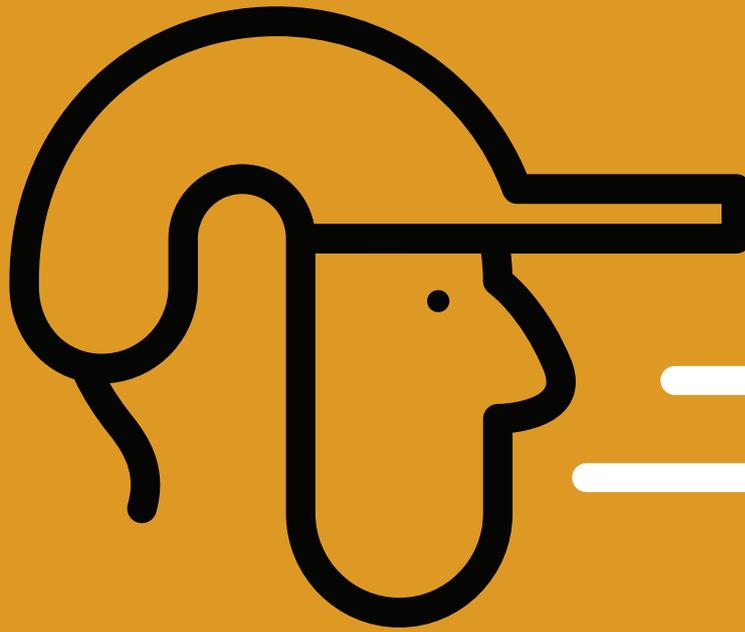




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# The Future of Work: Radical Republican Perspectives

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University of Roehampton



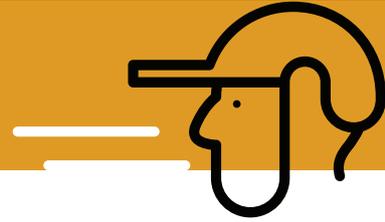


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# **The Future of Work: Radical Republican Perspectives**

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## Introduction

Work is changing. New technologies are transforming how certain kinds of labour are performed and governed, including greater remote working, the normalisation of digital surveillance, and the growth of algorithm-based management techniques. Advancements in automation, robotics, and artificial intelligence are sometimes projected to bring about widespread technological unemployment. The rise of the gig economy has been characterised by new forms of temporary and flexible work that is mediated by digital platforms. The climate crisis is also creating pressures to transition away from carbon-intensive industries, with corresponding impacts on jobs expected in areas like energy, engineering, and transportation. So too, wider demographic shifts in much of the world are seeing increased demand for casualised workers in sectors such as health and social care.

These changes come with renewed dangers, such as workers being subjected to overbearing managerial authority and greater levels of economic precarity. But they also present opportunities for organising our working lives differently. How should we conceptualise these challenges? And what can and should be done to meet them? This report looks to the civic republican tradition for answers to these questions.

Civic republicans oppose dominating power and advocate for institutions that will promote the common good. Republican thought has undergone an economic turn in recent years, including increased attention to the position of ordinary workers. This report aims to show how these theoretical interventions can inform discussions around policy and political organising relevant to the future of work. In particular, it explores an analysis of work proposed by radical republicans who seek to prevent a further entrenchment of economic unfreedom in our societies.



## Civic Republicanism

Civic republicanism has its roots in ancient and early modern thought.<sup>1</sup> Over the past three decades, this political tradition has undergone a major resurgence among thinkers concerned with freedom and citizenship. Historically, republicans sought political institutions which would foster active citizens committed to the common good rather than their own private interests. Furthermore, they praised the liberty of citizens, which was thought to be infringed by the dominating power of tyrants and foreign emperors. Likewise, absolutism was rejected in favour of mixed political constitutions underpinned by the rule of law.

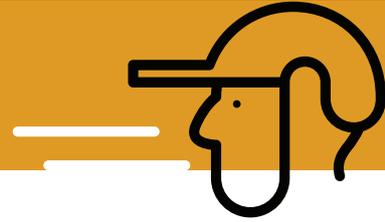
The liberty that republicans pursue is contrasted with the condition of the slave who is subject to the arbitrary power of their master. On this analysis, we lack freedom when someone has unaccountable power over us, even if they choose not to exercise that power. Slaves are always vulnerable and can never be certain of their positions. This creates pressure to be servile: anticipating and conforming to the will of one's master, in order to forestall their potential displeasure. The same lesson goes for others subject to dominating power, who can be made unfree by their dependence on the will of others, whether or not they happen to be treated favourably by the powerful.

