in the conference is free; travel and accommodation costs are to be borne by each participant. A limited number of grants to partially cover travel costs will be made available to students or Ph.D. students whose abstracts are regarded as particularly innovative. Application for access to the grant to partially cover travel costs must be received at the same time the abstracts are submitted, by sending an email to: [fondazioneadapt@gmail.com](mailto:fondazioneadapt@gmail.com).

## ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

For inquiries, contact us by sending an email to [fondazioneadapt@gmail.com](mailto:fondazioneadapt@gmail.com).

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