

Organised Labour Submission:

Nedlac Annual Summit:

Remote Work

Nedlac
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Introduction

- **Remote work/ 4th Industrial Revolution** has been a talking point for government, business, labour & society for many years.
- **Presidential 4th Industrial Revolution Commission** was established in 2019.
- We have all treated the 4IR as a far away concept that is best left for a distant tomorrow.
- Covid-19 has exposed the dangers & fallacies of this approach.
- Failing to plan, is indeed planning to fail.
- Workers, disadvantaged communities & fragile industries will be left behind & pay the price.
- The challenges of remote work & the 4IR require government & social partners to work together to ensure the transition is a just one.

Covid-19 & Remote Work

- Remote work was essential for many workplaces as the economy went into lockdown in March 2020.
- Enabled many workplaces to continue to operate, earn an income & thus pay & continue to employ their workers, e.g call centres.
- Remote work protected many workers from Covid-19, e.g. office staff.
- Universities & well resourced schools went online whilst those in disadvantaged communities simply could not.
- Benefited the IT sector with increased demands for data, fibre, laptops, iPads etc.
- Brought the 4th industrial revolution forward in a way never imagined.
- Not all workers can work remotely.

Jobs at Risk

- Jobs lost to the 3rd Industrial Revolution include milk men, switch board operators, street light lamp lighters & many jobs in clothing, textile & agricultural sectors.
- Jobs at risk now include cashiers, mine workers, printers, receptionists, human resources, car washers, farm workers.
- Jobs under threat to the 4th Industrial Revolution include construction, mining, drivers, manufacturing, accounting, marketing, postal.
- Value chains that support office workplaces are at risk, e.g. rental, furniture, catering, restaurants, cleaning, security, transport, stationary.

Workers at Risk

- 56% of workers at risk to 4th industrial revolution are women.
- 35% of jobs at risk to automation.
- Most at risk are low skilled workers.
- 16% of workers have no alternative work opportunities.
- South Africa with an unemployment rate of 44% cannot afford to lose any jobs.
- Workers who lose jobs take on average 2 years to find another job.
- We are in danger of creating a permanent class of unemployed.
- Youth unemployment is above 60%.

Remote Work: Labour Rights Risks

- How do you enforce labour rights for someone working at home?
- How does someone working at home take sick leave, annual leave, maternity, parental leave & time off?
- How does you enforce the 40 or 48 hour working week at home?
- Can a worker injured working remotely claim from the Compensation of Injury on Duty Fund?
- Have employers developed policies to recognise remote work & ensure its compliance with labour laws?
- What happens to those workers who cannot work remotely, e.g. live in an informal settlement, back yard, rural village?

Remote Work: Labour Rights Risks

- Have unions developed strategies to reach out to, organise & protect the rights of workers working remotely?
- Remote work has been an increasing trend in some sectors, e.g. insurance, retirement funds, telecommunications, e-platform workers where workers are unilaterally told by the employer that you are now self-employed.
- Implications are that the job security, benefits, annual increases, paid leave & all the other rights & benefits these workers had enjoyed for many years are lost overnight (please see Telkom where the head count of direct employees went from 50 000 to 14 000 since 1994).
- It boosts employers' profits at the expense of workers' rights.
- It collapses collective bargaining & ability of workers to protect their labour rights.

Remote Work: Positives

- Workers save hours a day wasted in traffic with an accompanying massive drop in traffic congestion & accidents & saving on fuel.
- Workers are protected from exposure to workplace illnesses & injuries.
- Has enabled single mothers to work from home whilst taking care of their children & save on creche fees.
- Enabled parents to spend more time at home & seen a drop in burglaries.
- Productivity has been boosted with workers saving time travelling.
- Remote work has less office place distractions.
- Remote work opened opportunities for to work from rural towns.
- Companies have saved money on remote work enabling them to expand operations & save & create jobs.

Remote Work: What Needs to be Done?

- We need to fill the many gaps exposed in our labour laws to ensure that workers working remotely are covered as they would in a normal workplace.
- Employers need to provide workers with the necessary tools & support.
- Invest in skills of workers, not just white collar or middle class to avoid leaving blue collar workers behind & increasing the risk of their jobs being lost to automation.
- Unions need to develop strategies to adapt to this rapidly changing world of work.
- Collective bargaining needs to be respected & protected by employers & not abandoned under the guise of self-employed workers.

Society Opportunities

- Remote work benefits extend to education, e.g. UCT has started an online high school.
- Universities can accommodate students living in rural areas & save them the costs of accommodation & travel.
- New jobs rich sectors can grow, e.g. call centre in Cape Town supporting companies in Europe.
- Access to healthcare in rural areas can be increased with online specialist access.
- E-commerce has grown massively creating new jobs (drivers) but also posing risks to shops and shopping centres.
- Similar risks & opportunities exist for banks & financial sector jobs.

Conclusion

- Remote work & the 4th industrial revolution is here.
- Denying & ignoring it exposes workers & society to unnecessary risks.
- It has huge opportunities & benefits.
- Equally it carries real risks & pain.
- We have two options.
- Do nothing and the poor and even middle class will pay the price.
- Plan and guide the transition, exploit its opportunities, invest in workers, create transition paths & society will reap the benefits.
- Government, business, unions & society all have key roles to play.