What does all this have to do with the workplace? Labourers in the nineteenth century adapted republican ideas to articulate their dissatisfaction with conditions in workshops and factories<sup>2</sup>. They were dependent upon the discretion of their bosses for the opportunity to work and thereby feed themselves and their families. They concluded that their sheer vulnerability to such unaccountable power meant that they were unfree, even if they did happen to secure work. The dependence of waged labourers on bosses for their basic material needs was also thought to produce subordination within the workplace itself, with workers being subject to rules, discipline, and timekeeping over which they had no effective say. In response, these labour republicans sought a reduction in working time, a shift to cooperative firms, or even outright public ownership of their workplaces.

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<sup>1</sup> On the history of republican thought, see Quentin Skinner, *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought: Volume I, The Renaissance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), ch. 1-3; Quentin Skinner, *Liberty Before Liberalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997); Iseult Honohan, *Civic Republicanism* (London: Routledge, 2002); Rachel Hammersley, *Republicanism: An Introduction* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2020).

<sup>2</sup> Alex Gourevitch, *From Slavery to the Cooperative Commonwealth* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015); Tom O'Shea, 'Eugene Debs and the Socialist Republic', *Political Theory* (forthcoming).



## Domination at Work

Contemporary radical republicans build on this labour republican analysis. We shall see how it can also help us understand emerging developments relating to the future of work too. But first it is important to grasp how it is meant to apply to standard work.

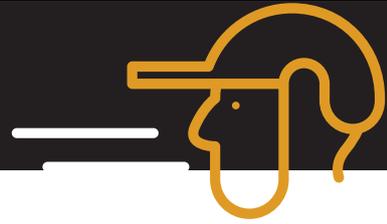
Consider the account of the domination of ordinary workers provided by Samuel Arnold<sup>3</sup>. He claims that capitalists have power over workers: they can get those workers to do things that they would not otherwise do. That includes showing up to their jobs, accepting hierarchical relationships of command, producing products they may not care about, surrendering those products to the capitalist, and so on. That is because capitalists control the resources that workers need to live well, or even to survive at all. The power that capitalists have over workers is also arbitrary, in the sense that it is not forced to track the interests or beliefs of those workers. Capitalists generally decide what is produced, under what conditions, for what rates of pay—even if tight labour markets and strong unions can sometimes curb that power. There is no need for capitalists to be greedy or vindictive for them to dominate workers. Often there will be a strong economic rationale for them acting in ways that damage workers' interests, such as by maximising working time or minimising pay. But capitalists are also able to impose on workers without such an economic rationale: subjecting them to sexual, emotional, or physical harassment; pressuring them to disclose their political affiliation, or even attend political rallies; controlling their dress and speech; or bouncing them into performing menial chores outside of their official duties.

Another similar concept that can help us understand power over workers can be found in Elizabeth Anderson's notion of private government<sup>4</sup>. When government is private then it is characterised by arbitrary and unaccountable power over those who are governed. That form of governance can be found in many workplaces, where managers may be empowered to arbitrarily sack members of trade unions, prevent casual socialising between staff, or demand that workers undergo drug screening and theft checks on their own time. The notion of private government helps to stress the parallels between much-derided authoritarian power in political life and the often less remarked upon pervasive arbitrary authority in settings like the workplace.

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<sup>3</sup> Samuel Arnold, 'Capitalism, Class Conflict, and Domination', *Socialism and Democracy* 31 (2016), pp. 106-24.

<sup>4</sup> Elizabeth Anderson, *Private Government: How Employers Rule Our Lives (and Why We Don't Talk About It)* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017).



## Some Objections

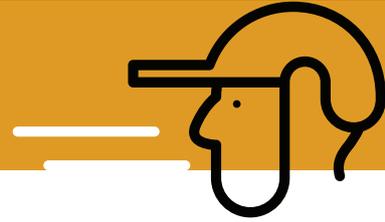
We ought not rush to conclusions. Waged work is often thought to be characterised by voluntary exchange. When workers must consent to sell their labour, then it might seem implausible to say the power of employers is uncontrolled or unaccountable. Likewise, waged workers have a legal right to exit their jobs, with this possibility limiting an employer's ability to act with complete impunity. So too, the need to compete with other capitalists might be thought to curb the power of private employers. The intrusion of law, including labour laws, appears to further constrain that power.

Yet, none of these factors are sufficient to show that waged workers cannot be subject to dominating arbitrary power. Unlike serfs and chattel slaves, waged and salaried workers have to assent to their jobs. People can also typically leave in order to work for other organisations, unless they are stuck somewhere like a company town with only one major employer. But those without independent wealth are not able to opt out of employment entirely. That means that workers can have some say in who has power over them but without them being able to escape such arbitrary power altogether. That is a condition that republicans have called "structural domination".<sup>5</sup> Someone's position in a social and economic structure means they have to subject themselves to the dominating power of some employer even if there is no one specific employer whose power they cannot escape.

Employment legislation, contract law, and health and safety regulations can help narrow the unchecked power of employers. But law is often a blunt instrument, which does not and cannot regulate every eventuality, even when energetically enforced. Similarly, market pressures can reduce an employer's room for manoeuvre over the long-term in how they treat their staff. However, managers can often effectively impose their will even then in a whole range of matters that do not significantly impact profits, or choose to imperil their market position in their desire to get their own way.

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<sup>5</sup> Alex Gourevitch, "Labor Republicanism and the Transformation of Work," *Political Theory* 41:4 (2013), pp. 591-617.



## The Future of Work

### Surveillance and Invigilation

What, then, can this radical republican perspective reveal about the future of work?

Workers have long been subjected to supervision by others—whether a bailiff, overseer, foreman, or manager. Technological developments are enabling new forms of monitoring of workers and their performance. Consider software that precisely measures the number and pace of tasks completed (products shelved, phone calls made, customer queries answered) or which will inform management when staff are late arriving or in taking breaks. Continuous observation is also common for those working from home digitally, and can include regular screenshotting and detection of workstation idleness. The increased ease of digital recording of customer interaction has meant that retrospective assessment of workers is now more feasible. Even activities outside of the workplace and working hours can now be easier for employers to track, such as through health monitoring involved in corporate wellness programmes or the social media profiles of employees.

The most familiar danger from these new developments is a threat to the privacy of workers. But a civic republican perspective alerts us to another problem: undue invigilation.<sup>6</sup> Someone is invigilated when another person observes their behaviour and can enforce their own view should the invigilated person not do what the invigilator intends. This technique can intensify relationship of domination in which some people are thoroughly dependent on the will of others. When a worker is invigilated, the mere awareness that a manager could threaten or punish them for not exercising complete attention or effort can be sufficient to ensure compliance with managerial diktat without such potential punishment or threats actually being carried out.

### Tipping and Customer Reviews

The proportion of occupations in the service sector has been growing for decades globally<sup>7</sup>. Many such jobs involve tipping, such as waiting, cleaning,

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<sup>6</sup> SPhilip Pettit, *On the People's Terms: A Republican Theory and Model of Democracy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), pp. 60-4.

<sup>7</sup> The World Bank, 'Employment in Services', <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.SRV.EMPL.ZS> (retrieved May 2022).



delivering, or taxi driving. The reliance on tips to reach a basic salary can mean that customers and not simply employers possess considerable arbitrary power in relation to a worker's livelihood. That can create significant pressure to endure harassment and demeaning behaviour, disclose personal information, or tolerate bigotry. When a significant amount of remuneration is in the hands of customers, this can create relations of dependence that reinforce servility.

Tipping is not the only way customers can possess important discretionary power over workers. Many workers in the service sector are beholden to reviews as a condition of further custom or a requirement for continued employment. Consider taxi drivers who work with ride-hailing apps that demand a minimum star-rating from passengers. That can place those drivers in a situation where they are unable to push back against unreasonable behaviour and abuse from customers, since the driver is unable to contextualise or explain the reason for a bad review. That can entrench social deference and vulnerability to the whims and moods of others in ways that raise concerns about domination.

## Algorithmic Management

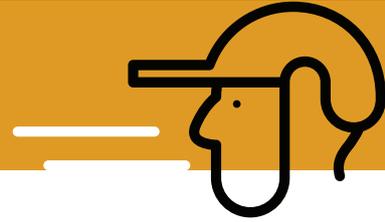
Technological advances have also made algorithmic management a feature of some occupations.<sup>8</sup> That involves the automation of management functions such as supervision and coordination of work. For example, some workers in the 'platform economy' will rarely communicate with a human manager, and instead carry out work tasks as directed by a company's proprietary algorithm (say, where to pick up and drop off a food delivery). That may seem like welcome news from a republican perspective because it appears that the arbitrary will of managers has been reduced or dispensed with. It can be true that the pressure to flatter or curry favour with particular managers is thereby diminished. However, arbitrary power remains in contexts of algorithmic management, such as unaccountable and often opaque changes to the coding of the apps which coordinate people's labour. That the 'backend' of such apps is typically not revealed to the users themselves means that this can be a hidden, indirect, and insidious form of power over others.

## Reproductive Work

Not all work takes place as paid employment. Housework, parenting, and other kinds of 'reproductive' work typically go unpaid but can share many salient features of other labour. Reproductive workers can be subject to dominating

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<sup>8</sup>Min Kyung Lee, Daniel Kusbit, Evan Metsky, Laura Dabbish, 'Working with Machines: The Impact of Algorithmic and Data-Driven Management on Human Workers', *Proceedings of the 33rd Annual ACM SIGCHI Conference, Seoul, South Korea* (2015), pp. 1603-1612.



power by families or romantic partners who take it upon themselves to supervise domestic labour and can dish out implicit or explicit punishments when they deem that labour unsatisfactory. These dynamics are often highly gendered, with women facing enduring cultural norms regarding food preparation, cleanliness, parenting, and emotional wellbeing within the household. Unpaid reproductive workers can also be particularly vulnerable to the arbitrary economic power of others if they themselves have few independent sources of income. Complete economic dependence on the decisions of a ‘breadwinner’ who decides how money is spent according to their own whims rather than an agreed financial plan can create concerning relationships of domination within the home. Those challenges raised by reproductive labour should not be forgotten in discussions of the wider future of work.

## Reduced Demand for Labour

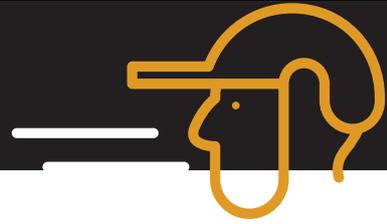
Some commentators have worried that declining global demand for labour presents a major problem for workers. The most eye-catching claims about such declines are associated with advances in automation: industrial robotics, self-driving cars, checkout-free stores, computer-generated documentation, and so on.<sup>9</sup> This is sometimes thought to presage a widespread technological unemployment that will have a catastrophic effect on the bargaining power of labour. There is some evidence that such claims may be overstated: that growth in the productivity of labour is slowing rather than accelerating, and that declining rates of wider economic growth in the last fifty years has led to a failure to create enough new jobs.<sup>10</sup> Nevertheless, even if automation is not to blame, trends towards underemployment are apparent. What are the dangers of this from a republican perspective?

In tight labour markets, with very high rates of employment, competition over workers can constrain the free reign of employers with respect to wages and working conditions. This provides a limited check on discretionary power over hiring, firing, wage-setting, and everyday managerial decision-making, which arises from the economic need to retain a suitable workforce. However, when demand for labour is low, with greater unemployment or underemployment, workers possess less counterpower, and are more at the mercy of bosses. In particular, one of the most important forms of leverage that workers possess—

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<sup>9</sup> Carl Benedikt Frey and Michael Osborne, “The Future of Employment: How Susceptible Are Jobs to Computerisation?”, *Technological Forecasting and Social Change* 114 (2017); James Manyika, Michael Chui, Miremadi, Mehdi et al., *A Future That Works: Automation, Employment, and Productivity* (San Francisco: McKinsey Global Institute, 2017).

<sup>10</sup> Aaron Benanav, *Automation and the Future of Work* (London: Verso, 2020).



the credible threat to quit—becomes much less effective, especially in lower-skill occupations. That can intensify conditions of dependence of workers on the holders of capital, in ways that entrench economically dominating power.

## Policy Directions

### Universal Basic Income

What, then, might be done in policy terms to push back against worker domination? Some republicans have echoed proposals for a universal basic income.<sup>11</sup> If such an income was unconditional and set at a non-negligible level, it would provide all workers with some respite from managerial power. In particular, it may facilitate exit in ways that increase the independence of workers, insofar as they have a credible route to quit. When labour markets are relatively tight, that could increase the power of workers irrespective of whether they choose to exercise an option to leave. Furthermore, it might make it easier for unpaid domestic workers to escape relationships marked by asymmetrical economic dependence on a partner.

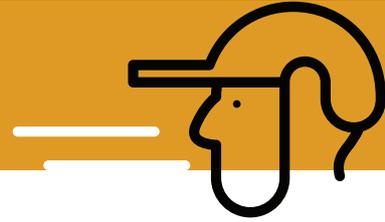
There are, however, reasons to doubt that universal basic income is the best focus for reform. Some republicans have suggested that the amount of political influence required to introduce a meaningful universal basic income against opposition would be sufficiently high that other more attractive options would also then be possible.<sup>12</sup> There is also a concern that the focus on universal basic income is premised on enabling ‘exit’ but without sufficiently increasing worker ‘voice’ within the workplace. The credible ability to walk away can sometimes bolster influence over the internal affairs of an organisation, but quitting one’s job is a nuclear option, which can be risky and impose considerable financial and social penalties. Thus, it does not always translate into worker control within a firm.

### Workplace Constitutions and Rule of Law

Republicans have also proposed measures that would bolster something akin to the rule of law and constitutional protections in the workplace.<sup>13</sup> The aim is to offer workers both procedural protections and substantive rights that can check

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<sup>13</sup> Elizabeth Anderson, *Private Government: How Employers Rule Our Lives (and Why We Don’t Talk About It)* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017).



arbitrary power. That includes the codification of managerial authority through employee handbooks, accountability mechanism such as complaints procedures, and basic rights to free speech and against discriminatory behaviour.

These proposals alone are likely to be insufficient, however. Take procedural protections such as codification of managerial authority and formal complaints processes. If these are to be effective, then it is important that there be an external check on the organisation, so that the managers whose authority is to be bound are not the same group who determines the scope of the rules and the outcomes of appeals against them. Likewise, if the interpretation of contested ideals like freedom of speech remains in the hands of employers, then it is doubtful that it will adequately restrain the invigilating power of employers, since they can bend the guidelines to suit the exigencies of any particular case where they want to snoop on or punish a worker for off-hours activity.

## Co-Determination

Some republicans have entertained co-determination policies as a response to the problem of private government, under which workers have formal representation on supervisory boards within firms<sup>14</sup>. The most familiar example of this is the German Mitbestimmung system for large companies. Would this secure sufficient voice for workers that dominating power could be held in check? Again, as an isolated policy, there are reasons to doubt this. Where co-determination happens in Germany, workers only hold between a third and a little under half of votes on company boards. Furthermore, the supervisory boards in question often have little authority over investment and strategy decisions. So too, shareholders can often impose their will indirectly through debt leveraging or by threatening to simply withdraw their capital. Thus, workers would remain substantially at the mercy of owners and managers under these arrangements.

## Property-Owning Democracy

The threat of domination has prompted some republicans to advocate a property-owning democracy in which wealth is dispersed much more widely than at present.<sup>15</sup> The rationale is that more widespread private wealth increases individual independence and so insulates people from the dominating economic power of others. Other things being equal, redistributive and predistributive policies with this effect would offer some protection to workers.

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<sup>14</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> Alan Thomas, *Republic of Equals: Predistribution and Property-Owning Democracy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).



Nevertheless, there are also some limitations to such an approach. Widespread private capital ownership does not necessarily ensure that workers have control within their own workplaces. Worker-owned cooperatives are possible under this system in sectors which are not highly capital-intensive, but that becomes very risky for worker-owners themselves, since their own capital is at risk at the point when they would most need it: namely, when their firm fails. The same lesson applies more generally to risk under property-owning democracy. Private ownership of capital is meant to secure people's economic independence and so offer some immunity to dominating power. But when that capital is sunk in an asset like a house, then that leaves people vulnerable to the vicissitudes of the real estate market. It is one of the most important functions of the state, on the other hand, that it can socialise rather than individualise such risks.

## Labour Law Reform

Republicans have often looked to the law to restrain dominating power. We saw that legal reforms alone are unlikely to stamp out domination in the workplace; yet, they may still help curb its excesses. For instance, this might include a mandate for a liveable minimum wage in service work independent of income from tips, or the requirement for a standard service charge per transaction to be paid to workers. That would seek to shield workers from subjection to the individually small but cumulatively significant arbitrary power that arises from a reliance on customer tipping. Likewise, grappling with the new challenges presented by algorithmic management could involve a requirement for the often-opaque coding of current computerised systems of labour coordination to be made more transparent, so workers can understand and potentially challenge the decision-making processes that underpin their working lives. So too, legislation limiting the forms of data that can be collected on staff both within and outside the workplace could help to reduce overbearing invigilation by employers.

## Unionisation

Workers are not powerless in the face of dominating power. The institutional form which labour movements have most often used to push back against the arbitrary power of employers is the trade union. That allows workers to coordinate their responses rather than being outmanoeuvred or picked off one-by-one by employers—exhibiting counter-power through the threat of industrial action, such as strikes and working-to-rule. Long-term declines in union density in many countries are therefore a cause for concern, including the difficulty of organising precarious workers in areas like the gig economy<sup>16</sup>. So too, there are

<sup>16</sup> OECD, 'Trade Union Dataset', <https://stats.oecd.org/Index.aspx?DataSetCode=TUD> (retrieved May 2022).



concerns about sclerotic bureaucratisation of some unions, whose leadership may be more interested in perpetuating their own positions than fighting for the economic and social interests of the membership. But unionisation nevertheless remains an important check on the free hand of managers and owners—being one of the few mechanisms through which workers within a particular sector can exert their collective authority democratically. Radical republicans should welcome attempts to extend union structures to the new sectors such as the platform economy.

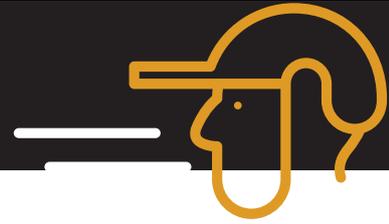
## Socialist Republicanism

Among the most ambitious proposals for countering workplace domination has been a socialist republican programme.<sup>17</sup> It would constitute a profound transformation of the economy that socialised productive property—taking it into public hands so that it can be managed democratically by citizens. This would facilitate democratic control over economic enterprises, to be combined with some measure of worker control within them. The aim would be to eliminate much of the economically dominating power that currently rests in the hands of managers, owners, and shareholders.

Does a socialist approach presuppose a centralised command economy? If so, the danger is that the domination of managers and private owners is simply replaced by the domination of distant bureaucrats. But public ownership is compatible with democratic control at regional, municipal, and local levels, including significant workplace democracy in the operational matters of enterprises. That can be supplemented by extensive social welfare provisions, including universal entitlements to basic economic goods and services, whose unconditionality further shields citizens from the unaccountable economic power of others. In particular, it puts unpaid reproductive workers in dependent domestic relationships in a much stronger economic position to leave, which can informally limit the kinds of power that can be used over them with impunity, even if such dependents ultimately decide not to exit the relationship.

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<sup>17</sup> Tom O'Shea, 'Socialist Republicanism', *Political Theory* 48:5 (2020), pp. 548–72.



## Conclusions

This report develops a radical republican analysis of the future of work. It provides a number of analytical concepts with which to understand the position of certain workers, including the notion of domination and private government. These are then used to uncover new or worsening threats to the freedom of workers arising from developments concerning work, including surveillance and invigilation, tipping and customer reviews, algorithmic management, unpaid reproductive work, and global declines in demand for labour. Several policy orientations were then considered with an eye to reducing worker domination, highlighting some of the benefits and limitations of measures like universal basic income, workplace constitutions, co-determination, property-owning democracy, and labour law reforms. More fulsome support is offered for increased unionisation and a socialist republican programme combining socialisation of productive property, workplace democracy, and universal welfare provisions. That would entail a radical reorientation of our societies that can be hard to envision, let alone formulate a concrete political strategy for realising. Yet, the words of Herbert Marcuse are worth recalling here: “The unrealistic sound of these propositions is indicative, not of their utopian character, but of the strength of the forces which prevent their realization.”<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man* (London: Routledge, 1964), p.6.



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